

Artist insight




DRAWING AND PAINTING DRAGONS

James Strehle gives you tips to help you create that mystical beast you have lurking in your mind!

Artist PROFILE

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COUNTRY: US
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James is fresh out of the Art Institute of Boston with a degree in animation/illustration. He's already begun to make his mark in the art scene. He is currently working as a freelance illustrator where he is involved in many different projects.
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Dragons are the fire-breathing icons of the fantasy world. They are majestic and powerful beasts that have captured the minds of writers and artists all over the world. The legends and myths of the dragons have been around for eons and from them there have emerged countless variations of the dragon theme from cultures around the globe. I'm going to narrow it down to the traditional European idea of dragons to make this discussion more manageable. I will give tips on the conceptual stages, through sketching and inspirations, and I will also try to help you push through mental blocks and give advice on dragon anatomy.

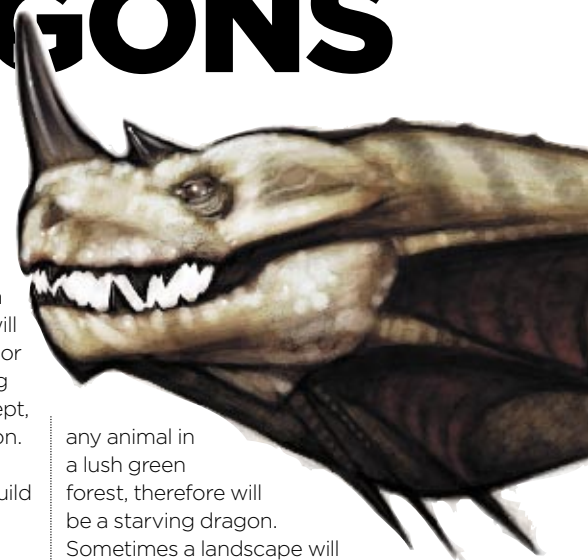
1 A GOOD CONCEPT

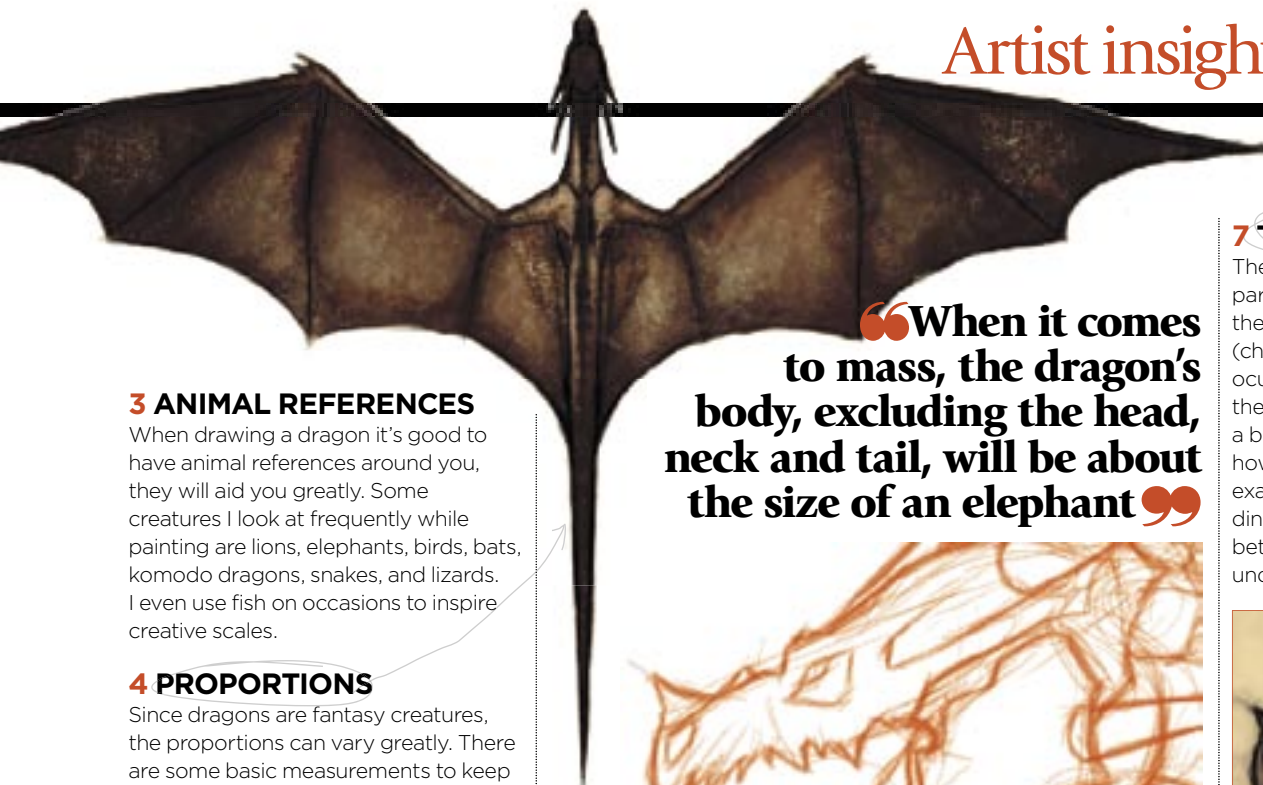
First and foremost, make sure you have a good concept. Come up with one or a few features your dragon will have, such as a massive horn, wings or intricate colour patterns. I like adding an animal in with the dragon's concept, such as mixing in the features of a lion. This will give you a very unique look and give you something strong to build on as you go.

2 SURROUNDINGS

Surroundings are very important in a dragon's creation. The setting really defines the beast. I like making the dragon part of the environment, like most creatures tend to be. A bright red dragon is going to be quite obvious to

any animal in a lush green forest, therefore will be a starving dragon. Sometimes a landscape will inspire a dragon concept. Try coming up with a dragon based in an extreme environment: you may come up with something very interesting. The setting can also complement a dragon's personality and mood and make it more dynamic.





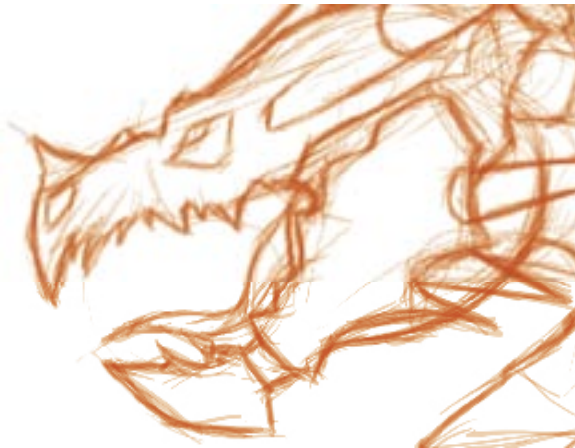
3 ANIMAL REFERENCES

When drawing a dragon it's good to have animal references around you, they will aid you greatly. Some creatures I look at frequently while painting are lions, elephants, birds, bats, komodo dragons, snakes, and lizards. I even use fish on occasions to inspire creative scales.

4 PROPORTIONS

Since dragons are fantasy creatures, the proportions can vary greatly. There are some basic measurements to keep in mind, however. Lengthwise, about 10 heads length is an acceptable measurement with the tail being around six or so of those heads. The tail should end up being about 1.5 times the body. Width wise the body should be around 1.5 heads wide although this is very generalised. The wingspan should be just under twice the length of the body including the tail. Larger bodied dragons may have greater wingspans while the petite will most likely need less of a span to keep flight.

“When it comes to mass, the dragon's body, excluding the head, neck and tail, will be about the size of an elephant”



5 SCALE

In comparison to a human, I generally give the dragon a height, while in **idle stance**, of about two to three human lengths. When it comes to mass the dragon's body, excluding the head, neck and tail, it will be about the **size of an elephant** (generally speaking).

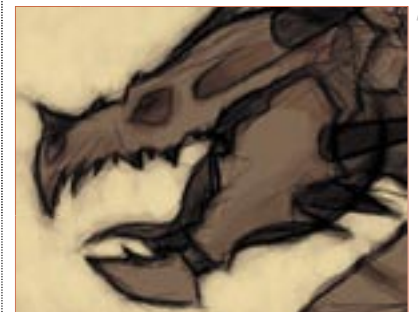


6 THE SKELETAL STRUCTURE

It's important to know where the bones are in the dragon. This is because, when you've got the basic bone structure, it's much easier to wrap flesh around the bones. You don't have to know the exact bones but you should know the key points where they are more prominent and noticeable. These bones will include the collarbone, scapula, pelvic bones, a few of the more prominent vertebrae, joints, rib cage, and so on. Knowing your anatomy will help give the details necessary to transform a cartoony creature into to a detailed and properly structured dragon.

7 THE SKULL

The dragon's skull is the most crucial part of its head, so you need to know the major bones such as the zygomatic (cheek) bone, nasal cavity, orbital ocularis, and mandible. Once you have the bones drawn in, everything else is a breeze. When I'm trying to figure out how to create a skull I'll look up various examples, including crocodile, bird, dinosaur, and human skulls, to get a better idea of what's going on underneath the skin.



8 MUSCLE

Every creature has muscle tone and you need to understand how muscles wrap and work their way around the bone structure. With this knowledge you can create arms, legs, stomachs and so on correctly. No matter how distorted or exaggerated the appendage you create may be, if you correctly work the muscles in you will have a believable creation.

➔ 9 TEETH

The teeth help define the dragon's whole face: if you draw big canine teeth, it will have a much different overall look than if you have smaller lizard-style teeth. A good reference for teeth would be crocodiles because their teeth jut out and look dangerous.

10 THE SKETCH

When I'm sketching out the dragon the first thing I do is lay down the S shaped line for the spine. Dragons are very curvy and S shaped, so it helps to lay that down right away. Once I have that basic shape, I put the ovals in position for the head and body. As a comparison of these two sizes, you should be able to insert about two of the head into the body (more or less).

11 LIMBS

The best thing I can say about arms and legs is to study **references** such as lizards, crocodiles, and even lions. It's important to get the limbs right so that the dragon **looks grounded**.

12 THE ARMS

In some cases the arms need to be large enough to **support the dragon** when it's walking on all fours. In other cases the dragon may not use its arm for support at all, so you will have to decide what you want for your dragon. When the arms are positioned against the body they should **stretch down** to around about where the tail begins.



13 THE LEGS

The legs are made up of **three main bones**. Their placement is somewhat Z shaped; this type of leg is fairly common and is easy to find reference for. Most four-legged animals have **similar leg structures**. For the feet I tend to lean towards birds' feet more than lizards' because they have more structure to them. I like to use ostrich feet for references: they are very muscular and defined.



14 AGE

Age helps to give it character: worn down skin and battle scars. You can also give the beast hazy eyes. It makes them very mysterious, which dragons tend to be. It can also make the dragon looking wise. Adding these features gives a story element to the beast, which you can build upon, and will lead to further development.

15 WINGS

The first step to wings is deciding their purpose. If the dragon spends most of its time in the air then you should probably give it the muscle support needed to maintain flight. If the wings are for show the muscle structure may not be as prominent. Bat wings make good reference.

16 MAKING SENSE

When drawing out your creation, try to ensure things make sense. You don't want to finish a piece and realise the wings would never get the beast off the ground. If the dragon breathes fire maybe you should make room for fire glands under the lower jaw.





17 COLOURS

There are many things you can do with colours on a dragon's body. I like using cooler blues and pinks for the dragon's underside because it adds a softer element to the beasts. I also like the concept behind sharks' colour design, where the shark is invisible to those looking up because of the light belly and invisible to those above because of the dark top. Try using colours to emphasise certain parts of the body.

18 EYES

The typical dragon eye is the yellow snake eye, but if you look at reptiles you'll see that there are countless eye types. Smaller eyes will give a more evil and mysterious look while larger eyes will create a more curious and harmless creature. I like to use an eye colour that stands out from the skin colour, too.

19 PREPARING THE SURFACE FOR SCALES

When painting the skin I use a **big dark brush**, logically splashing colours around to cover the area. I use dark to give it weight and I use colour to ensure it has a nice glow. I then go in with **lights and darks**, still being messy to give character to the skin. Obviously I'm splashing the darker colours where their should be shadows and the lighter colours where I would want the highlights. Then I throw an **overlayed texture** on top to busy up the skin and to hide any obvious brush strokes.

20 SCALES

Once you have textured skin the scales won't be so tedious because the texture gives the **illusion of scales**. You can just add a few scale stokes to accent the skin. Not every inch needs a scale. That's what the texture is for. I speckle the surface with a translucent brush and then speckle areas that benefit the form, such as where the light hits the skin.

21 DRAGON ATTRIBUTES

Figure out what sort of attributes your dragon should have. Use your environment to help you out. For example, if your dragon lives in the water, maybe it should be slim and aerodynamic. Look up some bizarre animals: they may help to lead down a fitting path for your dragon.

22 COLOURING THE BACKGROUND

When I'm creating a background for a dragon, I usually use it as a tool to strengthen the creature's atmosphere and mood. Sometimes I colour the background simply to make it stand out better. With dragons I feel they are a large part of nature and should fit in with their setting.

23 GOING FURTHER

If you get stuck, create a story for your developing beast. Why is it here? Is it good or evil? If so, is there a reason why it's that way? Maybe it was tormented and is nervous. Solving questions like these can help further develop your concept.

24 DRAGON LORE

If you have trouble coming up with your own story, there are massive amounts of dragon myths and legends to pull from. If you're looking to draw dragons it'd be good to know a bit about their origins.

25 OTHER DRAGONS

There are so many types of dragons that it would be very hard to discuss them all. The 'classic' dragon is the European dragon with its wings and fire breathing capabilities. The other famous one is the Eastern dragon, with the serpent-like body and four small legs. These are the two most commonly drawn dragon types. ●



“If you get stuck, create a story about your developing beast. Why is it here? Is it good or evil? Why is it that way?”

