

A LONG TIME AGO...

Alan was born in Middlesex, England in 1947, and decided at a young age that art would be his life's vocation. After studies at Ealing School of Art he became a freelance illustrator, working in the fields of book publishing, advertising and film. During these early years, his London work space was shared with a number of other artists—including Brian Froud, a painter also drawn to myths and legends. These two friends teamed up to create *Faeries*, a book exploring the rich tradition of faery lore in the British isles, reaching past our modern image of the creatures to capture the faeries of the old oral tales: earthy, wild, mysterious and capricious as a force of nature. Published in 1978, this ground-breaking book became a best-seller, as well as a highly influential text for a whole generation of artists, writers and film-makers to come.

Just prior to the creation of *Faeries*, Alan, his family, and Brian had moved from London to a small village in Devon. The mossy woods with their twisted trees, the ivy-clad lanes and the rolling moor all had their effect on the art for *Faeries*, as well as on Alan's subsequent work—revealing his core as a landscape artist, directly inspired by the lines, tones, and forms of the natural world. Dartmoor proved to be the perfect setting for an artist of Alan's temperament—a land of great and varied beauty, richly steeped in ancient tales; a land of Bronze Age ruins and standing stones on the wind-swept hills.

Wandering through Wistman's Wood and the winding paths by the river Teign he came into his full powers as an artist, the success of *Faeries* allowed him the time to pursue a project dear to his heart:



The Shire, 7 7/8"x 5", acrylic, 1991.

paintings inspired by the Mabinogion. He followed the threads of the stories to Dyfed and Snowdonia, grounding himself in the colors, forms, and spirit of that Celtic land. Returning to his Devon studio with reference photos and sketchbook notes, he created exquisite paintings to accompany the Jones & Jones translation of the text. The result, published in a small edition by Dragon's Dream in 1982, remains one of Alan's finest accomplishments to date. Over the next several years he continued to choose book projects with mythic resonance, such as *Castles*, *Merlin's Dream*, and two children's picture books: *The Mirrorstone* and *The Moon's Revenge*. During these years he also exhibited art across England, Europe and the US, and worked on the designs for magical films such as *Legend* and *Eric the Viking*.

In 1988, Alan was approached by J.R.R. Tolkien's publisher to create fifty new paintings for a lavish new edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, celebrating the first centenary of Tolkien's birth. Speaking about this massive undertaking, Alan says:

I first read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* when I was eighteen. It felt as though the author found every element I'd ever want in a story and wove them into one huge, seamless narrative; but more important, for me, Tolkien had created a place, a vast, beautiful, awesome landscape, which remained a resource long after the protagonists had finished their battles and gone their separate ways. In illustrating *The Lord of the Rings*, I allowed the landscapes to predominate. In some of the scenes the characters are so small they are barely discernible. This suited my own inclinations and my wish to avoid, as much as possible, interfering with the pictures being built up in the reader's mind, which



Above: Rivendell,
7 7/8"x 5", acrylic, 1991
Below: Stone Trolls,
7 7/8"x 5", acrylic, 1991

tends to be more closely focussed on characters and their inter-relationships. I felt my task lay in shadowing the heroes on their epic quest, often at a distance, closing in on them at times of heightened emotion but avoiding trying to re-create the dramatic high points of the text. With *The Hobbit*, however, it didn't seem appropriate to keep such a distance, particularly from the hero himself. I don't think I've ever seen a drawing of a Hobbit which quite convinced me, and I don't know whether I've gotten any closer myself with my depictions of Bilbo. I'm fairly happy with the picture of him standing outside Bag End, before Gandalf arrives and turns his world upside-down, but I've come to the conclusion that one of the reasons Hobbits are so quiet and elusive is to avoid the prying eyes of illustrators.

As these new editions of Tolkien's work are received with acclaim all around the world, Alan's luminous paintings are now inextricably woven into the fabric of Middle-earth, seeping into the dreams of travellers to those lands for generations to come: I've been strongly influenced, in technique as well as subject matter, by some of the early 20th century book illustrators—Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac in particular, Burne-Jones and other Pre-Raphaelites, and the Arts-&-Crafts movement they engendered. I'm continually inspired by Rembrandt, Breughel Hieronymous Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, and Turner; it's not necessarily that they influence my work in any particular direction, more that their example raises my spirits, re-affirms my belief in the power of images to move and delight us, and shows me how much further I have to go, how much is possible. Having visited Venice and



Entrance to Moria,
7 7/8"x 5", acrylic, 1991

Florence for the first time, I am besotted with the Italian Renaissance artists—Botticelli, Bellini, da Vinci and others. Their work is calm, controlled, and yet each face and landscape contains such passion. In Botticelli's paintings, every pebble and every leaf is rendered with a religious devotion; there is reverence inherent in paying such close attention to every stone, turning painting itself into a form of worship, an act of prayer.

I ask Alan whether he too sees painting as an act of communication with something beyond our human ken—God, Mystery, call it what you will:

Perhaps in a more mythological sense than the religious orientation of the Renaissance. To draw a tree, to pay such close attention to every aspect of a tree, is an act of reverence not only toward the tree, and toward the earth itself, but also our human connection to it. This is one of the magical things about drawing—it gives us almost visionary moments of connectedness. Every element—hair, wind, rocks, water—is portrayed with one material—graphite, ink, paint—which binds it all together, bringing out the harmony we know exists in nature. This is the power of myth as well, binding us to the natural world. There have always been mythic tales of figures whose function is to act as an intermediary between humanity and nature—the shaman, the shape-shifter, the trickster ... an embodiment of creative powers who appears in myths, fairy tales and medieval legends all around the world. Often they have a touch of “divine madness”—like Merlin, during his years in the wild through which he gained his divinatory powers. It is interesting to me that in our century it is often artists who fulfill this function. And who, in popular stereotypes, are



Above: Gondor,
7 7/8" x 5", pencil, 1991
Below: Bilbo,
7 7/8" x 5", pencil, 1991

given the licence to be a bit mad ... look at Picasso, a trickster figure if there ever was one. The power of both myth and art is this magical ability to open doors, to make connections—not only between us and the natural world, but between us and the rest of humanity. Myths show us what we have in common with every other human being, no matter what culture we come from, no matter what century we live in and at the same time, mythic stories and art celebrate our essential differences.

When Alan first encountered Greek myths as a child, he says the stories:

Provoked a degree of excitement that can't be explained by their value as adventures, however great that may be. Though they were new to me I felt a sense of recognition, and my response, in particular to the more Otherworldly elements, suggests that they were meeting a spiritual need that was barely touched by the dull lectures and repetitions of the school and church acts of worship I regularly dozed through. I'm not suggesting that I wanted to sacrifice a bull to Zeus or consult a Sybil—I didn't know any Sybils—but that I found, unconsciously, a wider and deeper context for my hopes and fears, gained a sense of continuity and communion with the people of the different times and cultures that I read about, and an enhanced and more imaginative relationship with the natural world.



Above: The Glastig,
8" x 6 1/4", acrylic, 1978
Cover: Fairy Sketch,
5" x 6", pencil, 1978

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