



On the Use of Photography in Illustration

Article Author:

[P J Lynch](#) [1]

[122](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

P J Lynch discusses the techniques and the issues.

There are good, bad and mediocre artists working in every genre of illustration. One instance when the casual observer might find it difficult to judge the quality of an illustration is when the artist has made use of photographic reference. Is this 'cheating' or can the debate be usefully broadened?

P. J. Lynch discusses the techniques he uses in his work, as well as some of the issues raised when artists work from photographic reference. <!--break-->

The nineteenth century academic painter, Paul Delaroche, seeing a Daguerreotype photograph for the first time, supposedly exclaimed 'Now painting is dead!' But he was wrong. Many artists continued to paint in a figurative way, some felt threatened by what they thought of as the soulless, mechanical trickery of photography. Many others, however, such as Gauguin, Monet, Mucha and Sickert were excited by the marvellous possibilities of the new technology and embraced it fully as a fledgling art form in itself, and also as a tool to assist in their painting. In fact artists had been using visual aids in their work long before photography as we know it was invented, Holbein and Vermeer are two good examples of artists whose finest work was created using the camera obscura.

American illustrators, Maxfield Parrish and Norman Rockwell came to find that taking photographs of the model in different poses and lighting arrangements greatly broadened the imaginative scope of their work. Inspired by their example, many American illustrators continued to work using these techniques with varying degrees of success, Maurice Sendak being a notable example in the field of children's books. Artwork of this style has only really begun to appear in British children's books in the last decade, and might possibly still be looked upon with some suspicion as another cultural import from across the Atlantic.

A short cut?

Critics of artists using photographic reference have implied that it is used as a short cut to good drawing*. This begs the question of why any of those artists I have already mentioned would choose to use photography in this way. All of them were natural draughtsmen of the highest standards, and none of them could be described as being too lazy to make their own sketches. It would, however, be true to say that as accomplished artists, confident of their abilities, they were all keen to experiment with a new technology that might in some way aid their creativity.

Practical advantages in using photographs are primarily to do with the freedom to capture models in a great variety of poses, including awkward unsustainable positions.

Different lighting arrangements can be experimented with, and photographs taken from angles from which it would be impossible to draw.

Clearly photography can offer great insights into the understanding of figures in motion. Some of Degas' finest pictures

of ballet dancers and racehorses are derived directly from photographs.

Extending the possibilities beyond the studio, an artist with a camera can record locations, landscapes and props where it might be difficult or impossible to sit down and sketch.

A major consideration also for most artists would be the expense saved in models' fees, as painting or drawing directly from life takes a great deal more time with the model than a photographic session.

The need for good drawing

I am not suggesting that using photography should replace good drawing practice. In fact, to use photographic reference successfully, it is vital that the artist has a good drawing ability and a thorough understanding of form, of light and shadow, and of perspective.

Unfortunately it is sometimes the very people who lack these skills who are attracted to using this technique in the belief that it is an easy way to achieve impressive results. Common weaknesses in their work can be seen in a lack of coherence when the photographically derived elements are integrated with those drawn from a different source, and invented elements may not be drawn well enough. Sometimes the relative scale of characters to their setting will be wrong, or figures might somehow appear not to properly exist in the same space. A laziness can often be detected even in the artist's choice of model, and a static, snap-shotish feel shows that not enough work has been done at the photo-session. At their worst, illustrations derived from photographs can appear artificial and lifeless, especially, when the artist has not used his or her own photographs.

How I use photography in my work

I will happily make use of a photograph from any source for a prop or a background element in my illustration. I feel it is wrong, though, to use someone else's picture as the reference for a major element of a painting. I see this as plagiarism and it is not justified by the fact that it requires some skill and effort to transfer the image into another medium. Until recently many illustrators, particularly in the field of advertising, made a living doing little more than this. I did a few such book covers myself, but I was young when I did those pictures and I needed the money! The advent of new computer technology has made it simple to process any photograph through filters which can make it look pretty much like a painting, leaving the least imaginative of those illustrators redundant and the rest queuing up for computer courses.

The first books I illustrated were fairy tales and the images were drawn mostly from memory and imagination. I would refer frequently to books to check how a prop, or a costume or an architectural detail might have looked. For facial expressions and hand gestures I would pose myself in front of a mirror and draw directly from that.

When I began work on a story called **Melisande** by E. Nesbit, I decided that for the fantasy of the giant princess to work she had to look as convincing as possible whilst still relating to the invented elements around her. I was particularly keen to get the folds in her dress just right, so I posed a friend with a sheet wrapped around her and took a Polaroid. Using this reference I was able to draw up a very believable Melisande and challenged myself then to create a townscape which would hopefully appear to be just as solid.

To remain consistently within a kind of fairy tale unreality, and being very wary of the pitfalls involved in using photographs, I always tried to avoid working too closely from them. Referring to my initial thumbnail sketches I would direct my model and photograph her from various angles, then I would select one or two photos that I would use as a starting point to trigger my imagination.

However, when I was asked to illustrate **The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey** by Susan Wojchiechowski, I realized that I would have to adapt my usual approach. The story is a very intimate human drama involving only three characters, and it is set almost entirely within a woodcarver's hut. It is a wonderfully moving text and I felt that it required a more subtle use of expression and gesture, and a greater authenticity than I had attempted before. I wanted the

reader to really know Jonathan Toomey and to understand his day to day life. To research the book I travelled to the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, where I was able to absorb the atmosphere of various early American buildings, including houses and to take numerous photographs of tables, chairs, windows, doors etc. Back in Ireland I added to this with book research and close study of films set in Toomey's period. Meanwhile I was planning the layout with the designers at Walker Books and composing the pictures in thumbnail drawings.

Each of the many photographic sessions had to be carefully set-up and directed. This part of the process is very much like directing a play or a film, trying to coax a performance out of the model, whilst experimenting with lighting and camera angles. It can be very intense, gruelling work for everyone involved. Of the hundred or so photographs taken at each session, I would select only three or four to work from.

The next step is to draw up the composition. In this case I drew the figure working from the photographs and then, guided by all the research I had done, I invented the workshop around him. A few small elements were closely based on photos but everything else had to be drawn afresh for the perspective I had decided for the room, and here it had to be much more naturalistic than my fairy tale books. When I was satisfied with the drawing, I began with the fun part, the painting.

I used watercolour first to build up the image layer by layer, and then, towards the end, I added detail and light effects with gouache, working hard to achieve a unifying quality of finish across the picture. My aim was not to achieve photo-realism, but a kind of heightened naturalism, that would evoke a real sense of a man and a place that only ever existed in an author's words.

To many artists, photography presents an exciting other way of seeing, experiencing and remembering the world around us. Some, without a clear artistic vision of their own, may misuse or be dominated by the photographic image, but others will continue to use it as a wonderful tool to serve their creativity.

* see Lisa Kopper's article, 'Will the Real Drawings Please Stand Up?' in **BfK 110** (May '98).

P. J. Lynch won the Mother Goose Award in 1987 for **A Bag of Sunshine** . In 1995 he won the Kate Greenaway Medal for **The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey** and in 1997 for **When Jessie Came Across the Sea** . His latest book is **Grandad's Prayers of the Earth** (Walker, 0 7445 5648 1, £10.99 hbk).



[P J Lynch - Portrait.JPG](#) [3]



[P J Lynch - Portrait.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

10

Source URL (retrieved on Sep '20): <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/122/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/on-the-use-of-photography-in-illustration>

Links:

[1] <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/p-j-lynch>

[2] <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/122>

[3] <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/P J Lynch - Portrait.JPG>

[4] http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/P J Lynch - Portrait_0.JPG