



# Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist

*James Gurney*

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## Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist James Gurney

From the award-winning artist, learn to see and shape the world in a way you never before imagined.

An award-winning fantasy artist and the creator of *Dinotopia*, James Gurney instructs and inspires in *Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist*. Renowned for his uncanny ability to incorporate amazing detail and imagination into stunningly realistic fantasy settings, James Gurney teaches budding artists and fans of fantasy art step-by-step the techniques that won him worldwide critical acclaim. This groundbreaking work examines the practical methods for creating believable pictures of imaginary subjects, such as dinosaurs, ancient Romans, alien creatures, and distant worlds.

Beginning with a survey of imaginative paintings from the Renaissance to the golden Age of American illustration, the book then goes on to explain not just techniques like sketching and composition, but also the fundamentals of believable world building including archaeology, architecture, anatomy for creatures and aliens, and fantastic engineering. It concludes with details and valuable advice on careers in fantasy illustration, including video game and film concept art and toy design.

More than an instruction book, this is the ultimate reference for fans of science fiction and fantasy illustration.

"Gurney's *Imaginative Realism* is a gold mine for artists who want to create images that sing with authority and delight the viewer with rich otherworldly visuals." --Erik Tiemens, concept artist, *Star Wars: Episodes II and III*

"*Imaginative Realism* is an indispensable, flawless reference for vision makers in any discipline to create their own imaginative realms." --Frank M. Costantino, ASAI, SI, FSAI, JARA, cofounder, American Society of Architectural Illustrators

## Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist Details

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Author : James Gurney

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# **From Reader Review Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Doesn't Exist for online ebook**

## **Molly says**

This is one of those books that you can read and then revisit again and again just to flip through.

Gurney is the king of preparedness, and it shows in his stunningly realistic worlds. Get ready to be blown away the effort that goes into it, but also the incredible payoff. Nothing is by accident.

This book doesn't just show you how to make up creatures from your imagination, it gives you instructions on creating his level of lifelike creatures with shape, dimensions, flesh tones, and habitats that make sense. You'll learn about making physical models and dioramas, staging them and lighting them, keeping files of reference materials, expanding your range by limiting your palette, where to find real-world inspiration for fantasy art, plus an absolute barrel-load of Gurney's work throughout his career.

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## **Emily Van Doozer says**

I really got a lot of use from this book. It has a few chapters that really were easy to understand but so different than a lot of other art books. While the book does have emphasis on a few techniques I did not find helpful for the mediums I use it still was useful  
I learned quite a bit from it.

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## **Darkvine says**

I am more of a sketcher, so perhaps not the most practical art book to me but it is a great insight on how a professional fantasy, science fiction, and palaeological illustrator goes to work.

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## **Bree says**

Now I know why Gurney's paintings are so amazing; the amount of research and preparation he does for a painting is stunning.

This isn't a "How to Draw" beginner's book, but is a "How to Be a Better Artist" guide. I think you would need some basic drawing foundations (self taught or otherwise) before delving in to get the most out of it, although there are excellent principles for beginning artists to apply to their drawing habits, as well.

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## **Ben Chandler says**

Gurney's guide to painting the imaginary is thoroughly detailed, carefully put together and covers an exhaustive list of topics. The methods and materials he documents, the techniques, disciplines and theories

he covers and the examples he provide are not only educational the first time, they're also excellent sources to reference after reading.

I highly recommend this book to anybody who has learned the basics of painting and wants to begin incorporating some advanced ideas and principles into their work. It has changed the way I paint every day at work - I can hardly give it higher praise than this.

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### **Void lon iXaarri says**

The artwork is great, and the stories are very interesting, but as per the subtitle I was honestly expecting a bit more on the techniques and teaching rather than showing off his great works. Still, much food for thought and a lot of inspiring work ethic. Way cool!

PS: on the criteria above I liked his "Color and Light" book better, though even that suffers a bit from that... or at least I would hunger more to not just know the man but learn the craft of the man!

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### **Mario Russo says**

In this book Gurney sums up his approach to imaginative realism, references, maquettes, techniques and more. For some one who reads his blog, this book do contain a lot of things already posted there. But of course with more detail and also some sample of Gurney's commissioned works are worth checking out.

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### **I Read says**

An interesting insight into how an artist creates fantastical worlds.

This book isn't really a tutorial book on drawing, but much can be learnt from it. You will gain endless tips from it's study and it will fill you with ideas and inspiration.

I think essentially Gurney breaks down the fear of stepping away from the 'copying' of life and photography, supplying the reader with techniques which free them to put down their imagination with confidence.

Some of the suggestions such as making marquees may be a little too far for the average reader, but this was still important to know how a professional goes about his skilful work - professional and skilful both descriptions gained through such meticulous methods.

I particularly found the sections covering light and dark useful, also the discussion of composition was extremely interesting, stepping away from long held beliefs.

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### **Mya says**

Really nice as a reference book/guide to have on your shelf, or just to flip through and enjoy the paintings. I did not overly enjoy so much focus on dinosaurs or machines though, unfortunately. And what I gather from

this is "to draw something really good you must reference reference reference FUCKING REFERENCE EVERYTHING". I honestly almost never do, which might explain why my art has been stagnating for 10 years now. Something that gave me hope is the author saying it took him 3 months of research and painting for a particular detailed piece. That sounds so mind-boggling to me, someone who has maybe spent 12 hours top on a piece. Here rises the hope that if I spent more I could astound myself with the results. The problem is...I spent 12 hours tops on a painting in my life :D not sure how to do MORE. What this doesn't say is how to power through the fatigue and being already fed up with a piece after 10 hours.

I am left kinda with a feeling of shame for not having referenced stuff in my xy years of artistic endeavor. And I have never ever done master studies, another apparent MUST as a training technique. While it does give me good insight into which ways to improve, I feel regretful of not knowing this before.

Having liked this, I have to say that I don't precisely agree with the author's endnotes in the afterword. "Forget about style", he says. "Those stylistic mannerisms will make your pictures look dated in the future, and the more you can avoid them, the more timeless your work will be." Obviously, he is a proponent of realism and I do in a way agree with not sacrificing learning realism and the proper techniques in favour of just developing your style but I really don't think it is an end goal for me personally. Ridding my art of my personal features in order to closely follow nature. In case he meant "don't skip learning the proper techniques just because you're lazy to reference and call these shortcuts your 'style'" then yeah, I agree.

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## **Trike says**

My first 5-star book of the year.

James Gurney is most famous for creating the Dinotopia books, but he's a painter who has also done a lot of Science Fiction and Fantasy book covers as well as a ton of work for National Geographic.

Imaginative Realism is aimed primarily at artists, but if you have an interest in art and the nuts and bolts of creating it, you'll probably like this book as it is akin to the behind-the-scenes features on a DVD. By the equivalent of Coppola or Kubrick. It's amazing to see the lengths Gurney goes to create a painting. Beyond just using photo references and life drawings, he builds models and maquettes in order to test shadows and foreshortening, among other things. Some of his dioramas are quite elaborate. The research he does is impeccable and thorough. He really thinks this stuff out. I have a whole new appreciation of his craft.

You'll also learn things as Gurney talks about the specifics of how to achieve a certain effect, or the history behind a style of painting. I even learned a couple new words, such as pareidolia, which is the natural human tendency to see faces in objects. It really is jam-packed with information.

This book is superbly laid out as well, something other book designers could learn from. Also on display are a variety of terrific paintings, with very few suffering from "gutter loss" by being splashed across two pages.

This book is a great tool for artists but also extremely informative for those interested in art in general or Gurney's in particular.

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## **daisy says**

RTC!

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### **Katelyn Jenkins says**

GET THIS BOOK. Please. With sugar lumps on top and all the shaved coconut and pistachios you will ever NEED.

To be a creative, thinking about fantasy become particularly common, but rendering it out on paper let alone in paint can seem to be a daunting endeavor.

There is no other piece of literature as comprehensive on the topic of painting what does not exist - whatever the cost, this is a staple, chicken soup for the technical.

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### **Diane Kistner says**

I got this book because I thought my talented artist son (of Tunnel Sun Studios and Geek Fight design/illustration fame) would enjoy adding it to his reference shelf. Now that I've been through it, I know he will absolutely love it--but I loved it, too! I was absolutely enthralled by the book. I had no idea what goes into producing effective fantasy artwork, and now I can better appreciate my son's skill--and even remark on his technique instead of just saying "that's really nice."

Reading the book and comparing Gurney's works to my son's, I was able to see which methods he is already using in his artwork and also be tickled to recognize those that he'll be intrigued with that he may not have already tried. Some chapters are subject-oriented (people, creatures, architecture, history and archaeology, etc.) and some deal with composition, procedures, and working habits. All of the chapters are largely structured to demonstrate under-the-hood methods and techniques to achieve particular ends, and we can see how the works unfolded in Gurney's studio through various stages. Gurney even shares timeframes for completion (increasing my appreciation for what goes into works like these) that I think most aspiring artists will find helpful.

The material and techniques are presented succinctly, in engaging two-page spreads, designed to give the gist so that intermediate-level and professional artists can draw immediate conceptual benefit without bewildering beginners and non-artists with a lot of technical information. Gurney stresses that his approach is suitable for both digital and hands-on illustration. Excellent Recommended Reading and Glossary sections appear in the back to entice and inform all levels of readers, and the Index is well-organized and complete.

At the beginning of the book, a Studio section takes us into Gurney's studio and gives some great ideas for making tools at low cost as well as how best to conserve the more expensive ones. I saw at least one thing I can give my son as a graduation present: a Gallery Flambeau! (ROFLMAO!) The book ends with a Careers section that I found especially reassuring. Here I was worrying about my son's ability to find a job with an art degree, but now I feel a lot better about his prospects.

Finally, the design of the book itself is both classic and appealingly edgy; a high-quality glossy paperback with lots of air and color, it would make a fine coffee table book/conversation piece, even for non-artists. I liked the typeface on the back cover so much, this seventies-era typographer went on a hunt for it: Claxton, I

presume. Engaging with this book really brought back for me my own creative exploits when I was a young adult about my son's age, and "that's really nice."

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## **Theresa says**

Learned many artistic techniques in this fascinating and beautiful book.

I agree with his statement that goes against the modern concept that an artist should develop a unique personal style, "The artist ... should try to study nature as faithfully as possible and portray it with as few mannerisms and conventions as possible. Those stylistic mannerisms will make your pictures look dated in the future, and the more you can avoid them, the more timeless your work will be." (I'll personally add that "style" will come with experience)

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## **Parka says**

(More pictures at [parkablogs.com](http://parkablogs.com))

If you are a regular reader of James Gurney's blog, Gurney Journey, you would expect nothing less. This book is as good as I expected. He dispenses his knowledge as freely as he does on his blog. Here's what he says about his own book from the introduction:

This is not a book about figure drawing, anatomy, or perspective. It's not a step-by-step guide on how to draw dinosaurs. It's also not a recipe book for a particular paint technique, although all these topics are addressed in passing. What this book contains is a distillation of the time-tested methods that I've found to be most helpful for achieving realism in imaginative pictures. — James Gurney

If you haven't got the hint from the title, this book is about making your art real and believable. In every chapter, James Gurney shares with us what he learned when creating his paintings. There are topics on people, dinosaurs, architecture, vehicles, composition and his step-by-steps (not techniques but process). The tips he gives can be applied on other subjects as well.

The importance of research is emphasized and the amount of research he does really shows. While creating an illustration on ship wreckage for National Geographic, he talked to survivors to get an accurate account. He found out there's a drummer boy who used his drum as a float and drew that in. He also acted out the various poses of sailors in distress, rather than drawing them from imagination. The result is a painting that tells its story convincingly. The same goes for many of his other paintings.

Another interesting read is the story of him trying to design a Dinotopian fire engine. When he presented his concept art to a professional fire engine designer, it was critiqued to have form but not function. There's lack of heat protection for the dinosaur, lack of understanding on how water hose works and a complicated water pump design. The revised concept is a huge improvement in believability that I thought it actually might work.

He has provided lots of photos and his own work in the book. You'll get to see how he stages the props for reference, sketches and drafts, plenty of commissioned work (especially from National Geographic), the bird



on his shoulder while he's drawing, the lousy-art incinerator he created from mirrors and other entertaining stuff.

Imaginative Realism is an enlightening and fun read. Highly recommended to professionals, beginning art students and those who wish to push their art to the next level in terms of depth.

Be sure to check out more work and writing from James Gurney at [gurneyjourney.blogspot.com](http://gurneyjourney.blogspot.com). On his blog, he talks about his work, art theories, insights and news from the creative field.

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