



When Texas artist Karen Carr was commissioned to produce the five murals that dominate the walls of the Hall of Ancient Life in the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, she took on a task of mammoth proportions. The largest of the five, “Jurassic Landscape,” stretches 65 feet long and two stories tall. A first-prize winner in an international competition for dinosaur illustration, the mural forms the backdrop for the Clash of the Titans exhibit. All five are included in the July 2001 Illustration Annual of *Communication Arts* magazine.

The other murals are in the Triassic, Pleistocene, Cretaceous, and Cretaceous marine areas. Carr also is working on three other murals for the hall, one each in the Permian, Miocene, and Pleistocene areas.

For an artist tackling pre-history illustrations, Carr employs very modern techniques. “Creating a series of murals, particularly murals as big as the ‘Ancient Life Series’ for the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History,” Carr says, “brings together an exciting blend of science, art, and technology.”

Two years ago, Carr discovered the wonders of digital painting, exchanging her paintbrushes for a computer mouse and stylus. Instead of backbreaking hours balanced precariously on scaffolding as she applied paint to walls in the traditional way, Carr works comfortably and safely in her Plano, Texas, studio, but the hours are long nonetheless. She estimates 1,500 hours of painting alone for the first five murals, and nearly as much time in extensive research, preliminary layouts and design, and constant consultation with the museum experts.

BY CAROL J. BURR

Creating the “Ancient Life Series”: One Mural at a Time



Karen Carr

“These murals are *big*,” Carr stresses. “Working with their designers and architects, the museum staff had developed a very good initial outline of the scenes and animals they wanted to show and a precise set of requirements for the physical space that was available.” Carr had thousands of square feet to cover and the need to accommodate lighting and building systems like air conditioning and heating.

Then Carr prepared detailed black-and-white layouts for the experts’ approval. Solving the design, composition, and content problems through the review process was vital to Carr in reproducing animals and environments that no longer exist. “The museum and scientific review groups can feel comfortable with the image and content, and I can enjoy painting knowing that the image is accurate,” she says.

Rough color proofs followed, then Carr began digitally painting in earnest. Each image, created full size on a powerful graphic workstation, required more than 1.4 gigabytes of file space—too large for a single CD-ROM. The final files were sent to the museum, then to a digital-printing service for output and installation, applying the murals to the walls in sections like wallpaper.

Carr’s artistic career is devoted to creating images for educational, editorial, and scientific use. At SNOMNH she found the perfect venue for her work.

“I hope that as people look at the ‘Ancient Life Series,’” she says, “they will share my admiration for the scientists whose work brings knowledge of these extinct animals to us, and my support for the continuing conservation of the environments and creatures with which our world is now blessed.”