

## **Reaction to the Work of Frank Frazetta**

History of American Illustration  
UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD  
Limited Residency MFA in Illustration



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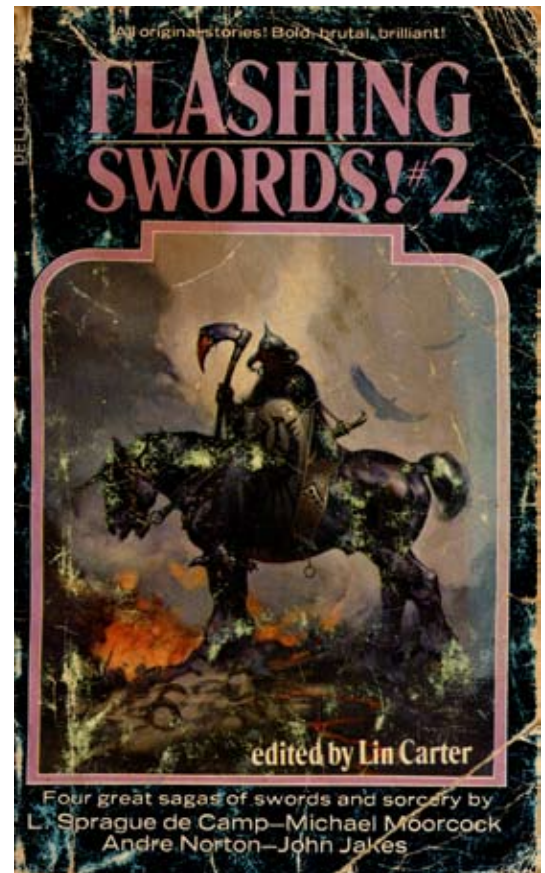
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It would be fool hearty and arrogant to think that I could add to the commentary on the closest thing to a “Rock Star“ that the Illustration field possesses; Frank Frazetta (b. 1928). I can only comment on how Frank’s work has influenced my work, my formative years and my appreciation of his legacy.

My first experience with Frazetta’s work was on a cheap paperback... well, not so cheap for an eleven year-old in 1974 at \$1.25. The book was a collection of stories about wizards and swords titled “Flashing Swords #2”, edited by Lin Carter, with four different authors, Michael Moorcock being the most memorable. The book was black, with purple text, very brooding, but the thing that jumped out at me was the powerful figure in black and steel on the back of a black Shire draft horse. I like comics and cartoons, I didn’t go for books without pictures, but Frank Frazetta’s “Death Dealer” had hooked me and made the sale.

I read it cover to cover but when finished,



*Death Dealer, 1973*  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on canvas, detail below



would study the cover art. I left the book on the end of the books lined up on my desk, just to have the cover facing out. I had never had a picture affect me that way. Sure, I liked to look at the ads in the back of the Horror magazines, where you could order your own pillow with Raquel Welch in her 1,000,000 BC bikini, but the piece on the book cover was entirely different.

I started searching for Frazetta everywhere. I had no idea that I had been seeing him all along - I was a fan of the Warren Publications *Creepy*, *Eerie* and *Vampirella*... all of which, I had to hide under my mattress with my deck of 51 topless playing cards. Frazetta's vision of women was cartoonish but rendered so realistically that a kid's head would practically explode in the aisle of the 5 & Dime. I mowed lawns, cleaned garages, baled hay... whatever it took. I needed more.

I began to copy Frazetta's ink drawings, however I was using a ballpoint, and he was a master of crow quill and brush. I



Raquel Welch  
1,000,000 B.C. Press Photo 1966  
Associated British-Pathé  
Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation



*Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, 1923  
James St. John  
Ink and Watercolor

For comparison with opposite piece.



*Savage Pellucidar*, 1974  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on canvas

was embarrassed by the results, but I knew I had to look to HOW he was doing things to get the results he had in the final paintings. I believed artists were always that good... artists never copied, artists never searched for inspiration outside of the walls of their mind. I didn't understand that Frazetta was looking at illustrators he admired, like James Allen St. John (1872 - 1957), Howard Pyle (1853 - 1911) and NC Wyeth (1882 - 1945). Either through deliberate study or subconscious transference, Frazetta channelled his forerunners thematically, atmospherically or compositionally.

I had no idea at the time that I could build off of what others had discovered. I was sold on the falsehood that true artistic excellence was only derived

*Finding these side by side comparisons has been a revelation for me. I continue to find more, but lack the space here.*

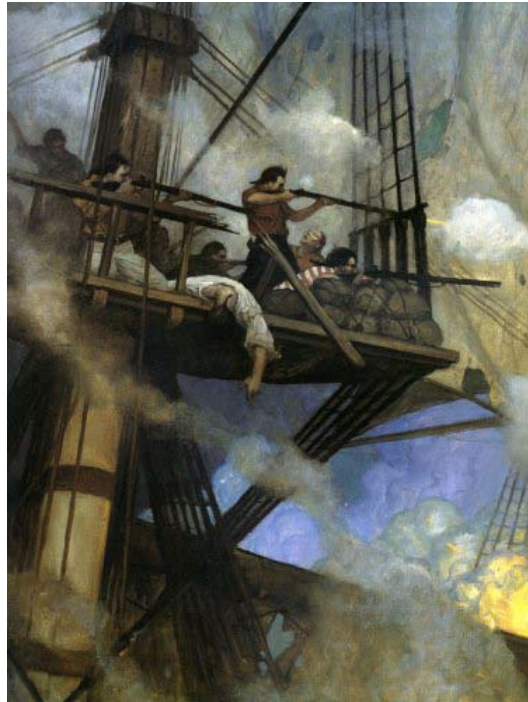


*Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar.* 1918  
James St. John  
Oil on canvas

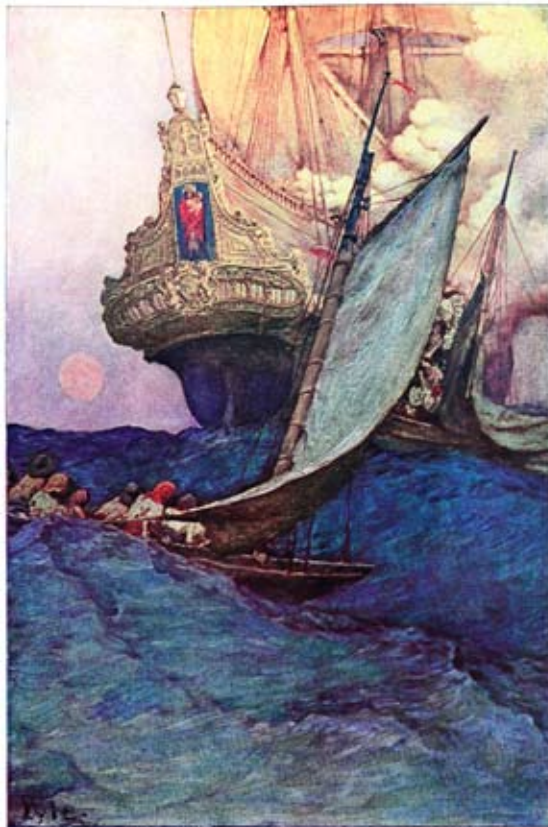
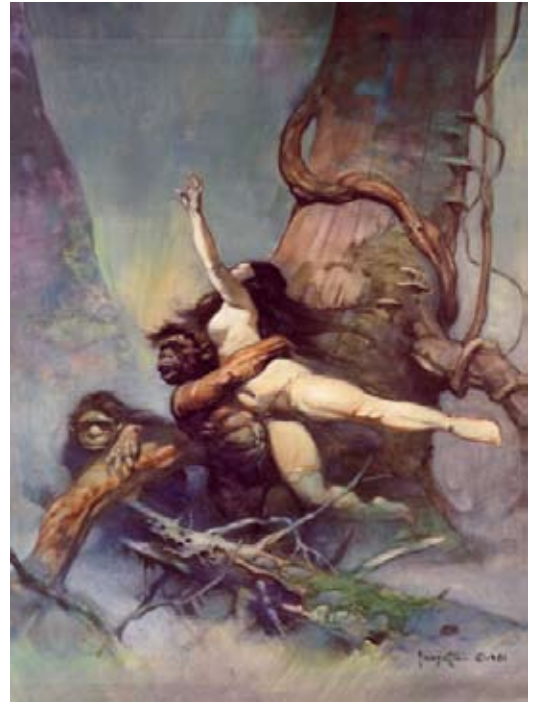


*Tarzan at the Earth's Core,* 1963  
Frank Frazetta  
Watercolor

Right:  
*The Fight in the Foretop*. 1905  
N.C. Wyeth  
Oil on canvas



Far-Right:  
*Captive Princess*, 1981  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on Canvas



*Attack on a Spanish Galleon*. 1905  
Howard Pyle  
Oil on canvas



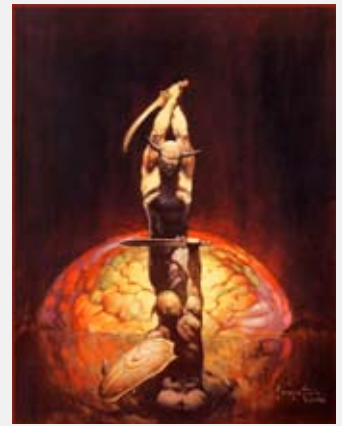
*Sea serpent*. 1972  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on canvas

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from direct observation or from ones imagination. The philosophy that it was from nature or nothing didn't take into account the serious issues of composition, leading the eye and most importantly, exclusion of non-essential details from the picture.

As I re-examine Frazetta's work, the fantastic creatures he created are built from items he observed from photographic reference. His lizards, bats, lions and wolves were created directly from observing the photograph, then manipulated anatomical and chromatic structures to meet his needs.

Frazetta was also using simple design structures: circle, rectangle, diagonals, but mainly the use of the Isosceles Triangle. The majority of Frazetta's most famous and successful works hinge on the use of the triangle's structure to lead the viewer into the piece, and focus interest at the point nearest the center. Frazetta would often overlay multiple shapes to create dynamic relationships, but even these relied on the most simple forms to create. He would force figures into triangular shapes to create vignettes, tilt triangles slightly to give the composition a varied thrust, or blatantly leave the triangle front and center to give the anchor to composition. I didn't see it then, but with a few years of schooling and a grey hair or two, I can't see much else.



*The Brain*, 1967  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on canvas

*The Brain* has bugged me since seeing it in 1979. How does this demon expect to drop his sword on his opponent with his horns in the way of his arm's stroke? I have found many similar issues with Frazetta's work, usually scaling issues between fore and back ground figures. The painting is impeccable, but minor structural issues can often ruin the whole piece for me.



The Isosceles Triangle is a Design standard through many Frazetta works

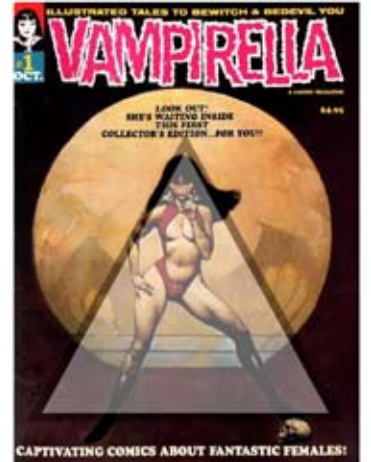
top

- Count Dracula, 1966
- Paradox, 1975
- Swords of Mars, 1974



middle

- Woman with a Scythe, 1969
- Gollum, 1973
- Tanar of Pellucidar, 1971



lower

- Mammoth, 1974
- Moon Maid, 1972
- Vampirella, 1965

The dynamics of strong picturemaking were known to Frank Frazetta. I needed to understand what he understood.

A light went off in my head... at the age of twelve, I decided to be an illustrator.

As an adult, with a bit of education and history behind me, I can only wonder what will become of Frank Frazetta's legacy in the decades to come. Artists are in style one year, and passe the next. Can the broader art world ever come to grips with the subject matter, dynamic use of color or original illustrative intent of Frazetta's work? Artists in the past were admired or vilified in one decade, and completely flipped critical opinions the next: William Bouguereau (1825 - 1905), Henry Darger (1892-1973), Margaret Keane (b.1927).

I hope Frazetta is able to find a place in pantheon of Pyle, N.C. Wyeth and the grandfathers of American Illustration. He had learned his lessons at their feet, and eventually will be counted among them.



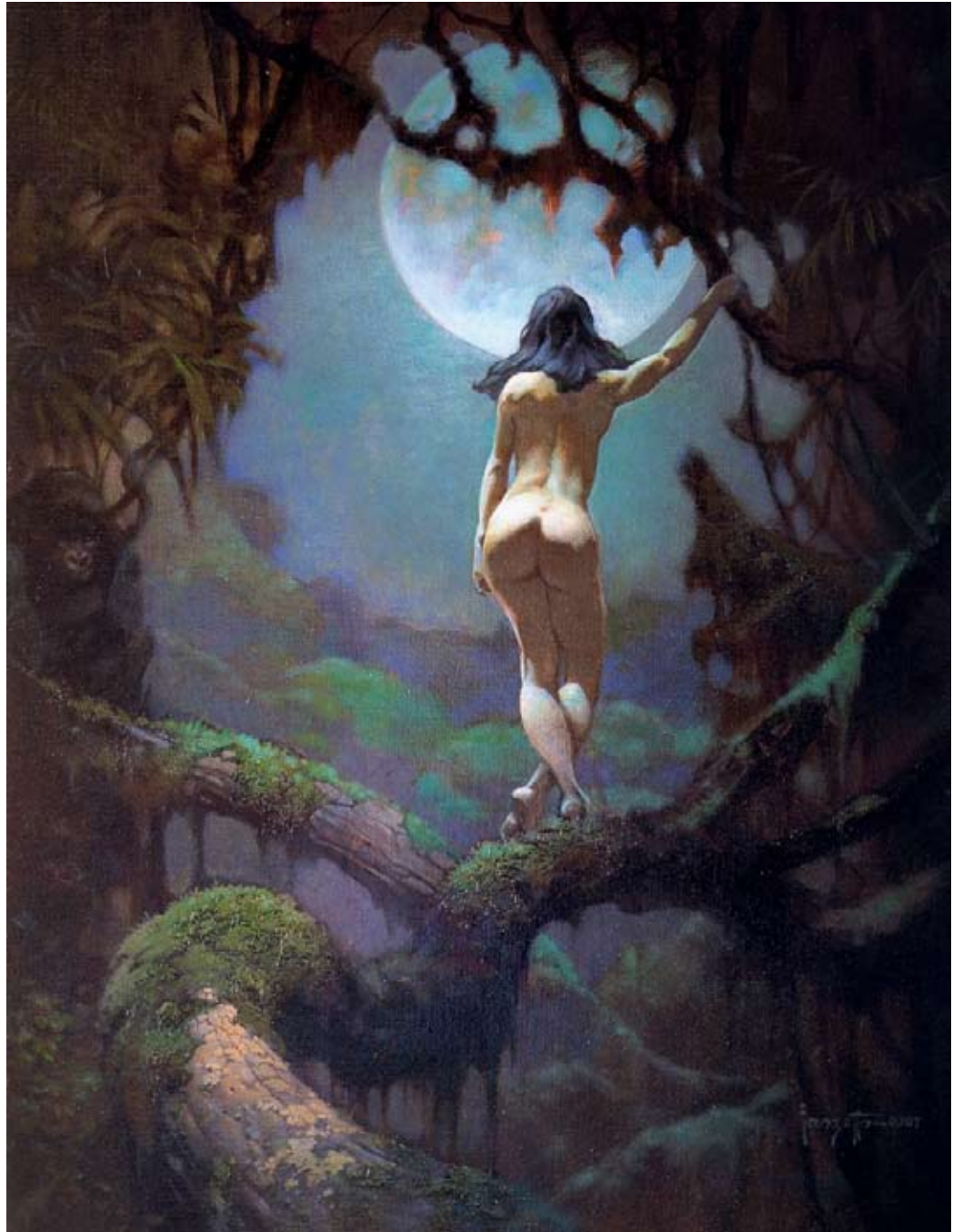
*The Sad Clown*, 1962  
Margaret D.H. Keane  
Oil on canvas; 24 x 18 inches



*The Vivian Girls*, unknown date  
Henry Darger  
Watercolor on paper



*La Vague*, 1896  
William Bouguereau  
Oil on canvas



*The Moon's Rapture*, 1987  
Frank Frazetta  
Oil on canvas

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