

# INTERVIEWS

**RICK STERNBACH: Designing the Future**



Rick Sternbach's long association with *Star Trek* began with *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* for which he designed one-third of all the spaceship consoles, computer read-outs, and shipboard graphics. His fascination with understanding technology lends a sense of credibility and realism to his designs for literally hundreds of props and vehicles for *Star Trek*. He served as Technical Consul-

tant and Senior Illustrator for *Star Trek: TNG*, *Star Trek: DS9* and *Star Trek: Voyager*. He also worked on *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* and *Star Trek: Nemesis* as Illustrator and Scenic Artist, respectively.

In his role as Technical Consultant, Sternbach would consult with the writers to help inform their "technobabble." Sternbach is the co-author of both the *Star Trek: TNG* and *Star Trek: DS9 Technical Manuals*, and his understanding of *Trek* science is informed by his passion for real-world science. "I certainly enjoy working on the science and mechanics of the things I create, and for science fiction the technical aspects certainly have been featured quite a bit, but I also enjoy painting and drawing just for the visual and tactile experience. It's not all drafting and CAD and CGI...I'm a big believer in doing art that has some greater depth than a few seconds on a screen or a casual flip of a magazine page."

Sternbach's father was an architect, so he was exposed to the basics of drafting and design from an early age. "Pencils, crayons, watercolor boxes and the like were pretty

familiar to me from around three years old, so drawing and painting of some kind—with increasingly better tools and media—were always happening, right up through college. In the early 1970s I picked up my first airbrush and began refining my work for publication, eventually getting assignments for astronomical and science fiction magazines and books." In fact, Sternbach's science fiction illustrations were recognized with Hugo Awards in 1977 and 1978.

The working hours for television are very long, and the turn around time between episodes is very short. Sternbach demonstrated an amazing ability to design a wide range of technology for various alien races and *Star Trek's* Starfleet heroes. For Sternbach, the process of taking an episode from script to screen "...was to read through a script, usually a first draft, and make notes and doodles about possible new ships and props that might be needed, with separate attention given to the science and technology notes that I and Mike Okuda would give the writers and producers. The sketches could be anything from quick back-of-the-envelope scrawl

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handed off to the visual effects folks because they were under the gun, up to full clean line art with marker coloring. It all depended on the time we had; every tenth working day we were into a new episode, so it got a bit crazy sometimes.”

Perhaps Sternbach’s most recognized *Star Trek* contribution was the design of the *U.S.S. Voyager*. *Voyager* represented an evolution in Starfleet design with a sleeker look. Sternbach remembers the lengthy design process: “The exterior model design was something of a five month adventure made up of equal parts vague beginnings, false starts and regrouping, and cool ah-ha moments where bits and pieces fell together and got approved by the producers. Once the bare, simple outer shape was approved, the surface detailing was something of a breeze, since a lot of the Starfleet hardware and ship styling was a known quantity.” Of his many *Star Trek* ship designs, *Voyager* remains a favorite for Sternbach. “For me it’s still a toss-up between *Voyager* and the Klingon Attack Cruiser. Both were fun to work on for different stylistic and technical reasons.”

Science fiction fans have always collected art, and there is a long legacy of amazing science fiction artists. For Sternbach, some of the most influential were “...John Schoenherr, Jack Gaughn, Kelly Freas, Vincent DiFate, Ron Cobb, Ralph McQuarrie, and my bud Bob Eggleton; there are also a number of space artists who have done science fiction, like Ron Miller, David Hardy, Don Dixon, and even Chesley Bonestell...” He says that these artists inspired him to get into the field and that he attempted to learn from them all without copying their styles. I don’t think anyone would deny that Sternbach has helped to create unique design aesthetics for *Star Trek*. No one could mistake a 24th century hand Phaser for being anything but.

For *Star Trek* fans, the hobby of collecting related art has really exploded in the last decade with auctions by Profiles in History and Christie’s. Fans from all over the world now own original *Star Trek* designs by Rick Sternbach. For some fans, it’s very important to be able to own production art that directly relates to props or models in their collections. Sternbach says “It’s a good feeling to know

the fans are interested, even to the point where we’re conversing on various online forums; I doubt that very many other designers take the time to talk with folks about the technology and continuity and visual effects from their shows. It’s a nice way to keep the ideas flowing, keep the vitality of the franchise at a higher level.”

Sternbach’s most recent contributions to the *Star Trek* universe were for 2002’s *Star Trek: Nemesis*. He designed the beautiful floor map for the Romulan Senate chamber along with unique ground vehicles, the *Argo* shuttle, Reman *Scorpion* fighter and consoles and computer readouts for the *Enterprise-E*. Would he like to work on *Star Trek* again? “Of course. There aren’t many of us out there who have lived with the material for as long as we have.” I, for one, would love to see how Sternbach would continue to design the future.