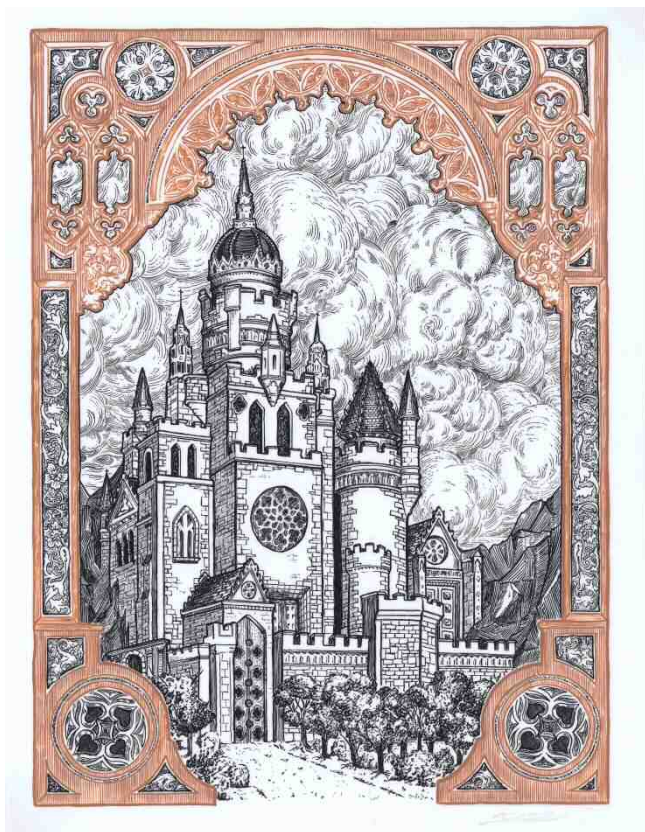


## J.M. Dragunas The Devil is in the Details



Joe is one of my favorite people in the hobby. A good friend and a great artist that is forging a new path in comic art. Although some of you know Joe and his art already, let me introduce the rest of you to him.

I first met Joe at C2E2 in 2014. Although it has only been 4 years, it feels like I have known him for over a decade. I like to spend a lot of time in what I call the art ghetto at comic cons, you know the rows and rows of tables with artists struggling or just starting out. I have met many friends and artists this way but Joe stands out. I remember going by his table and stopping for what I think was about an hour to talk with him and I ended up buying quite a few pieces of art from him. He had just produced his first self-published comic, *The Sires of Time*. He had many illustrations and pin-up pieces with him and he was selling a lot of prints. I was immediately drawn to Joe's art due to the illustrative nature of it as well as his use of borders and filigree. Probing further, we talked about other artists and he was already well versed in some that came up like his buddy Jeremy Bastian. I was able to introduce him to Schuiten and a few others. Often when I tell artists about other artists they should check out, I figure they just humor me but Joe actually went out and got one of Steve Smith's recently released Schuiten books and so when I went back for another visit, he had just started looking at the book. That impressed me, someone

that is willing to learn and seek out new influences. Joe credits me with the being the person that through my actions of talking with him and buying his art that made him think, "yeah, I can do this for a living." We have taken turns introducing each other to new artists from around the world. Over the next 4 years I have met with Joe at many conventions, we have been roommates, I have visited with him at his home/studio, he has come up to Toronto over a half dozen times to attend comic conventions with me and other times just to hang out for a few days. Before the last time we met up, I had asked Joe to do an interview with me for CFA-APA and we did.



### Interview March 2018

We met in 2014, it seems like I have known you a lot longer. We were fast friends and I am a big fan of your work. When we first met, I think your art reminded me of my youth playing old school dungeons and dragons. We have discussed this before but you would have been perfect for all things D&D circa 1982. ***Describe your art for us.***

*So I've had a few people ask me to describe my style, and I never really can come up with a good answer besides 'A lot of lines', I love ornamentation and I use a variety of styles that orbit around that, some French baroque and rococo elements, some medieval mantling, and just a bunch of filigree. But I think that I've come up with a term that describes what I'm trying to convey and that would be 'Fanciful Ridiculousness'.*



(as a side note, Joe is currently in the middle of a crowd-funding campaign on Kickstarter for an Art of J.M. Dragunas book entitled **Fanciful Ridiculousness**)



**When did you really start drawing?**

I've always drawn, I mean almost every small child draws with crayons at the Doctor's office or in preschool, but I never put that hobby down, but it was always just a hobby until about 15 years ago when I first thought about taking art seriously. The art from 15 years ago, Hell, the art from two years ago, is about as good as the stuff from pre-school, but I'm trying.



**Did you go to school/classes for art?**

You and I have talked often about the medical field, and that's what I went to school for. 3 years in different community colleges taking the required classes for emergency work. No formal training at all in art, actually the last art teacher I ever had was in middle school, and she told my mother in a meeting that I should 'Never pursue anything in the artistic field.' But that's American underfunded public schools for you.

**How did you get into comics and self-publishing?**

So my past before I met my wife is a bit sketchy so I won't remark on that here, but when I first met her (at about 21 I think) I was working in an emergency room 3rd shift and a video store 2nd shift. I was always working. After I got sick of the medical field, I worked at a few part-time jobs, and then worked as a shipping supervisor for almost a decade. At the warehouse I wrote a few books at the suggestion of my wife who told me 'I

was a great storyteller and should do something with that'. Honestly it wasn't something I had ever thought of, but as soon as she had given me the idea. I ran with it initially writing two books, (which were published by a now closed publishing house, and there junk anyways so please don't read them) and then thinking it would be wiser to jump over to comics.



**Who are your biggest influences as far as style goes**

As far as influences go, ironically its most artists that are so far away from my own style that it's almost comical. I LOVE LOVE LOVE most Japanese and Korean artists. Yoshitaka Amano, Noriyoshi Ohrai, Kouta Hirano, and Sun Ken Rock just to name a few, Kentaro Miura, Shirow Masamune. Those are the go to guys for inspiration. Wild and action packed, the movement jumps off each panel and page. But for studying and learning techniques I have a few go to guys, like Gary Gianni, Mark Schultz, Terry Dodson, and some older chaps like J.C. Coll, Heinrich Lefler, Alex Raymond, honestly I could go on for a while..... But I should say that the more I look at Kirby, Williamson and Foster, the greater my awe for them becomes.

**Who are your favorite artists currently working**

Favorite living guys? A few that I named above for sure, Schuiten (who you kindly introduced me to), Manara, Darrow, Maroto, Nick Dragotta, Dave Rapooza, Troy Nixey, Frank Brunner, John Bolton, Becky Cloonan, Toppi, and of course Adam Hughes and Simone Bianchi, just to name a few, again, I could go on for a while.....



***You tend to draw medieval and fantasy themes... why?***

*So as far as fantasy themes go, I have a thousand reasons, but mainly they're just more visually interesting than modern stuff. If you look at the architecture in Little Nemo compared to the buildings of New York in Spiderman, Little Nemo wins every time. Castles and gothic cathedrals will always beat the brutal modernism of a concrete warehouse and a glass skyscraper. Not to diminish the work of any architect though. Plus with fantasy, there tends to be less rules, you can go to different worlds, have mythical creatures and supernatural abilities, and all you need is the word 'fantasy' to make all that logically fit into the story.*

***Your border work and scroll work are amazing, where did that come from?***

*Thanks! Always appreciated. Again, it came down to visuals. Here in Cleveland, we have a beautiful art museum, and about 15 years ago they had an outstanding medieval exhibit go through and that was the first time that I had ever seen a Knight's Crest. A beautiful coat-of-arms that blew me away. I bought the book, (which I still have although it looks like it's been through a hurricane) at the end of the tour and that was the exact second that I got serious about art. The ornamental design of scroll work is so visually pleasing to me; I try to incorporate it into everything I do. Also it's a great tool for balancing a picture, just like hair or cloaks, if the image is too heavy on one side, just add a little frame work and it still makes sense.*

***Where do you see your work going in the future?***

*I've always gravitated to creator-owned material. I like seeing the complete vision of the person, so that's basically how I've chosen to work. As far as my own work goes, I have the next 20 years laid out in what I want to do, I have all the stories loosely outlined, most of the characters designed, now I just have to draw!*

***You do travel to many conventions each year, what is that like?***

*Conventions are a double-edged sword. They're incredibly fun to do, but they take a lot out of you, especially when you drive to all of them like I do. It's great to be at the table and answer questions, to people watch, and see other parts of the country, but on the flip side, it means you're away from the drawing table for four to six days.*

***What do you like about fan interactions?***

*Interactions with people that come to the table are 99% positive, which is great. It gives some validation for spending most of my existence at the drawing table. I have a style that is a bit different than most other people set up. I don't have any giant Deadpool faces, or Harley Quinn pin-ups, so when people remark on that in a positive way it's great.*



***Any fan pet peeves?***

*I think of most shows as a fish market, were all selling fish, so if you've come to my table to buy my fish, then that's great, no pet peeves here. Except for tattoo requests. I don't do tattoos, and if you want a tattoo, then do your damn research, find a great artist, get on his/her waitlist, pay whatever they ask, tip well, and then go home.*

***I do see a pop-culture, movie and anime themes to some of you prints and work. You really do capture the essence of the subject matter well.***

*Thanks for saying so! So the movies and pop culture that I familiarize myself with usually doesn't translate into either my artwork or stories, but it's always useful to dip into that well for talking with other people at the table or other creators. When I talk to someone who I admire and they reference Fritz Lang's Metropolis for example, it's*



always nice to know what that other person is referencing and try to see what was so inspiring to them. I'm always looking to find material for stories, or for inspiration. Always thirsty!

### **Do you do commissions?**

For commissions, I wouldn't say that I don't do them, (although on all my social media it says 'no commissions') but I always find them to be a distraction from what I'm currently working on. I'll always take on a few as long as time isn't really a problem. If I have 6 months to slowly think about the layout, the composition of the characters, then I'll gladly take on a few, and that way they don't distract me from anything that I'm currently working on. But again, absolutely no tattoo requests.

### **In addition to being an artist, you are a fan and collector of original comic art. Tell us about you collecting.**

So I absolutely love collecting art. Our mutual friend Rob asked me if I collected for aesthetic reasons or for nostalgic reasons. I answered yes to both, but would add a third, and that's to learn from. I've learned so much from collecting, like Sam Kieth for example, that guy used just as much white out as he did black ink, using two tools like that might of been obvious to some, but I'm teaching myself on a lot of this and for me the fastest way to learn is to study what others have done. Also there's so much of the ink work that gets covered up with the coloring, the pencils that get washed out or deleted while coloring. I love all the artist editions that are out now, I have about 20, and you can see some of the process and ideas that didn't make it to the final printed page. There are college courses of information in one original page. Plus it looks pretty on the wall.

### **Tell us about your recent project on a major movie franchise and you recent experience with digital artwork.**

So I spent the majority of 2017 working on the book **Harry Potter: A Cinematic Gallery**. I went into that book with the intention of doing the whole thing traditionally, but due to deadlines and the publisher's request, I went all digital after the first 8 pages. I hadn't really done anything digital before that, with the exception of some text. I went to YouTube and Skillshare, and tried to learn as much Photoshop as I would need in a few days. It was a bit stressful, but after the project was done, I was incredibly thankful that they wanted the book done that way. I learned things on the digital side of illustration that I would have never learned otherwise. I would have stuck to my stubborn idea that all art had to be done traditionally. I had always appreciated digital work, but thought it was something that I would never do myself in my luddite obtrusiveness. Above all else it was just so so much faster, and I learned a bunch of tricks that will make all my future projects faster, although the end result will still be traditional.



### **When you look back at your art, evolution and style, what do you see?**

In my own work all I see is mistakes. As what to improve? Everything. ha-ha. I'm always trying to use more solid blacks, Alex Nino was the master of solid black areas, and Williamson knew exactly when to block something out, but that comes with a knowledge of three-dimensionality, which is something I can't wrap my head around. But I'm trying!

### **What artistic legacy do you hope to leave behind one day?**

As far as legacy goes, my only desire on this earth, besides making my wife happy, is to, hopefully, make it a prettier place. My wife and I agreed years ago to not have kids, so no genetic legacy there. I enjoy history to a great extent, but I'll never be in the political ring, and I don't have any blue blood to become a king or monarch, I don't have the brain of Ceasar or the cunning of Kahn, but I can try to draw pretty things. If I can momentarily entertain you, and distract you from the void that we all return to, then I've done my job.

### **My Joe Dragunas Art Collection**

This article is entirely accompanied by art that I own and have gotten directly from Joe over the years.

What I see in Joe's work is the love of the craft and a vision. He works with traditional inks, fine tip brushes and crow quill pens to create intricate and detailed works that harken back to an era of great illustrators of many centuries past. The fine lines, contrast, use of filigree and borders makes one think of print work seen in ancient manuscripts and there is certainly a print like quality to Joe's work. Taking inspiration from classic illustrators as well as modern masters like many of Warren's Spanish

masters including Maroto and Gonzalez, Joe also tries to give his page work a flow and connectivity. Using non-traditional page layouts and panel structure, he is always



challenging the reader with his designs. In the few years I have known him; I have seen Joe grow tremendously as an artist refining his characters, anatomy, dynamics and depth. His dexterity with his tools has also improved greatly and one can see that on how much easier the ink flows on him most

recent works. Check out one of his many inking videos to see just how controlled, confident and gracefully he wields his brushes.

The first works I picked up from Joe were at C2E2 in 2014. I could have bought his whole portfolio but I stopped at a half dozen pieces including 2 small commissions.

The first pieces I choose were the first 2 pages of his book *The Sires of Time*. In this book there are four knights that travel through different tasks by Merlin to reassemble Excalibur and to thwart the plans of the evil Mogan LeFay. The first two pages make for an introduction



and an inside cover of sorts featuring Merlin and Camelot. I think these pages really showcase Joe's early intricate art and border work. I also picked up a third page from this book featuring a large panel page with Morgan La Fay and a town on fire. These early pages by Joe were done paper, I mention this because throughout his evolution, Joe has experimented with different paper types and processes. I believe this was the last time he worked on paper. I also

got two smaller illustration he had done featuring a queen



and a Knight. Both were used earlier in this article so see above. Lastly we arranged 2 small commissions, one of Totoro and a second with a Schiuten theme to it as that became an early connection we made. I had set up one other studio commission at that time with Joe, an addition to my Dragon Lady and Corto Maltese theme. I did go a bit overboard here but it is funny how those little events

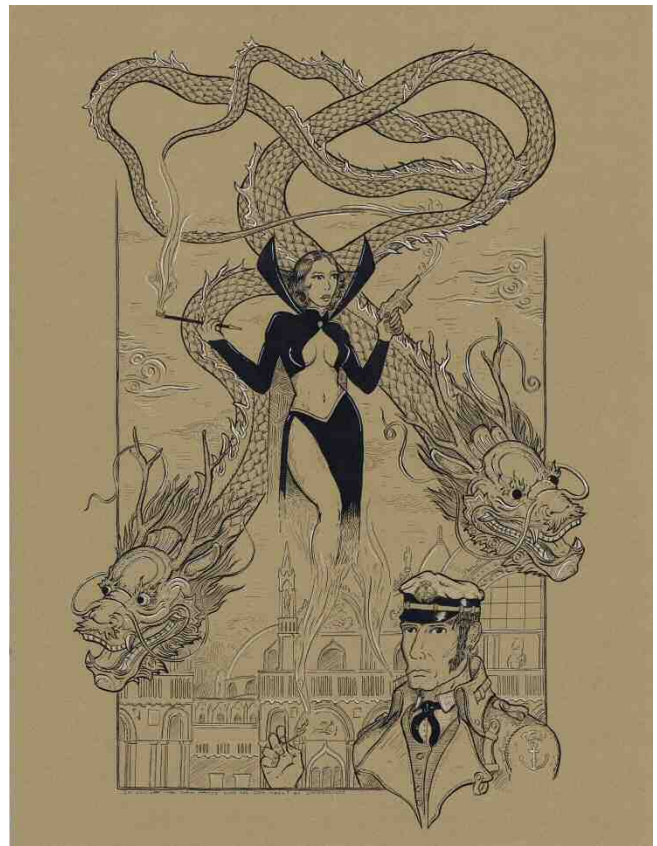
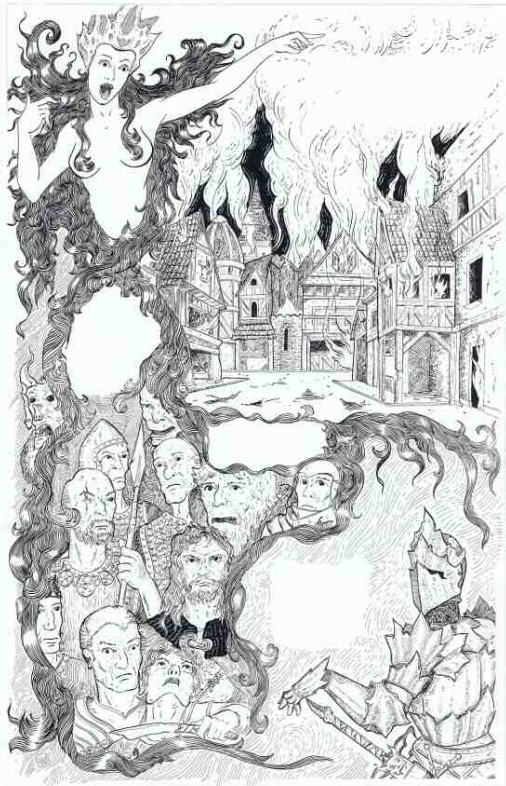
can sometimes be so important. It was that meeting and that sale of art that made Joe decide that he could do this for a living.

*The Sires of Time* as self-published in a regular comic format. Already into the second book, Joe decided to put the first few books all together as a Kickstarter. By this point he

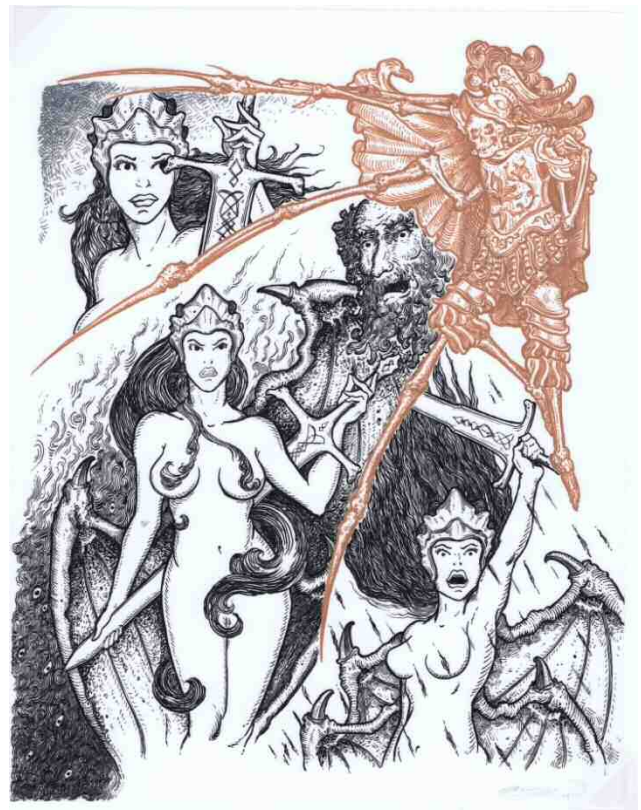
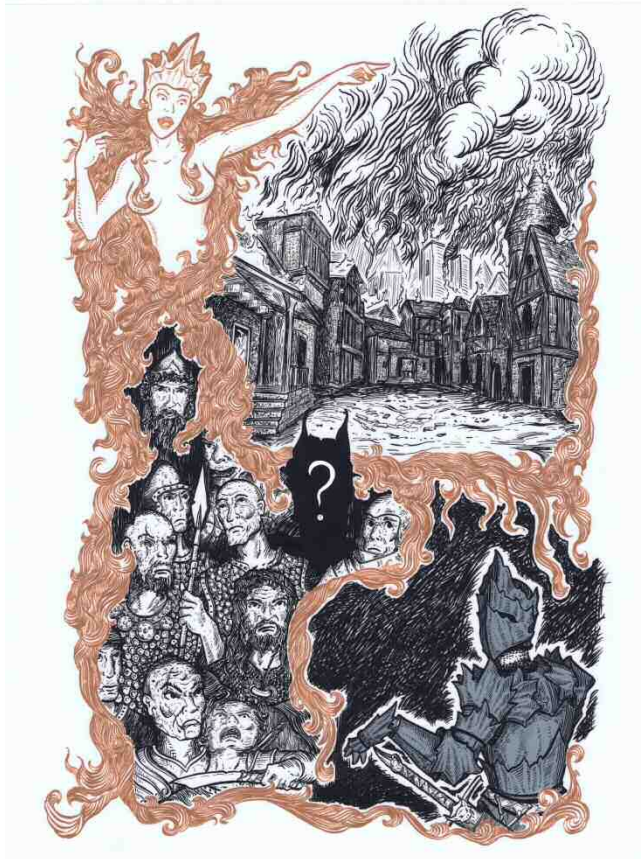
had started working on velum as he liked the way the ink sat on the paper better. There was also the introduction of a redish ink to Joe's work. This is a color he makes himself and the highlights it provides added another level to his work that Joe liked a lot. So much so that he redrew all the original pages from issue one with the new style to keep the style of the book the same. So, the first printing of the comic is the only time those originals were



ever published. The first image you see in this article is the reworked Camelot which you can compare to the first one I bought. Below you can see the original Morgan LeFay page I bought from Joe followed by the reworked page.



The Chinese dragon's you see here make their way into the second instalment of *The Sires of Time*. I have several pages from this including one I shared earlier in the article with three of the Knights and the Asian dragons. Below is another Morgan LeFay page and a pin-up.

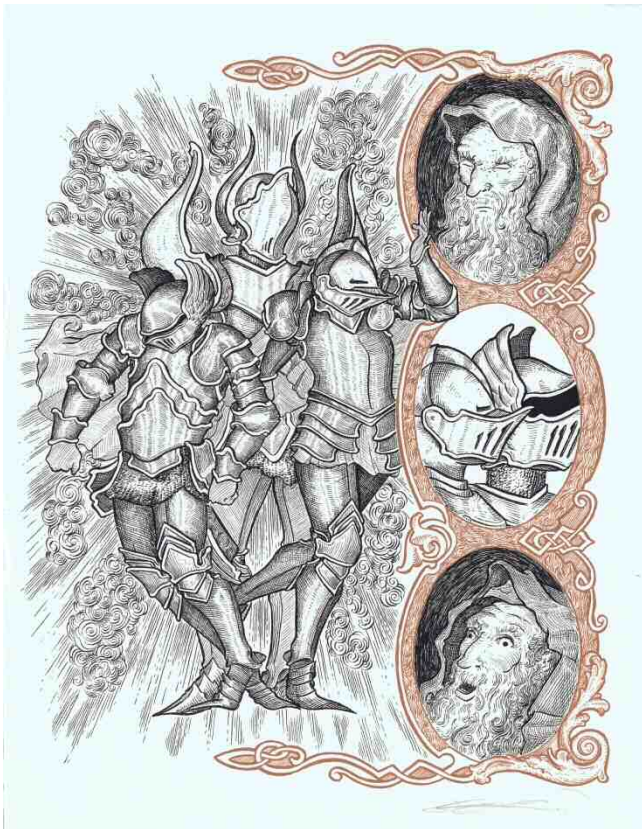


Here is the commission. You can see the use of design elements to flow and tie the drawing together.

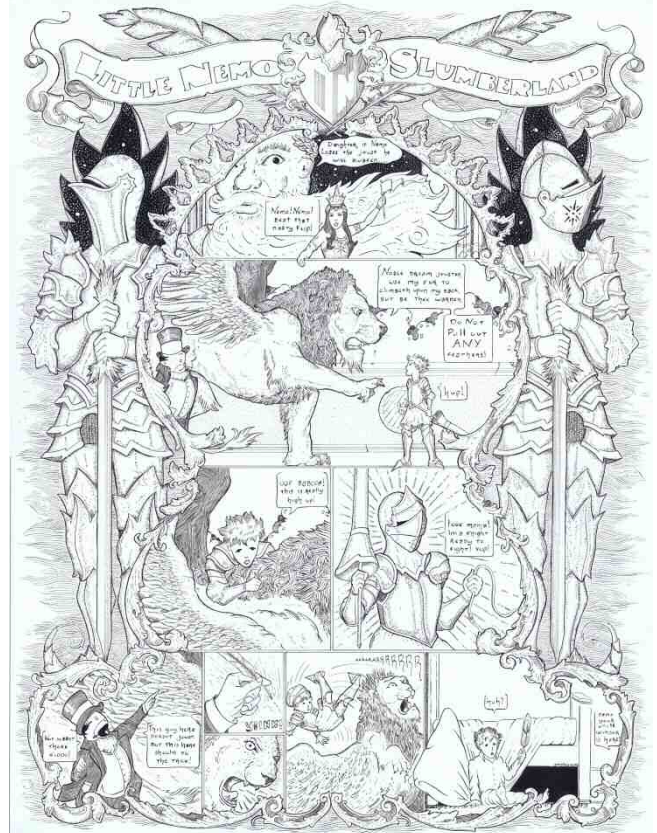
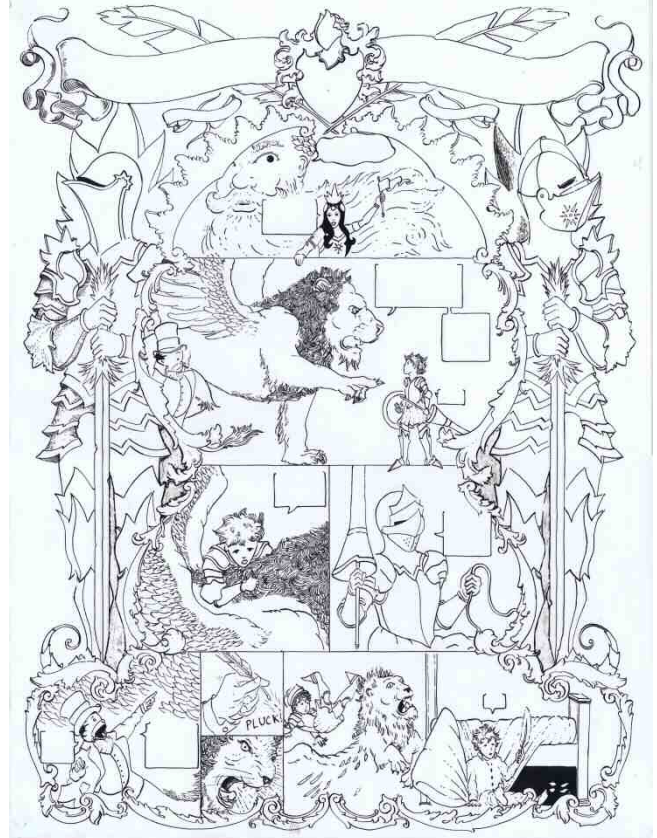




Below is one last page from *The Sires of Time*. Joe's Kickstarter for *The Sires of Time* was very successful and I supported it with a contribution that included a commission. I gave Joe a choice of a few things and the one that I was hoping he would choose spoke to both of us. It is the Akira themed commission shown earlier in this article.



Locust Moon ran a Kickstarter campaign for a wild idea for a book. They decided to revisit the Little Nemo themes of Winsor McKay with modern artists. Joe was one of the invited artists to participate in *Little Nemo: Dream Another Dream*. Below is the preliminary work and the final page that Joe did for this project.





With so much art by Joe already in my collection, I took a bit of a break. As I tell Joe every time I see him, I could buy so much more art from him but I have too much already and have to say no. Over the past year I have added 3 new pieces by Joe. The first is one of only about a half dozen traditional illustration Joe did for his Harry Potter project and that image is presented earlier in this piece. The next two are more recent additions. The first is a little illustration that will likely make it into his most recent project, *Fanciful Ridiculousness*. The final piece is perhaps his best work to date. It was done as a Spectrum submission this year. Joe had a previous work in Spectrum last year. One of the newer things that Joe has added to his work is the use of pattern transfers like leterset. Still working on vellum, the inks are on the front of the art but the pattern is transferred on to the back of the art to create a lighting/coloring effect and adds depth to the pieces. I think it is quite effective.

Beyond what I have shown you Joe has worked on other projects including a cover for Valiant Comics, an illustration that was used in Game of Thrones merchandising, several gallery show inclusions and pin-ups in other creator's comics.

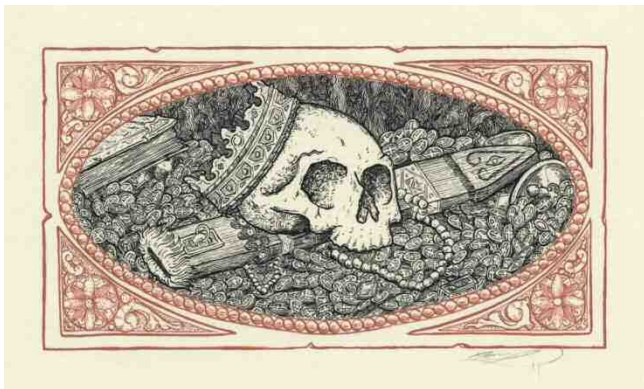


A lot of what I have from Joe is a bit older. He asked me to show some of his more recent work and so here are images. These are not pages I own. The Adventure Time Lemongrab image is an older one but a favorite of mine.











## Mailing Comments: The Art of Collecting

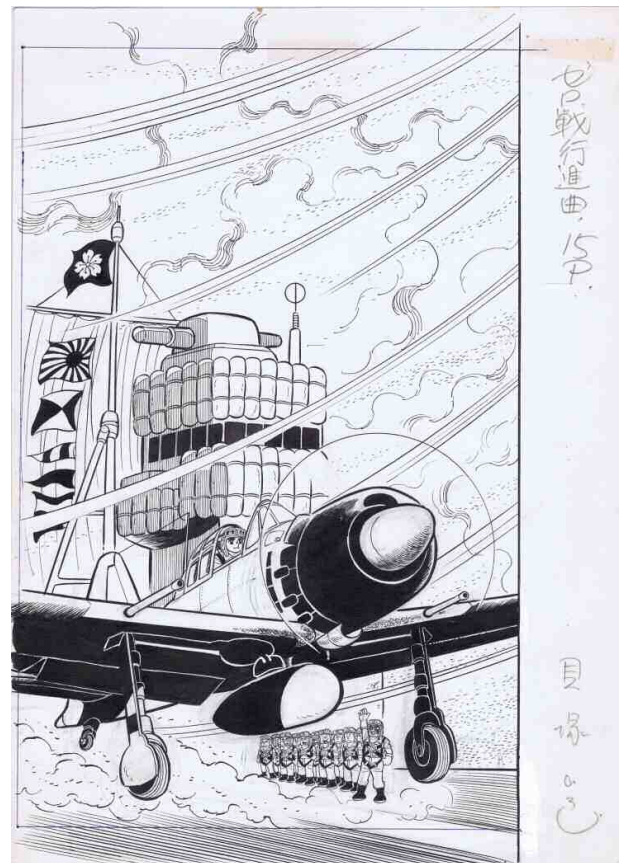
This might be my favorite issue so far and one I expect to revisit in the future. My comments will be short this time as I really appreciated everyone talking about their collection. Although we may collect different artists/material, we share similar thoughts and motivations and in that we have a brotherhood and an understanding of each other. It takes some work to look at and dissect what it is you collect, why you collect and how you collect and we are making our selves vulnerable sharing these thoughts with others. Please know that it was all enjoyed and helped solidify my own thoughts and feeling on these matters. There were many reoccurring themes and lessons we have learned over the years and perhaps this issue would make a great primer of sorts to give to someone who is entering the hobby. The problem with me (and perhaps others) is I seem to be destined to make my own mistakes and sometimes the same mistakes more than once. I do think curation is important in deciding how you want to alter/grow/shrink your collection and like many of you; I had a collection that was out of control before I gave curation much thought. The one thing I was hoping to hear more about from the group was what the end game plan is. What will happen to your collection one day? I did talk about that in my piece but would love hear the thoughts of others and their reasoning.

Benno introduced you to J.M. Dragunas last issue but in the context of Joe being a collector. I am here to introduce you to Joe the artist. If you are reading this, you have already finished my article and I hope there was not too much overlap with Benno's great interview.

A short follow up to my Japan comic con article in a previous CFA-APA. I just returned from my third trip to Tokyo and although it was not timed with any conventions, I managed to do and see a few comic related things. On our second day in Tokyo, I headed to my



favorite hole-in-the-wall comic shop, the one I have previously told you about with the curry shop in the back. It is one of the few places I know of to find original art. This time they had 4 Tezuka original on display but none were for sale, just a client showing them. It was wonderful to see more originals in person and hopefully my pictures are better as I had a phone accident and had to get a newer phone. Hopefully future comic art adventures will have better images to go with them too. I did pick up one really cool splash from a 1960's era



Japanese manga entitled *Zero Senkoushinkyoku* by Hiroshi Kaizuka. The next day was a total comic geek day starting with another visit to Studio Ghibli in the Tokyo outskirts of Mitaka. I'd share pictures but they are not allowed as they want to preserve the experience for the guests and to call it anything less than magical would be doing it a disservice. The rest of the day and evening were spent at Nakano Broadway, a three story mall made up almost entirely of manga, anime, comic and related shops. About 2 dozen on each floor often very specialized in niche material and many resellers. It is not uncommon for collectors to rent a case in these shops to sell unwanted items. With living spaces being small, buying something new often means having to get rid of something. We did visit Akihabara, Tokyo's electronic and Otaku central area which is unchanged from my last visit. The one nice surprise for me was when visiting the Mori Art Museum on the top floors of the Roppongi tower, they had a large exhibition for well-respected mangaka Fujiko Fujio. Below are photos from the amazing exhibition that unfortunately I didn't have enough context to fully appreciate.





