

## Combining Magic with the classical masters

# Behind the Canvas: Donato Giancola

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What happens when you combine fantasy art with the classics? Somehow, even though Rembrandt and Shivan Dragon don't seem to be a likely combination, it works for Donato Giancola. Many players have noticed his work, which stands out among his contemporaries due to what Donato calls his "classical-abstract-realist" style. If you've ever looked closely at the original Sisay's Ring, originalMoss Diamond, or Glory, it's hard not to admire Giancola's style.

Like many **Magic: The Gathering** artists, Giancola's interest in art began in his childhood, when he immersed himself in fantasy genres, using his own creativity along the way. "Although there are milestones in my art career, I can't really say exactly when I 'began' drawing and painting in a serious manner. My childhood is peppered with memories of making models, toys, drawing tanks, spaceships, and almost anything in the afternoons, reading and copying drawings from comics, painting lead figurines for **Dungeons & Dragons**, creating maps and loads of art for roleplaying, producing art projects for school." He tried a different career but looked back to art when he felt that his abilities and talents weren't being used to their full potential. "Art was a passion, yet always a hobby. My formal training came late. I began my college career at UVM majoring in electrical engineering, but it wasn't until my second year at the University of Vermont that I withdrew from this career path, frustrated with the creativity missing from the classes, subjects, and assignments. I still remember the day I dropped out of three engineering classes midsemester. I shocked my friends, my family, and even myself. Do not try this without proper adult supervision. It could screw up your life!"

Making the decision to change career paths is one thing, but it's something completely different to follow through and improve. "I enrolled in an art course the next semester, my very first formal lessons on drawing had begun. That same year, I picked up my first set of oil paints, created some horrible paintings, and realized I need guidance -- lots of guidance! Very quickly it became obvious to me that to take painting seriously I needed to pursue an education at a more challenging art college with competitive peers. I enrolled at Syracuse University in the fall of 1989 and majored in fine-art painting. The doors that were opened to me at Syracuse proved unfathomable -- from color theory to composition, anatomy, paint techniques, experimental drawing, post-modern, modern and abstract theorizing." This just goes to show that while natural talent is important in the art world, so are education, persistence, and effort. "Anyone who tells me I have a god-given talent hasn't seen the hours I labored to understand how to properly put an oil glaze of alizarin crimson on my paintings. Practice, practice, practice. Create, create, create. Those were the greatest lessons I learned at school. No art can be made perfect, and you need to keep moving onto your next project/vision. All told, my college career lasted six years, but it paid off: I'm doing what I love to do -- reliving my

childhood fantasies every day! Yet with that all said, my training did not stop after I graduated in 1992."

Indeed, learning art in a classroom is one thing, but "the real world" is an entirely different situation. "In the fall of '92 I moved to New York City to be closer to the largest arts scene in the world. I sought work as a book cover illustrator, concentrating in the science fiction and fantasy fields. It was a big leap. It was several months before I landed any commissions, and NYC is not a cheap place to live. I resisted the temptation to get a 'regular' job and barely supported myself by working part time at the Society of Illustrators and by borrowing money from my parents (who suspected I was crazy). I spent all my free time creating illustration samples under the guidance of a 'potential' agent, visiting museums, examining other illustrators' and artists' works, attended life drawing classes and art openings. I shared a small apartment with two other aspiring artists, and painted every day for eight to ten hours." Eventually, Giancola found work, starting his career by illustrating covers for some of the most well known classic fiction novels. "The hard work finally paid off with commissions to produce covers for three classic science fiction books -- *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne. Since then, I have not had a free moment as a freelance illustrator without work."

Giancola's background, education, and interests focus greatly on classic art. This inspiration has helped shape his work, which is reflected in some of the cards you open in boosters. "For me, the most important issue about painting is not the printed image, but what a person takes away when experiencing the original work. I moved to New York to be near its wonderful museums, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Museum, and Museum of Modern Art. I still spend many afternoons visiting my favorite artists -- Memling, Van Eyck, Velazquez, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Mondrian, Rembrandt. I strive to comprehend their complexities and bring that into my work. There is nothing so impressive to me as standing in front of a huge Velazquez that is sixteen-feet wide and ten-feet tall with fully life-sized figures! (I actually made a pilgrimage to the Prado Museum in Spain to see that one.) Or I will spend long stretches of time gazing into the minute details of a tiny Van Eyck that's eight inches by twelve inches, bumping my nose on the glass, straining to see details almost invisible to the eye." Interestingly, this classical influence has shaped some of Giancola's **Magic** work directly. "It is the combination of classical aesthetics with my love of Modern abstraction that I attempt to meld into one art form in my paintings. You can see these influences in some of my illustrations. For example, the woman Cartographer and male Patron Wizard from *Odyssey* were inspired by Lorenzo Lotto's portraits (a sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance painter)."

Of course, merging the **Magic** universe with classical style can potentially create some problems, but Giancola keeps certain issues in mind to assure that both worlds can coexist. He aims to focus on the human aspect of the **Magic** world, which gives his pieces more depth. "The greatest challenge here is trying not to let the magic and monsters dominate my images. Special effects are cool, but I love to paint people and investigate the psyche behind each character, which is why I love artifacts (which are still lifes for me) and character cards (which are portraits). It's like watching three different sci-fi movies: one that is all about effects, with no plot for you to lose interest in when the next cool effect comes along; the second is all good story but nothing to entertain you; and the third (which I try to emulate) has elements of both great character development and cool effects used to support the story, rising to become high art and leaving you with a lasting impression." Even though Giancola tries to focus away from the "bells and whistles" approach, he still likes the freedom that fantasy art provides. "There are *no* bounds. No one knows what a dragon looks like, how magic works, what

another world would look like. Everything is on the table for redesign and re-creation, from swords and clothing to architecture."



As far as **Magic** goes, Giancola was first intrigued by the game when he saw how much the players enjoyed the game and the art. "I first heard of Wizards of the Coast in 1995 at a comic book convention. Wizards artist Bryon Wackwitz showed me some cards he had done, and he was swamped with players requesting signatures. I was impressed with the creative potential of illustrating for the game and most importantly wanted to get a piece of that fan action! Because I was still building up my book cover career, six months passed before I finally sent my portfolio to Wizards of the Coast. Sue Ann Harkey, the art director, was gracious and complimentary and immediately commissioned four pieces for [then] upcoming *Mirage* expansion deck after viewing my portfolio of cover illustrations. I was delighted to have such an opportunity." With the job in place, Giancola decided to go the extra mile to ensure that his work would be top-notch. "I decided to set a high standard for myself in the quality of art for these cards. I purchased a few extra books on various African cultures and proceeded to research the styles and designs of eastern Africa dress and jewelry to bring a broad sampling of culture to the images Wizards of the Coast desired. I am proud of these first products of my labor and thrilled with the success they've achieved: Grinning Totem, Amber Prison, Village Elder, and Moss Diamond." His personal favorite **Magic** piece is Sisay's Ring. "There are quite a few factors that went into Sisay's Ring that set it apart for me. The inclusion of hands (which I see as descriptive about a person as a face), my love of maps, the classical feel to the piece, and the fact that the hands are from a friend of mine, a mechanic who lives down the block from me here in Brooklyn. I always try to use someone I know as models for my images."

Giancola tried playing the game for a bit, but he's a roleplayer at heart. "I played for about a year back around *Visions*, *Weatherlight*, and *Tempest*, but my history as a roleplayer overpowers **Magic**. Sorry! . . . I like the long drawn-out narratives that roleplaying develops into with multiple players. [It's] similar in fashion to the art I create. I love stories!" Still, he does feel a connection with **Magic** players all over the world. "The greatest pleasure I get from **Magic** is knowing that millions of people will see and enjoy my art. Since I am a gamer myself, I love sharing what I enjoy so much with so many other players."

## Shivan Dragon

Art description: The savage Shivan Dragon in flight, breathing fire.

The king dragon from the mountains of Shiv may very well be the **Magic** games most iconic creature. It's been around since Alpha, and it was often the most sought after **Magic** card. Newer players are often in awe of the firebreathing monster, while veterans look at it fondly and remember when they thought a 5/5 creature with flying was better than a Black Lotus. So what happens when a card like

this is redone? "The Shivan Dragon commission was a dream project. There was no art description given to me, just the old card and a few words from the art director 'Make it cool!' That was my intent! I had no problems reinterpreting an image from another artist, mostly because I don't follow what the other artist usually has done."

Still, Giancola kept the original piece in mind. "I did want my Shivan to have a nod toward Melissa Benson's art, since it was to be the same card, but I needed to make it mine. Since this was to be a card that *everyone* would see, I created the art at double my normal working size and put in three times as much labor. I was not worried about what the millions of players would think about the new Shivan, I needed to make the most beautiful, awesome dragon for myself. If I could satisfy my inner critic, than I'm sure everyone else would like it; I wanted to give the fans the best of my abilities. It is the way I work for all of my paintings." Overall, it's safe to say the finished product was a success. "It was so well received that Wizards used the image everywhere, from packaging art to plastic bags. I wouldn't change a thing if I had to redo it, except maybe make the original painting even larger!"

## **Patron Wizard**

Art description: This is a blue card and should show the schoolmaster of wizardry. A wise, old human headmaster. The focus is the master, so place him in a surrounding that conveys this.

For this piece, Giancola had the perfect opportunity to infuse some of his classical influences into the **Magic** world. "Patron Wizard was a wonderful commission to work on. A chance to do a portrait of a human as an exotic character, the 'Wizard King,' which is what the original art description title had it listed as. I knew I wanted to tackle the image as a seated figure, in the classical sense of formal portraits dating back to the Northern Renaissance in Europe. Those images are timeless and it was that quality I wanted in this piece." The art description was also very general, giving Giancola the freedom to create the character in the best way he saw fit. "The openness of the commission, which is the way I prefer them, allowed me to throw myself into this painting. My model was an easy find -- a neighbor living across the street. An impressive man in his seventies with deep set eyes that evoked respect and unfathomed wisdom." You'll notice that there is a lot of shading on the wizard, especially on the eyes, which creates a unique effect. "By leaving his eye sockets dark in the final image, the wizard makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, you do not know where he is looking. He is in an advantageous position over you."

Giancola put a lot of effort into the jewelry and armor, creating his own interpretations of tribal pieces. "On the formal technical side of this piece, I created my own underwater motifs for the jewelry accompanying him, from the octopus on his shoulder to the tentacles creating the chair in the background. These were inspired from African-styled pieces -- simple, primitive and massive. I love to pull exotic designs from our own world to make a figure seem unworldly. The multitude of earrings was likewise inspired from a character in one of my reference books. I wanted to show the rings on his ear like the stripes or medals of a battle decorate soldier -- they represent age, experience, and survival." Color elements were used to tie the whole thing together. "The entire composition was unified through using a simple approach to the color wheel; the backgrounds are green and purple because they both have blue as a common foundation." Overall, Giancola was extremely happy with this piece. "I couldn't imagine changing a single element of my composition or color choice if I had to do it all over again. I love this card!"

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Where outside art is concerned, Giancola is so prolific that it would practically take up a whole other article just to list everything he's done. "It would be easier to reverse the question and ask what *workhaven't* I done -- hundreds of book covers, game covers, magazine covers, illustrations for *Playboy*, *National Geographic*, Hasbro, advertising for *Star Wars*, portraits, private commissions, gallery work, and so on." He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter; a second baby girl is on the way in February. Check out his website at [www.donatoart.com/magic.html](http://www.donatoart.com/magic.html).

### Donato Giancola Card Gallery

(Click each cardname to view)

Card	Expansion	Card	Expansion
Archivist	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Brine Seer	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Feroz's Ban	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Cinder Seer	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Gerrard's Wisdom	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Ivy Seer	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Jayemdae Tome	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Jasmine Seer	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Reflexes	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Nightshade Seer	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>
Shivan Dragon	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Brink of Madness	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Teferi's Puzzle Box	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Memory Jar	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Yawgmoth's Edict	<i>Seventh Edition</i>	Rack and Ruin	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>
Crystal Rod	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Antagonism	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Fyndhorn Elder	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Brand	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Iron Star	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Crystal Chimes	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Ivory Cup	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Disenchant	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Throne of Bone	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Island	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Truce	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Island	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Wooden Sphere	<i>Fifth Edition</i>	Island	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Glory	<i>Judgment</i>	Island	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Cabal Surgeon	<i>Torment</i>	Meltdown	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Flaming Gambit	<i>Torment</i>	Scrap	<i>Urza's Saga</i>
Cartographer	<i>Odyssey</i>	Shattering Pulse	<i>Exodus</i>
Mirari	<i>Odyssey</i>	Skyshaper	<i>Exodus</i>
Patron Wizard	<i>Odyssey</i>	Flame Wave	<i>Stronghold</i>
Cromat	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Intruder Alarm	<i>Stronghold</i>
Doomsday Specter	<i>Planeshift</i>	Megrim	<i>Stronghold</i>
Mana Cylix	<i>Planeshift</i>	Dismiss	<i>Tempest</i>

Star Compass	<i>Planeshift</i>	Echo Chamber	<i>Tempest</i>
Cauldron Dance	<i>Invasion</i>	Essence Bottle	<i>Tempest</i>
Dredge	<i>Invasion</i>	Havoc	<i>Tempest</i>
Spinal Embrace	<i>Invasion</i>	Kindle	<i>Tempest</i>
Tigereye Cameo	<i>Invasion</i>	Nature's Revolt	<i>Tempest</i>
Troll-Horn Cameo	<i>Invasion</i>	Orim's Prayer	<i>Tempest</i>
Agent of Shauku	<i>Prophecy</i>	Peacekeeper	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Spore Frog	<i>Prophecy</i>	Steel Golem	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Sunken Field	<i>Prophecy</i>	Thran Tome	<i>Weatherlight</i>
Air Bladder	<i>Nemesis</i>	Juju Bubble	<i>Visions</i>
Divining Witch	<i>Nemesis</i>	Sisay's Ring	<i>Visions</i>
Deathgazer	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Amber Prison	<i>Mirage</i>
Forest	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Grinning Totem	<i>Mirage</i>
Lava Runner	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Moss Diamond	<i>Mirage</i>
Panacea	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Village Elder	<i>Mirage</i>
Revered Elder	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Ebon Dragon	<i>Portal</i>
		Sacred Knight	<i>Portal</i>

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