

# Contemporary Visionaries. Environment Concept Art's Imaginative Realism and Evocative Power

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## Abstract

*Imagining and creating new worlds has always been one of the deepest desires of mankind. Today as yesterday, the insatiable hunger of the creative genius characterizes the poetic activity of certain artists and architects who see the world in an imaginative way in order to give birth to original pieces of reality (or unreality). Reason and imagination freely interact in the artistic mind, decomposing and recomposing fragments of architectures, urban and natural landscapes to build new visions. The history of art is full of examples of visionary artists whose production was mainly devoted to the visionary representation of places such as the Baroque scenic designs by the Galli da Bibiena dynasty, the imaginary views by Piranesi and the masters of capriccio as well as the futuristic visions of Sant'Elia and Chernikhov. Similar experimentations can be found today in the work of environment concept artists operating in the entertainment industry: these artists create depictions of fictional universes characterized by an extraordinary evocative power, in which reality and imagination coexist. These contemporary visionaries can see beyond the visible, drawing from memory and fantasy, providing coherent and incredibly realistic pictures of imaginary places, to the point that they appear possible in the eyes of the spectator.*

*Keywords: concept art, imaginative realism, world-building, entertainment industry, visionary aesthetics.*

## Introduction

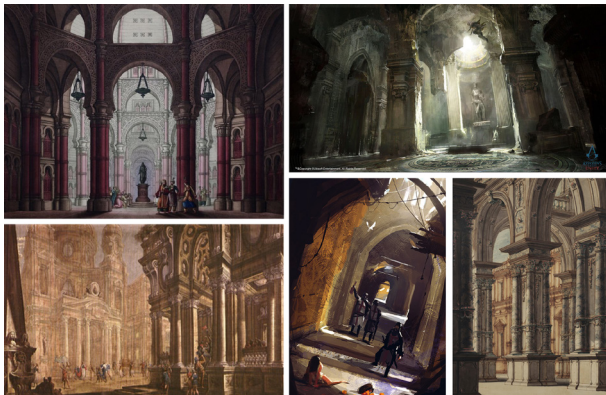
"Anything that we can imagine can be transformed  
into a visually convincing truth.  
But even as we strive for verisimilitude  
in our imaginative pictures,  
it is really the invisible quality of believability  
that we're ultimately trying to capture"  
[Gurney 2009, p. 206]

Designing fantastic worlds and translating them into convincing bi-dimensional representations characterized by impressive evocative power and visual realism is an old and yet up-to-date artistic practice. The video game and film industry are growing fast, requiring a huge amount of multifaceted, talented artists who are able to shape and give life to fictional places, conveying a vision and setting

the tone for the entire video game or film production. We are talking about the so-called concept artists, contemporary visionaries endowed with unlimited imagination, fine artistic skills and mastery of modern digital creative tools. Their visionary images are built by means of traditional graphic expression techniques (geometric perspective, aerial perspective, composition, value, lighting, theory of colour and chiaroscuro) and resorting to a wide range of artistic media. The evocative power of concept artists unfolds through perspective illusionism and rigour, monumental architecture, decaying ruins, infinite spaces, mind-blowing multiplying environments, endless landscapes, dizzying illusionism, unexpected encounters between distant ages, dreamlike background and unique

Fig. 1. Environment concept art by Jakub Różalski,

Fig. 2. Collage of theatrical sketches by Fratelli Bibiena and Sanquirico and two environment designs (top right: Assassin's Creed: Unity; in the centre: concept by Różalski).



light modulations. All these features build the visions of worlds which will host visual entertainment products: even though they only exist in the designer's imagination, these worlds look believable, authentic and coherent, especially thanks to a skilful use of perspective and an accurate reference study. Hence, concept artists stage either credible, dreamlike, unreal, utopic or dystopic fictional places that take shape right before our eyes, appearing as they could potentially exist (fig. 1). Environment concept art, just like the XVIII century theatrical sketches, the capricci, the piranesian carvings and Sant'Elia's city of tomorrow, are the result of the creative combination of natural and/or architectural forms. These images are able to unveil unknown layers of meaning, blending reality and imagination: they "stand out for their evocative power, and very often there is actually an evocation behind them" [Focillon 2006, p. 16].

### Visionary artists across time

"Close your bodily eye, that you may see your picture  
first with the eye of the spirit.  
Then bring to light what you have seen in the darkness,  
that its effect may work back, from without to within"  
[C.D. Friedrich cited in Hartley 1994, p. 29]

The need to give the products of imagination a visible and tangible form is always present throughout the history of art: "making realistic pictures from the imagination [...] has always been at the center of what artists have done through history, whether they were painting pictures of Athena and Zeus or aliens and zombies" [Gurney 2009, p. 210]. This mainly concerns fictional worlds and imaginary places resulting from the poetic activity of the artistic mind which, by combining fantasy and reality, builds incredibly believable and realistic visions of places, despite being fictional. As the master of imaginary realism James Gurney points out, "as early as the Renaissance, artists perfected a step-by-step process designed to transform an imaginative idea into a convincingly realistic image" [Gurney 2009, p. 10]. Later on, the masters of Baroque and *quadraturismo* pushed forward the tradition of fantasy paintings, creating spectacular ceilings crowded with figures, creatures and architectural elements. The XVIII century was instead dominated by the dynasty of scenographers Galli da Bibiena and their renowned set designs in which they used to freely combine elements of late Baroque architecture with

suggestive theatricality and a monumental scale. Thanks to these amazing artists, the XVIII century theatrical sketches (*bozzetti*) achieved an unprecedented compositional, dynamic and spatial force: highly evocative fantastical spaces –which at the same time look surprisingly realistic– took shape on paper before being staged. The introduction of the *scena d'angolo* conferred the Bibiena' scenes an extreme dynamism and unlimited depth. The *scena d'angolo* was characterized by unusual angles and complex textures of diagonal lines which were able to make the eye of the observer bounce from one point to another, forcing it to wander around the setting (fig. 2). The angle position strengthens the illusionistic effect, also thanks to an efficient use of proportional scales so that every single detail of the painted scene is convincing [Giordano 2002, p. 21]. Such effects were further emphasized by extremely photographic angles: the corners and proportions of architectural elements are indeed located in the foreground against the light, an artistic device that was later taken up and enhanced at the beginning of the XIX century by Alessandro Sanquirico. In this way, the gigantic painted architectures seemed to stretch out to the horizon beyond the limits of the perspective window, while guiding the eye of the spectator towards the bright views of the painted backgrounds (fig. 2).

In this brief *excursus*, it is impossible not to mention XVIII century landscape art that, by leveraging on the *quadraturismo* tradition and perspective illusion, then evolved into *capriccio*, a refined imaginary veduta which expresses the artist's maximum creative freedom. In the *capriccio*, buildings, ruins and other architectural elements –either imaginary –fantastic or real-existent– are combined, dislocated, re-contextualized and revisited. According to Lucien Steil's definition, the *capriccio* is “a pictorial ‘invention’ creating an imaginary or ‘analogue’ reality by combining existing buildings or places with imaginary ones, shifting or re-organizing their locations and their groupings into uniquely suggestive visions” [Steil 2013, p. lvi]. It is not just a series of capricious, weird images but *capricci* instead follow the complex rules of figurative realism and representation, as well as coherent narrative and semantic. It consists of a dialogue between real and ideal, realism and fiction and, as Steil further points out, the *capriccio* “does not only serve to visualize, render and illustrate, but is dedicated fundamentally also to invent and to re-invent, to craft and paint in four dimensions (space, time, reality and imagination) architectural and urban visions, concepts and artefacts

[...], by multiplying layered relationships between buildings and spaces, city and countryside, history and politics, people and places, and so on, through a variety of narratives, images and scales, and within a dense metaphysical and mythological complexity” [Steil 2013, p. llll]. Artists like Ricci, Pannini, Canaletto and Bellotto juxtapose familiar elements to unfamiliar ones, they modify their scale, combining them with fictional materials and assembling perspective-based pictures often in derogation from the geometrical-scientific method (fig. 3).

The suggestive angle perspective of the *bozzetti* and the visionary spirit of the *capricci* come together and harmoniously merge into the work of Piranesi, the unquestioned genius of visual trickery, the architect of dreamlike, mesmerizing images and maker of utopic visions of ancient buildings. Piranesi stages majestic and cyclopean architectures characterized by dramatic *chiaroscuro* contrasts, innovative angles and impossible scales. His architectural fantasies provoke a sense of loss, dizziness and instability

Fig. 3. On the left, concepts from *Bloodborne* (2015), *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020) and *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014). On the right, one of the *Carceri* (XVIII century) by Piranesi, *Capriccio con rovine classiche* (1723) by Canaletto and *Parte di ampio magnifico porto ad uso degli antichi romani* by Piranesi (1749-1750).





Fig. 4. Series of paintings called *The Course of Empire* (1833-1836) by Thomas Cole.

Fig. 5. *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang (1927); *The Science Center* by Hugh Ferriss (1929); *Città Nuova* (1913-1914) by Antonio Sant'Elia; concept art from *Blade Runner* (1982) by Syd Mead; *Città Nuova* (1913-1914) by Sant'Elia.

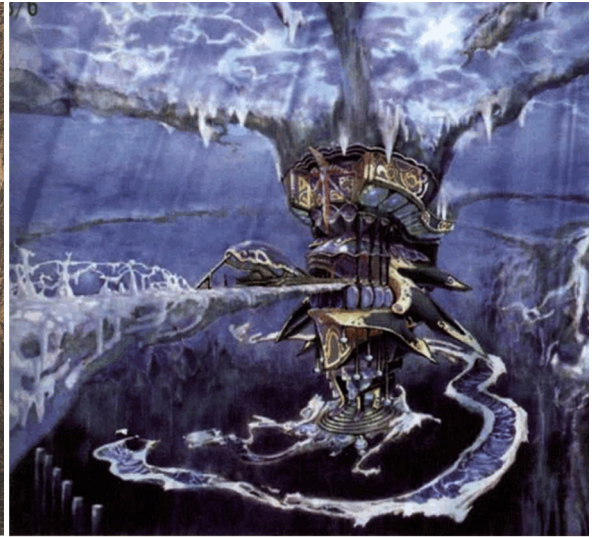


in the observer as in the famous *Carceri* series, an imaginary architectural adventure whose protagonists are aisles, beams, arches, walls, towers, hallways and colossal platforms. These are places where the human figure is reduced to a mere background actor, whose only aim is to underline the cyclopic scale of the architecture and the dizzying width of perspective, amplified by a marked *sottinsù*. These gigantic masses, "perfect and phantasmagorical, overlap a chiaroscuro outline on the accurate and precise image of the object, giving them the esteem of il-

lusion" [Focillon 2006, p. 50]. Piranesian architectures only exist in the drawings of their author: as a consequence, perspective serves as an instrument to render the artist's own visions in a visual and plausible form, which only exists on the bi-dimensional support. Even Romantic painters such as Turner, Friedrich and Géricault were moved by the spirit of the sublime to portray battles and shipwrecks known only to them from written accounts as well as spectral gothic nightmares and dreamlike landscapes: "the portray of a mysterious world, with an unusual and profound scale" [Focillon 2006, p. 15].

Romantic 'imaginative painting' [Gurney 2009, p. 11] in America was instead associated with the name of Thomas Cole, who produced a five-part series of paintings called *The Course of Empire*, which chronicled the growth and decay of a fantastical city (fig 4). Visionary aesthetics did not disappear with the onset of Modernism, but instead it flourished, transformed and revitalized in the XX century. Antonio Sant'Elia prefigured the architecture of the city of a sometime dystopic future, which inspired the famous series of drawing *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929) by Hugh Ferriss, the spiritual father of *Gotham City* in the contemporary collective imagination. Sant'Elia was also the precursor of recurring futuristic city models in movies, ranging from *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang to *Blade Runner* (1982) by Ridley Scott. In the drawings carried out by Sant'Elia on the eve of World War I, the main protagonist is an imaginary city of tomorrow, "an immense and tumultuous shipyard, agile, mobile and dynamic in every detail" [Sant'Elia 1914] and a complex labyrinth of hybrid train stations, airports, skyscrapers, elevators, straights, underground galleries and metal catwalks (fig 5). While Yakov Chernikov's early architectural futuristic drawings were characterized by colored lines and refined abstract compositions, the Stalinist regime and World War II forced the Russian architect to leave the avant-garde movements, turning his architectural fantasies into darker, gothic visions. Moreover, Lebbeus Woods designed dystopic architectures resembling gigantic machines built with assembled recycled materials: his visions of cities overstepped the traditional notion of functional and rational architecture, opposing a form of creative destruction and re-construction. This brief investigation on visionary artists and imaginative painters throughout history is, of course, far from being exhaustive: however, the main aim of this paper is to highlight how the works of all the aforementioned artists share the same intent: cre-

Fig. 6. Concept art from *Snow White* (1937); concept art of the Temple of Macalania from *Final Fantasy X* (2001); two concepts from *Star Wars* (1977) by Syd Mead.



ating visionary representations of imaginary architecture and landscapes. Such visions are staged in a way that they appear as an authentic possibility: images and imagination, imitation and invention coexist in the same picture as these artists feel uncomfortable within the limits of space and time, since they are not satisfied with our universe [Focillon 2006]. The visionary representation of imaginary places, with all the described techniques and artistic devices, can be traced back until today in the works of environment concept artists, contemporary visionaries, and foreshadowers of imaginary places of our time.

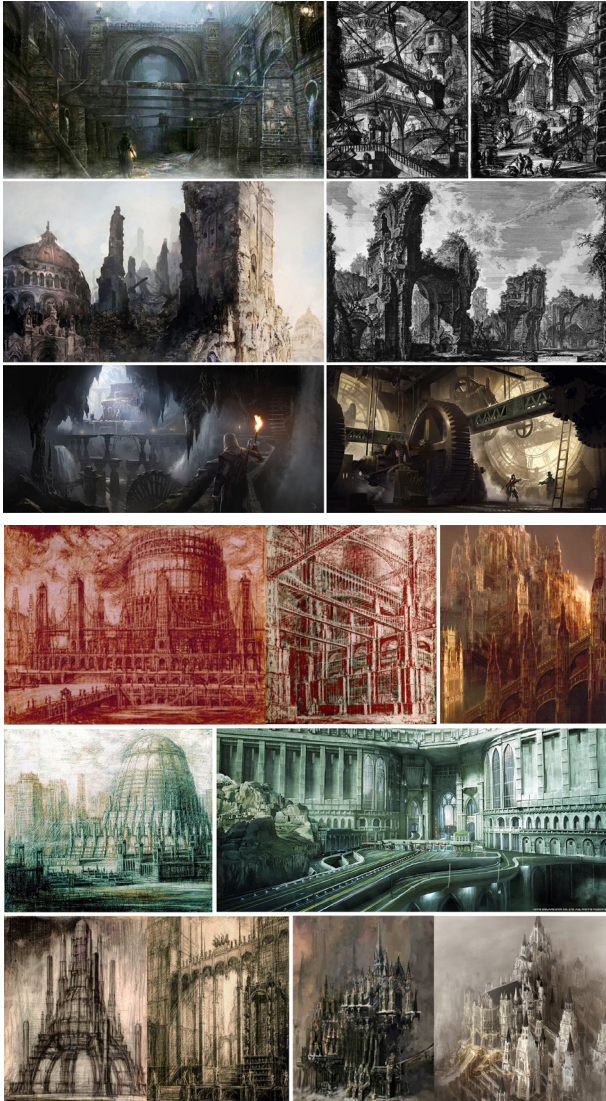
### Environment Concept Art for the film and video game industry

During the XX century, in America and Europe, new forms of visual entertainment like comics and animation emerged. In a very short time, "science fiction and fantasy films, computer-generated animation and video games eventually established themselves as culturally dominant art forms" [Gurney 2009, p.12]. To build their fictional worlds, visual and interactive entertainment giants started to employ countless talented artists capable of brilliantly combining a



Fig. 7. Left and bottom: concept art from *Bloodborne*, *Dark Souls III* (2016) and *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015). On the right: two engravings from the *Carceri plus Rovine del Sisto* (1765), both by Piranesi.

Fig. 8. Collage of architectural fantasies by Chernikhov (left); concept art from *Dark Souls*, *Kingslaive: Final Fantasy XV* (2016) and *Dark Souls III* (right).



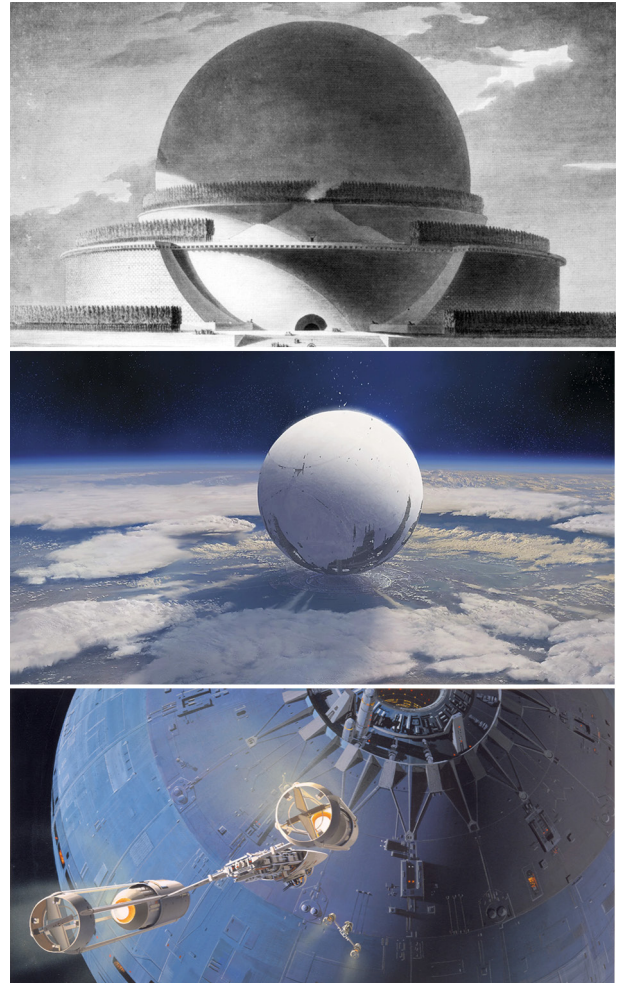
vivid imagination with refined and solid artistic skills. As of today, these artists go under the name of concept artists, a term which was apparently coined in the 1930s, during the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first famous Disney classic animated film by Walt Disney Animation [Ghez 2015]. However, their role was better recognized only in the 1990s thanks to colossal movie productions such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Blade Runner* (1982) but also point-and-click adventure games such as *Monkey Island* (1990) by Lucas Arts and the renowned Japanese series of role-playing games, *Final Fantasy* (fig. 6). The term concept art, thus, refers to a form of illustration whose main aim is not to simply illustrate but to visually convey a concept, a design and mood of environments, characters, creatures, costumes, worlds, which provide the “visual architecture” of visual entertainment products (video games, films, TV series) [Ansaldi 2020, p. 980]. Hence, a concept artist plays the role of “visual problem solver” [Nelson 2019] among the visual development team. Environment concept art, as the term clearly suggests, is a branch of concept art that deals with the design and visualization of environments, landscapes, and architecture. The work of a concept artist fits into the pre-production stage, the most imaginative and explorative part of the entire development process. Their goal is to create impressive, realistic visions, giving the ideas of directors and game designers a visible form. These mostly bi-dimensional representations are so evocative and suggestive that they serve as a visual guide for the rest of the development team (3D artists, animators, VFX artists, lighting artists etc.) during all the following steps in the creative pipeline. Concept artists must be able to turn ideas into images, giving them a tangible and explicative form that conveys a precise vision around which all the efforts of the specialists involved in the production will revolve [Faini 2016]. Their imagination “not only is the power to create and unleash images, but also the capability to receive and to translate them as hallucinations: [...] they don't simply ‘see’ the object, they envision it” [Focillon 2006, p. 15]. Environment concept artists combine, re-organize, overlap, transfigure, and reassemble fragments of architectures and landscapes never existed before or that could potentially exist as well as places belonging to past and present eras or to different geographical locations. This process gives birth to realistic and evocative visions of imaginary spaces, which is the goal of concept artists: they reach for a single credible, coherent, and convincing artistic vision.

It is unquestionable to assert that there is a close continuity between the artists mentioned in the previous paragraph and the modern concept artists: concept art shares with the scenic bozzetto the role of “visual ambassador of ideas” [Pantouvaki 2010] for the development of the final product, while it shares with the other artists the visionary approach to representation and the creative combination of architectural, urban and natural elements. For instance, the influence of the piranesian imaginary on movies, comics and videogames is well known: we can mention Nolan and Myazaki’ productions, François Schuiten and Moebius’ comic strips as well as famous video games like *Ico*, the *Assassin’s Creed* saga, *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls*. Piranesi’s *Carceri* with his infernal machinery like wheels, leads, pulleys, levers, chains, and scaffoldings undoubtedly have their counterpart in the settings of the mentioned video games, full of traps, elevators powered by ancient machinery, labyrinths and platforms intersecting in dark and cavernous spaces. The *Carceri* can enchant and disorient, making us feel as “lifted on a huge scaffolding or a fragile catwalk, suspended on an endless night, crossed by beams, cables and chains, full of shutters and funeral stones” [Focillon 2006, p. 51] (figs. 3-7). Environment concept art from *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* also shows clear resemblance to the work of Yakov Chernikov: the endless spires and buttresses of Anor Londo, Yahrnam and Lothric are an explicit reference to the late works of the Soviet constructivist. Many references can also be found in the imaginary metropolis of Insomnia from *Final Fantasy XV*: in these imaginary cities, order has been sacrificed after the encounter with the sublime, which allows the exploration of the unknown labyrinths of our mind [Barzan 2015] (fig. 8).

It is no coincidence that monumental projects of architects such as Étienne-Louis Boullée are an explicit inspiration for many pieces of environment concept art: Boullée’s perfect spheres and pyramids look like big sci-fi buildings reminding of space stations or alien monoliths. A reference to the *Genotafio di Newton* can be found in the *Halo* ring-shaped world, in *Destiny*’s Traveller as well as in the iconic Death Star from *Star Wars*. These empyrean structures all seem to refer to a transcendent truth: as it often happens with impossible structures, essential and perfect forms can generate a distant sense of pure grandeur (fig. 9)

The dystopian genre, both in films and video games, owns much to the futuristic urban imaginary created by Sant’Elia: as already pointed out, Fritz Lang and Hugh Ferriss were the first to understand its visual strength and in their turn

Fig. 9. *Genotafio di Newton* (1784) by Étienne-Louis Boullée; concept art of *The Traveler from Destiny* (2014); concept art for *Death Star* by Ralph McQuarrie for *Star Wars*.





they both became the inspiration for many other sci-fi masterpieces like *Blade Runner*. Ridley Scott's transfigured Los Angeles definitely looks like a tribute to Sant'Elia's visions, just like many similarities with urban landscapes from *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* by Hugh Ferriss can be found in recent titles, like *Batman* (1989) by Tim Burton and *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) by Square Enix. Moreover, in the urban dystopias of Gotham City and *Insomnia*, various architectural styles are blended, gothic architecture and art deco in particular (fig. 10). Dystopic visions of a fictitious past are instead the trademark of the art of Jakub Różalski, the visionary Polish artist whose works inspired and shaped the imaginary world of the board game *Scythe*. Różalski stages a universe called *1920+*, an alternative vision of history, a timeline in which the age of the Polish-Soviet War incorporates sci-fi elements like dieselpunk or steampunk airships and, most of all, mecha, giants war robots or machines controlled by people that abruptly break into peaceful idyllic landscapes. Such images remind of Lebbeus Woods's me-

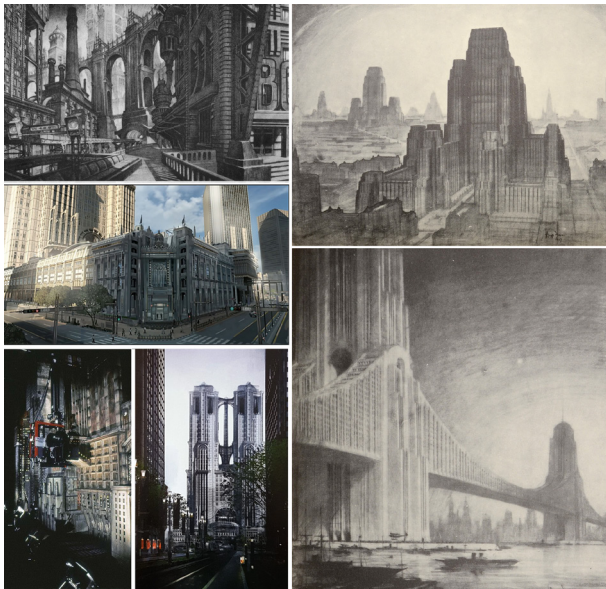
chanical architectures which climb or cling to buildings and landscapes (fig. 11). As Woods stated, these artists are at war with their time, "with history, with all authority that resides in fixed and frightened forms" [Woods 1993, p. 1].

### Building visions through referencing and thumbnailing

"The obsession of the visionary artist turns out to be creative: it needs to enter the sensible world, taken as a starting inspiration as well as a destination [...] which can be transfigured but still respected. This is the origin of its fertile innovative power and its tendency to oppose representation and suggestion" [Focillon 2006, p. 65]

Building visionary pictures of fictitious spaces and places hardly ever is the product of pure imagination: as already stressed, knowledge of reality and imagination constantly interact in the artist's mind. The visionary images of concept artists always have their roots in the real world, although they may be more or less hidden and deep. As Focillon argues, "this phenomenon is not pure: there's observation, reconstruction, [...], evocation and intersection of images" [Focillon 2006, p. 17]. Indeed, environment concept artists constantly train their ability to create convincing representations through the study of references and the iterative practice of thumbnailing (or thumbnail sketching) (fig. 12). The embryonic stage of the creative process of a concept artist is based on a thorough search of references (referencing): such formal study is for them "a starting point for evocations that –beyond space and time– can awaken the rarest harmonies, both in their genius and inside of us. Sometimes these visions are enough for themselves, sometimes they overlap with the universe, expanding and deepening it" [Focillon 2006, p. 18]. This implies a constant update of their visual repertoire of ideas in order to facilitate the process of evocation and combination of real-life elements in a creative, original and meaningful way. References such as photos, illustrations, drawings, and inspirations are usually collected into mood boards focusing on a specific theme; mood boards fuel creativity and stimulate the flow of ideas, serving as visual databases of forms and aesthetic themes to draw from. These libraries of references are basically the virtual, digitalized version of the precious heavy folders containing all kinds of visual inspirations in use by artists before the digital age: drawings of histori-

Fig. 10. Collage. In the left column, top to bottom: concept art for *Batman* (1989) by Tim Burton; concept of *Insomnia* for *Final Fantasy XV*; set for *Batman* by Burton and a frame taken from *Kingslaive: Final Fantasy XV*. On the right, two drawings from *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929) by Ferriss.





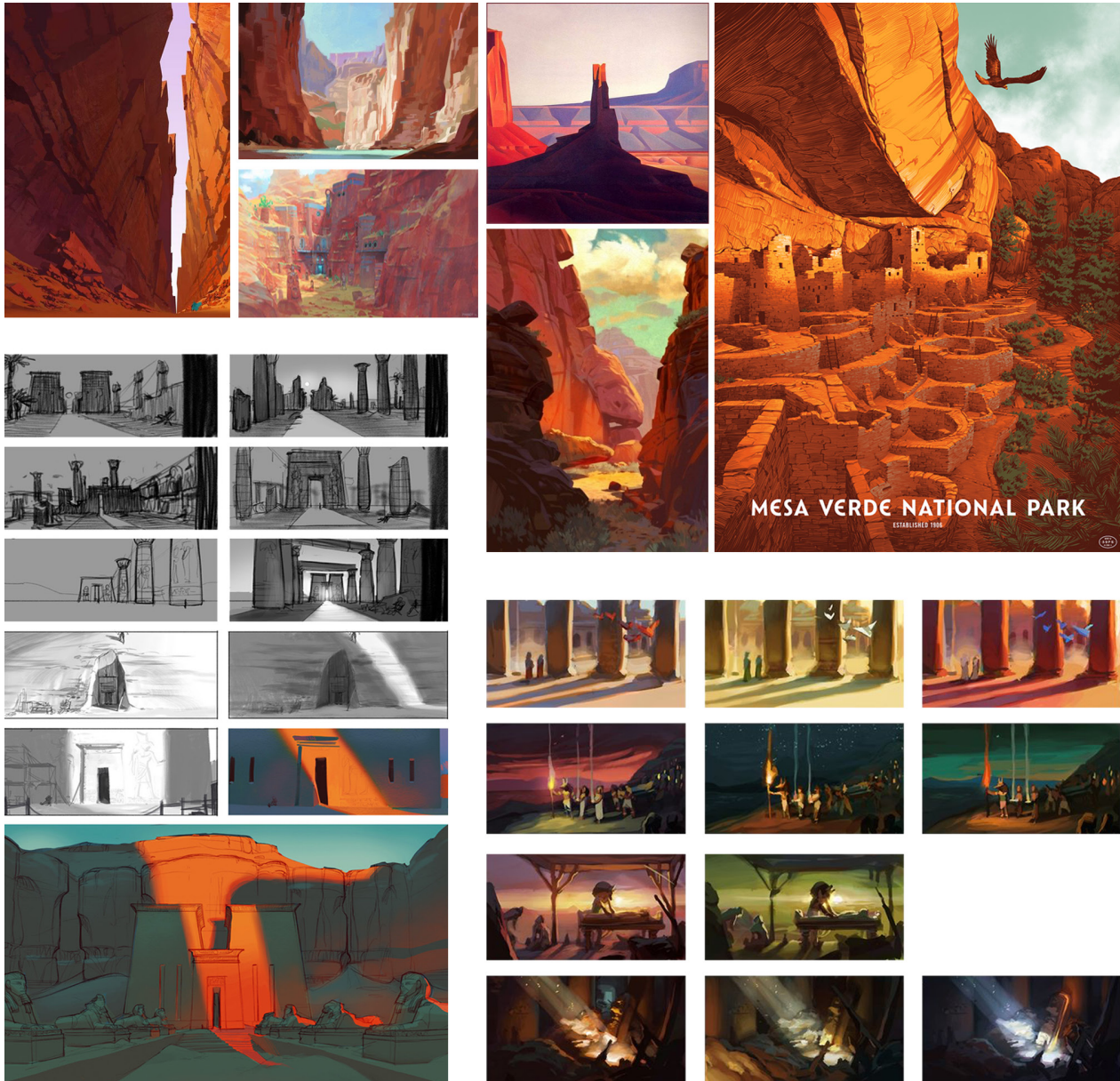
cal periods, artworks by other illustrators, photographs, travel diaries and collections of images piled up during years of research and personal annotations. Concept art is therefore the result of the inventive combination of natural and/or architectural forms: it adds imagination and fantasy to the traditional representation of landscape and architecture. As Gurney argues, “in most fantasy or science fiction, some things are completely invented but the majority of elements [...] are no different from what we see around us every day” [Gurney 2009, p. 140].

The so-called thumbnail sketches are instead tiny, loose, scribbly sketches used to plan the composition of the final image. Keeping them small avoids getting too caught up with detail during the first exploratory stage of the creative process, so that it is instead possible to consider plenty of ideas and variations in little time. This allows to focus on the tonal structure, technically called value composition (or value sketching), which is the foundation of any picture [Gurney 2009, p. 31]. “Value sketching” consists in laying out –in grey scale– the composition’s main masses (foreground, middle ground and background elements), relating to the distance of the surfaces of scene objects from a viewpoint, where further surfaces are darker and nearer surfaces are lighter. This provides a depth map of the environment, supported by aerial perspective which further clarifies composition and spatial organization. This stage can be basically considered as a visual brainstorming for which different ideas are quickly explored through small thumbnails where the main shapes and masses are sketched in a clear and concise way. The variation on the same theme allows saving time and effort by identifying the most convincing solutions which deserve to be further analysed and developed while abandoning the weaker ideas. It’s a crucial preliminary study aimed at controlling the final image composition, in order to shape the overall atmosphere of the evoked environment. Thumbnail sketches are laid out following the traditional principles and rules of composition, which are aimed at guiding the observer inside the environment. These sketches also provide a preliminary light study (lighting) of the scene. Indeed, light embodies both the evocative power and the ordering force that are so dear to visionary artists. Through thumbnailing, concept artists can eventually explore multiple alternatives for light sources (punctual or diffuse) and their intensity, while also testing possible

Fig. 11. Concept art of *The Vault* from *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020); *Zagreb Freezone* (1991) and *Projects for Sarajevo* (1993-1996) by Lebbeus Woods; cover of *Scythe* by Jakub Różalski.



Fig. 12. Examples of referencing (top), thumbnailing (left) and lighting studies (bottom right).





light effects (reflections, glares, contrasts etc.) and arrangements. The emotions conveyed by the final image are indeed strictly linked to the interplay of light and shadow: light “can make whole worlds come to life or fade away” [Focillon 2006, p. 27]. The point of view is accurately chosen to reinforce the unfathomable aura of mystery that envelopes the origin and purpose of the place depicted in the artwork. The piranesian human figure is again present within the represented sceneries with the sole purpose to better highlight the majestic scale of the breath-taking environments. Finally, the most convincing ideas are brought to the next stage to guide the choice towards the final image, which will result in an extremely evocative and suggestive picture.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to trigger a debate on Environment Concept Art, an art form through which imaginary places are invented and graphically rendered in the film and video game industry. Thanks to the endless potentialities of human imagination, the graphic-artistic language becomes the language of creation and of visual expression of narration. Working as a concept artist is now a widely acknowledged job for which many training courses are active both in Italy and abroad: however, very little has been discussed about the theoretical aspects and educational-methodological opportunities of this artistic phenomenon which draws on visionary aesthetics and on the work of many notable visionary artists from the past. As Chernikhov stated, “architectural fantasy stimulates the architect’s activity, it arouses creative thought not only for the artist but it also educates and arouses all those who come in contact with him; it produces new directions, new quests, and opens new horizons” [Chernikhov 1933, p. 11]. Con-

cept art adds the fantastic dimension to the annotation of real-life data by intersecting knowledge of reality and imagination: this results in decomposing the visible world to reassemble it into a new whole. Visionary artists “help us defining art as a heroic obsession, to see aesthetic imagination not only as a simple predisposition to perceive, organize, fix and externalize but mostly as a power of transfiguration, that seeks out and spontaneously creates its own technique” [Focillon 2006, p. 65]. Spaces and places which only exist on an imaginative level, eventually appear possible and believable thanks to an evocative and coherent representation supported by the illusionistic power of perspective. Concept artists’ visions forge the mood, atmosphere, and sense of place of the fictional universes that host and fuel the cinematic action or the gaming experience. As the boundaries between motion pictures and video games are increasingly blurring, whatever direction the new forms and technologies of entertainment will take “they will need artists who can translate concepts and ideas

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