
Author Fred Taraba wrote forty-one “Methods of the Masters” columns for the magazine Step-by-Step Graphics between the years 1989-2001. This book is a much-anticipated compilation of those columns. The author has updated, edited, and reformatted the columns and included numerous additional images.

The heft of this volume indicates the bountiful content within its 432 pages. Each chapter contains biographical information about one of the forty-one artists, his or her specialty genres, descriptions of the exquisitely reproduced images, and personal anecdotes garnered from Taraba’s relationships with some of the artists and their families. Within chapters, Taraba discusses illustrators’ philosophies and their preferred methods, such as pen drawings, pencil sketches, or watercolor paintings. He also notes whether illustrations were created as book art, covers or advertisements for magazines such as The New Yorker or Saturday Evening Post, or as pulp magazine/comic book art. Of note is the author’s facility with language, which is quite sophisticated, with a certain edge that makes for compelling narrative. The text is in no way subordinate to the artwork.

The book itself is printed on high quality paper stock that enhances the full-color images. Minor criticisms are that, perhaps due to the book’s weight, the binding may not be sufficiently durable. Also, although there is an index, the book lacks a bibliography and other supporting back-of-the-book data that a reader might expect.

Fred Taraba has been researching, documenting, collecting and selling the work of American illustrators for decades. He was librarian, curator, and assistant director of The Society of Illustrators for eight years, and then spent sixteen years as director of Illustration House, a New York-based gallery/vendor specializing in illustration art. He currently owns an illustration art business in Casper, Wyoming.

In terms of historical context, to better understand this book, illustrations were understood to be artwork created for a client to appeal to the masses, such as cover art, advertisements, or other “commercial art.” Conversely, gallery or museum art was usually considered to be one of a kind. This distinction has narrowed and may be disappearing as the means of creating, reproducing, and distributing art continue to evolve.

Masters of American Illustration: 41 Illustrators and How They Worked is already being heralded as a classic among art illustrators. It should be in the collections of all libraries and museums dealing with the genre; happily, its price is quite affordable. Taraba’s book belongs alongside seminal works by Walt Reed, James J. Best, Susan E. Meyer, and the other researchers who continue to develop and enrich the growing body of illustration art literature.

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