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**DREAMWORKS ANIMATION: THE EXHIBITION**

**Exploring some of the Characters**

**SHREK**

The *Shrek* films were originally inspired by William Steig’s children’s story about a frightful ogre who finds true love when he saves a magnificently ugly princess. Through the magic of DreamWorks; however, this grumpy green ogre transforms into an anti-hero whose fearsome appearance belies a kind heart. Director Vicky Jensen outlines, “The story is all about self-acceptance and that things aren’t always as they appear. We definitely turn the concept of beauty on its ear, which I think is a powerful theme” (*The Art of DreamWorks Animation*, p. 55).

The Exhibition allows visitors to trace the gradual evolution of the look of this character, showing how the original designs were closer to the character in Steig’s picture book and how these gradually developed into the lovable character that we all recognize today. Shrek nevertheless remains undeniably ugly, and it was up to the animation team to communicate his true nature and range of emotions through complex facial expressions, made possible via new digital animation techniques.

Shrek’s vulnerability and lack of self-esteem is integral to his characterization and how audiences respond to him. This aspect of Shrek’s character is central to the moment when Shrek mishears a conversation between Fiona and Donkey and thinks Fiona is repelled by his ugliness. Producer Aron Warner explains, “There was something about that moment that spoke to his delicate vulnerability as a character. Everyone related to it, and you had immediate compassion for him” (*Shrek: From the Swamp to the Screen*, p. 21).

In *Shrek 2*, Shrek continues to be haunted by his lack of self-esteem and insecurity, and drinks a magic potion to transform himself into a handsome hero. In transforming Shrek, the character designers focused on retaining some of the original ogre within the handsome features of the new-look Shrek. Character designer Tom Hester solved this challenge by using “toned-down aspects of his ogre features, like his squared-off nose and under bite, and gave him the body of a football player —big, strong and developed, but with a softening layer of body fat” (*Shrek: From the Swamp to the Screen*, p. 85).

**KUNG FU PANDA**

Inspired by the traditional art of kung fu and set in ancient China, *Kung Fu Panda* tells the story of Po, a panda who loves kung fu more than anything else in the world. This unlikely hero is voiced by actor Jack Black, who describes Po as, “an innocent, chubby dreamer on a quest to find his destiny” (*The Art of Kung Fu Panda*, p. 6).

Chosen by Grand Master Oogway over the Furious Five (characters based on different styles of kung fu fighting: Monkey, Snake, Crane, Tiger and Praying Mantis), Po must prove himself to be the true Dragon Warrior. To do this, he needs to use his special qualities as a panda — his size, shape and ravenous hunger — to defeat the terrifying snow leopard Tai Lung.

Character designer Nicolas Marlet worked with the natural shapes of the animal characters. As production designer Raymond Zibach states, “The way Nicolas designs, he looks at the actual animal and tries to distill down what's there into something that works for the film” (Academy of Art Character and Creature Design Notes).

Po’s soft, round panda shape influenced the overall character design in which “good things were round and soft.” His large and unwieldy body contrasts with the elegance of the settings and opened the way for much visual humour. Body shape is also used to great comical effect in the relationship between Po and his father, Mr. Ping, a duck.

Because of the decision to adhere fairly closely to all of the characters’ natural animal silhouettes, costume was a particular challenge. The traditional Chinese costumes and robes that were part of the original concept art had to be pared down so as not to interfere with the natural animal-like movements of the characters. The character design also had to allow for the characters’ individual and distinctive fighting styles.

**MADAGASCAR**

*Madagascar* tells the story of four animal friends — Alex, Melman, Gloria and Marty —who travel far from their home in New York’s Central Park Zoo and end up on the island of Madagascar.The characters featured in Madagascar were designed to look ‘cartoon-like’ and were originally inspired by children’s picture books from the 1950s and slapstick cartoons of the Golden Age of American Animation. The simple design of the characters, in turn, determined the design of the world they inhabit: slightly askew with straight lines contrasting against curves.

As well as adding to the comedy of the characters, this simple character design allowed the animators to apply the classic “squash and stretch” animation technique (where characters are stretched into extreme shapes and then snapped back to convey extreme motion and impact). As the film’s producer, Mireille Soria, outlines, “The design is definitely more “cartoony” than anything we’ve done before. We applied that style to the characters and to the overall design of the movie” (*The Art of DreamWorks Animation*, p. 102).

Each of the four main characters is based on a simple geometric shape: Alex is an inverted triangle, Marty a cylinder, Melman a tall, skinny stick and Gloria a circle. These shapes and design identity elements also help to communicate particular personality traits for each character: Alex’s posture and mane communicate his self-confidence, Marty’s huge and expressive mouth and eyes communicate his upbeat personality, Melman’s skinny body and large facial features highlight his phobic character traits, while Gloria’s full-figured gracefulness is linked to her strength and stability.The material displayed in the Exhibition reveals the development of these four key characters and includes colour gouache portraits; pencil sketches detailing anatomical poses and movements, as well as large-scale character masks.

**SPIRIT: STALLION OF THE CIMARRON**

Set in the 19th century American Wild West, Spirit explores the clash between the wilderness and the forces of colonization and settlement. Refusing to be tamed or defeated by the invaders, the wild stallion, Spirit, is a combination of strength, courage, tenderness and determination.

Director Lorna Cook states that, “There is something wonderful about the character of Spirit, who can endure so many trials and tribulations and still maintain his strength and courage” (*The Art of DreamWorks Animation*, p. 60).

Spirit’s story is unusually recounted as a voice-over narration in the first person, but from the perspective of the animal. While voice actor Matt Damon occasionally narrates Spirit’s thoughts, most of Spirit’s personality is communicated through the animation. The emphasis on presenting these wild and beautiful animals within their natural state was achieved by the animation team by using real horses as reference for designing and developing the horse characters. The challenge for the animators was to create characters with which audiences could identify, but to also depict the dignity and beauty of the real-life animals portrayed. As Spirit begins his story, he tells the audience that it is up to them to decide “whether the west was won or lost.”

While DreamWorks is known for its innovative approach to 3D animation, Spirit is a blend of 2D hand-drawn animation and 3D digital animation. DreamWorks’ CEO at the time, Jeffrey Katzenberg (2004-2016), describes this approach as “tradigital animation.”

When visiting the Exhibition, visitors will be able to track the development of the Spirit character from delicate early drawings through to animators’ sketches, oil paintings and character maquette.