

Drawing Out the Demon

A play-by-post game for 2 - 5 people played over several months

By Liz Stong

You will need:

Pens • Paper • Envelopes • Stamps • 2 - 5 people who want to badly draw animals • 1 - 4 months of sporadic free time

Character Creation

Gather together using your preferred real-time communication method. Phone, teleconference, or instant messenger are all great choices!

You are artists of small renown living in 12th century France. All of you have been commissioned to complete a piece of art that heavily features a specific animal. Unfortunately, while you may have great artistic skill in other areas, you are terrible at drawing anything relating to this one specific animal.

Take a moment to come up with the following:

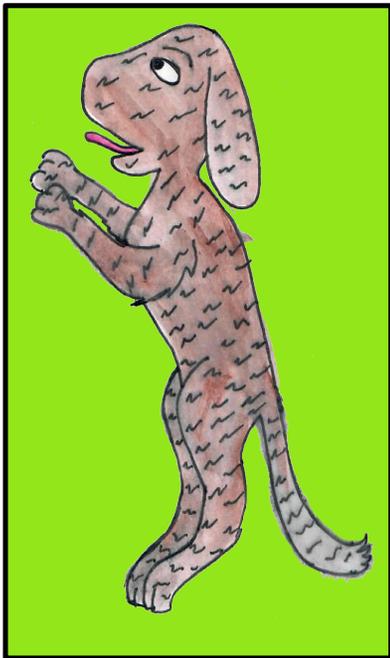
- What are your artist's name and pronouns?
 - What is your artist's specialty such as landscape painting, portraiture, or still life?
 - What is your artistic medium, such as oil paints, clay, watercolors?
 - Where do you live? This could be someplace like a monastery, rural area, agrarian society, or a major city.
 - Do you have a job other than artist? Think of identities such as monk, noble, monk, farmer, or another monk!
 - What hobby do you pursue other than art? This could include hobbies such as gardening, antique book collecting, or making beer.
 - What is the name of your patron. Some suggested names are Vicomte Pierre Du Morte, Marquise Louisa DelCouer, or Advocatus LeLand.
- What is the animal that you must draw for your artwork? Pick one from the list. Each artist must have a unique animal!
Cat • Dog • Elephant • Snake • Snail
 - What type of work did your patron commission? This might differ from your specialty!
Portrait • Landscape • Still life
 - To your artist, what makes your animal *that* animal? For example, for a cat, is it the pointy ears? The funny shapes they contort themselves into? Their fuzzy-wuzzy faces? The way they exude a malevolent aura? When navigating the dark waters of artistic block, this will be your guiding light.



Introduce your artist to the group. This is a short, out-of-character introduction letting the other players know the important things about your artist. Once introductions have been made, make a character connection to at least one other person. Are they a mentor? An artist you admire, but have never met? Childhood friends? Rivals? These relationships can be one-sided, and people can perceive relationships in wildly different ways.

Playing the Game

Once everybody has developed a connection to at least one other artist, it is time to stop real-time communications, and get to writing and drawing.



The artists must now draw their animal, preferably exceedingly badly, and with a special emphasis on what the artist thinks the essence of the animal is. Pour your heart and soul into the piece, only to realize that something is missing. Make adjustments. Get frustrated. Make more adjustments. Take a break. Make more adjustments. Realize you've made it worse. When you have reached this point, compose a letter to one of your fellow artists asking, nay, begging them for help with this very important commission. Whoever you ask for advice will be considered an expert in that animal, and any criticism you get from them is 100% correct. After all, they're the expert. How could they lead you astray? Include your drawing with the letter.

Actually put your letter in a mailbox. Then wait. If you're lucky, you'll get a letter from a colleague while you wait on a response to your plea for assistance.

Receiving a letter from a colleague is a rare, delightful experience. If another colleague asks for advice on their art, take the appropriate time to consider their art. Examine it. Take notes. Think about what they are trying to say with this piece. At some point, realize that you have no idea how to actually draw the animal they are asking for help on. Once you've given their art a

thorough examination, look at their art through your unique artistic lens. Once you've considered the strengths of their work, as well as what could be improved to capture the essence of the subject, it is time to provide some constructive criticism. Your constructive criticism should also be drawn entirely on your artistic specialty and what you think the essence of that animal is. Remember: if you give "good" enough advice, they won't know you are a fraud of an artist!

Here are some tips for constructive criticism!

- Give specific and actionable advice. Give them something they can actively work on to improve, instead of a vague 'this is bad or needs improvement.'

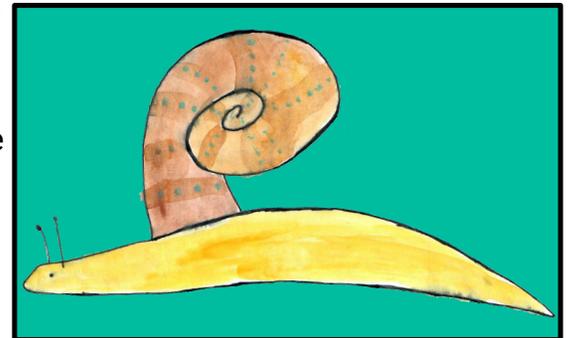
EXAMPLE: The ears on your animal could be more round. I'm pretty sure all animals have rounded ears.

- Don't forget the positive! If there's something you like in the work, shout it out!

EXAMPLE: The way you captured the perfect roundness of a cat is masterful!

- Criticize the art, not the artist. Don't insult the people asking you for help. That's just mean.

Letter writing isn't just about asking for help or artistic critique. Make sure you take part in other pleasantries. Ask how they are doing. Tell them how your hobby is coming along. Pass on some interesting artwork you've done recently, such as: "I just discovered a rat and it made me think of you and I think you'd really like this creature which does a most fantastic dance." Maybe, if you are so inclined, ask for some advice regarding a similar project you're working on.



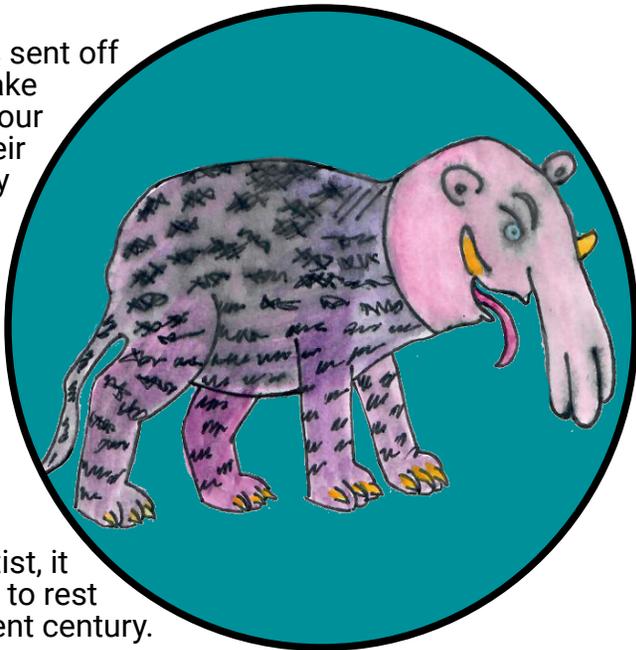
If you do ask for advice, make sure to include a sample of your art! Once your letter is done, pop your letter in the mail and wait for a response.

Things to do while waiting for a response:

- Draw your animal.
- Rant about snails invading your garden.
- Stare off into the distance, thinking about the nature of human existence.
- Write a letter to your patron telling them what great progress you're making (false) and ahead of schedule the commission is (extremely false). Forget to mail it.
- Have a tasty snack.
- Read a medieval manuscript (a lot can be found online at <https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts>).

Keep exchanging letters until you feel your artwork has reached its zenith. This does not mean it's good. But it is complete, and in your mind, really nails what your animal represents! Inform your colleagues of your success, including a copy of your artwork. The absolute deadline for this is three months from when the first letter is mailed.

Once everyone has sent off their final letters, take time to reflect on your artist. How was their artwork received by their patron? Did they go on to greater fame or did they die in relative obscurity? Did they find love? Were they happy with their lives and with what they created? Once you have pondered the later life of your artist, it is time to put them to rest and rejoin the current century.



On your own, assume the role of an art historian. The historian you create will have a particular academic focus on your artist. Answer the following questions:

- What are your historian's name and pronouns?
- What stage are you at your academic career? In order of seniority, you can be a grad student, post-doc, professor, or emeritus.
- What first interested you about your artist's works?
- Who among the other academics do you think is the biggest hack and why?
- What is the pettiest hill you will die on in defense of your academic views? Please make this extremely petty. You can't spell pet peeve without petty. What? You can? No matter, defend it anyway.

Write a brief thesis about how you think the animal artwork fits in with their artistic oeuvre. This is a statement that you will have to defend to your fellow academics. You may use anything you have at hand to argue your thesis. So actual historical documentation, the letters that your artist received from your colleagues, and any doodles your artist made are all fair game!

Use one of the following formulas for drafting your thesis if you get stuck!

- [Artist] was an unappreciated artistic genius because of their ability to draw upon [their hobby] to create uncannily realistic artwork of [animal].
- While [statement about a trend the other artists used] was popular during this time, [Artist] worked in relative obscurity to create one of the most meaningful works including [animal].
- You can draw a clear line of artistic evolution from [one of the other artists] to [Artist]. They certainly have some similarities, such as [similarity one] and [similarity two], but [Artist's] use of [technique] is a clear and unprecedented advancement not seen before in the art world.

Schedule a time for your art historians to have a video conference. This is the biggest symposium of the year for original research. This year, the theme is Animal Pageantry and Artistic Conflict. With your new research, you know you're going to knock it out of the park and wow your colleagues!

Open up the conference call and the historian with the lowest seniority goes first. In case of a tie, the historians will have to give a short one minute speech on why their petty hill to die on is perfectly justified. The other historians will then vote on who has the pettiest hill to die on. This historian will then go next. Or, if that's too involved, just go alphabetically. You will have 5 minutes to present your research. This can be in any format you think best. If you have the gumption to make a PowerPoint presentation, then go forth! Make that PowerPoint presentation with too much text on each slide! If you would prefer to just speak on the matter in a more extemporaneous fashion, that's rad, too! Whatever works best for you. After those 5 minutes, or you finish your presentation, whichever comes first, your colleagues will have an opportunity to ask questions. Everybody has an opportunity to ask two questions, and each question has to be unique. So no asking something like "why is the color story inconsistent in this artist's works" for every single presentation. If you do not wish to ask a question, simply say "I have nothing to add to our colleague's presentation."

Continue the presentation and question rounds in order from least to most senior. Once the last person has presented, take a ten minute break. Get some water and stretch. When the break is over, it's time to work on the book of essays that is going to be published based on your presentations. Don't worry, you don't have to write an essay! You will, however, have to work together as a group and collaboratively title, come up with a good representative cover for a book of the essays, and, most importantly, decide the order of authors' names. Use something like Google Docs where everyone can edit the document simultaneously for the cover. Because of the very tight deadlines found in academia, you have a half hour to come up with a clever cover.

After time is up, the book is finished. Collect scans or photos of the original letters, any notes you made as your historian, and any artwork you generated into a document with the book cover. With that, the game is over. Take some time to reread the letters, and reflect on your time as an artist and academic.

