

A master image-maker at the top of his form, **Gary Kelley** is never satisfied with the status quo.

# TAKING DESTINY IN HAND

Director Mike Clary had a clear image in mind for *Sea of Nod*—several images, in fact: a bustling village, a forested mountain, a magical ship manned by mischievous spirits. He'd seen them in a 1995 book, *Rip Van Winkle*, illustrated by Gary Kelley. "When he looked for backers for the play, he took the book along to show them the direction he wanted to take with the scenery," the artist says.

Clary got his backing, the play opens this fall in Rhinebeck, N.Y., and naturally, Kelley was asked to design the poster. "Ideally, that's the way it works," Kelley notes. "You do a piece you really believe in. Someone sees it and makes another assignment, and it builds. The key is to make sure that first piece is something you really believe in."

Developing a style he believes in was a conscious decision on Kelley's part. "Twenty years ago, I realized I wanted the work to be able to stand alone once the assignment had been met," Kelley admits. "What started me off, probably, was noticing what was happening in European illustration in the early '80s. I didn't want to do knockoffs. I wanted to know what they knew about illustration."

Examining the work of European illustrators led Kelley to study their influences, particularly the art deco painters. "It didn't take me long to realize art deco painting was a spin-off of cubism," he notes, "a refinement of cubism with a little more realism added. That kind of fit me. There's always been a lot of realism in my work, but I was trained as a graphic designer,

and the design just kept pushing its way into my work."

#### DESIGNING A CONCEPT

"For me, the toughest challenge is coming up with a concept that hasn't been done a hundred times already," the artist says. Developing a concept, the way Kelley approaches it, relies heavily on handwork.

"I can lay in bed at night thinking or try to come up with an idea while I'm driving the car, but until I start actually drawing and doodling, nothing really happens," he insists. "One drawing leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to another. Even if I come back to the first one, I need to do all the others to see—really see—that the first idea was best."

In his thumbnails, he always starts by drawing a frame. "It's the designer in me," Kelley explains. "I need to start with that outside shape and then build within it because cropping and edges are very important to me."

Although Kelley relishes the task of seeking out reference material, he tries to improvise as much as possible in his preliminary sketches. "I just start doodling, coming up with ideas off the top of my head," he says. And he doesn't shoot photo reference for the figures until later, after the client has selected one of the thumbnails and Kelley has refined the composition in a second sketch. Then the artist poses the model to match the stance he rendered. There are drawbacks to that

approach—but not for the artist. "My wife poses for me a lot, and she's always complaining that I come up with poses that are almost impossible to hold in real life," he says. "But that's part of being a painter instead of a photographer. You can take those liberties."

With his reference in hand, Kelley is ready to create his final sketch, a detailed rendering where he works out the tonality of the image. "I didn't always do it this way," he says. "I used to do fairly refined line drawings, but over the past ten years or so as my work became more influenced by painting, I think more in terms of values and shapes. That's the one thing I got out of my undergraduate painting studies—the most important thing I got out of that—learning to see an image in terms of almost abstract shapes: darks and lights, value shifts, positive and negative space."

Even at this point, when he's honing detail, Kelley allows room for a bit of improvisation. "Unless I need to be historically accurate, I only use reference for suggestion," he says. "I want to get myself pointed in the right direction with the light source and the folds in the clothes, but [reference material is] only a starting point for me."

Spontaneity is also an important ingredient in Kelley's color handling. "I resist doing preliminary color studies because I want to have fun with the finished piece," he says. "I want some surprises or accidents to happen. I don't want the finished art to be the experience of copying a color study." If a client demands a color

by **Talitha Harper**



study, Kelley provides it. “But I try to talk them out of it,” he notes.

#### PAINTERLY PASTELS

“About 95 percent of my inspiration comes from oil painters,” Kelley says. “I’ve learned a lot about mixing colors by looking at paintings.” Although pastel is typically his medium of choice for illustration assignments, he applies color as if he were working with oils, laying down a tonal “underpainting” and building up layers of deft strokes.

“I started working with oil in sixth grade, and I’ve always loved it, but pastel goes faster. I can achieve similar effects in less time,” the artist notes. There are other advantages: “There’s no drying time with pastel, and it’s tough to reproduce oil well. Pastel is easier to shoot.”

The artist is best known for the earthy palette, inspired by the work of Edwin Dickinson, he developed in the 1980s. “When I discovered Dickinson’s work, I was intrigued by the way he could take blacks and grays and browns and sometimes blues and make them look so interesting together,” Kelley notes. “Up until that point, I never used black in my work — ever — not unless I was working in black and white.”

Under Dickinson’s influence, Kelley began to use black to deepen shadows and enhance the drama in his imagery. “The black always goes in last because it will muddy everything up if it’s used as an underpainting,” he says.

Only a few catalogs of Dickinson’s paintings have ever been published, and Kelley was fortunate enough to stumble across one of them in a bookstore. Exploring Dickinson’s work further, however, was an act of will. “There are a couple of his paintings in the Metropolitan Museum [in New York], and I’ve gone to see them when they are on display,” Kelley says. “I’m always on the lookout for galleries or museums that are displaying his work.” The search has continued for years, and in that time, Kelley has seen only about 25 originals.

“But then,” Kelley notes, “I’m always looking for new inspiration — at museum shows and galleries and bookstores. I’ll take some of this, I’ll take some of that. I think that’s what it’s all about: collecting and combining influences to make something yours.”

▼ **When Kelley** was asked to create a poster for *Sea of Nod*, a play based on the Rip Van Winkle legend, he showed the director three preliminary sketches. “This was the most obvious idea, and I was glad the director didn’t go with it,” the artist admits.



➤ **Kelley focused** on Rip Van Winkle carrying a keg of magic brew, but the director asked him to add three figures: crewmen on the enchanted ship. “This is really complicated for a poster,” the artist says, “and I was hesitant to complicate it even more. But in the end, I think they added magic to the scene.”

▼ **“This sketch** is more designed,” Kelley says. “I think it would have made a strong poster, but the third sketch — the one the director chose — offered the most potential in terms of illustration.”



▼ **Once the** direction was settled, Kelley gathered reference — an easy task in this case because he had already scoured for reference five years ago when he illustrated a book about Rip Van Winkle. “This was about the right era for the clothes,” Kelley notes.

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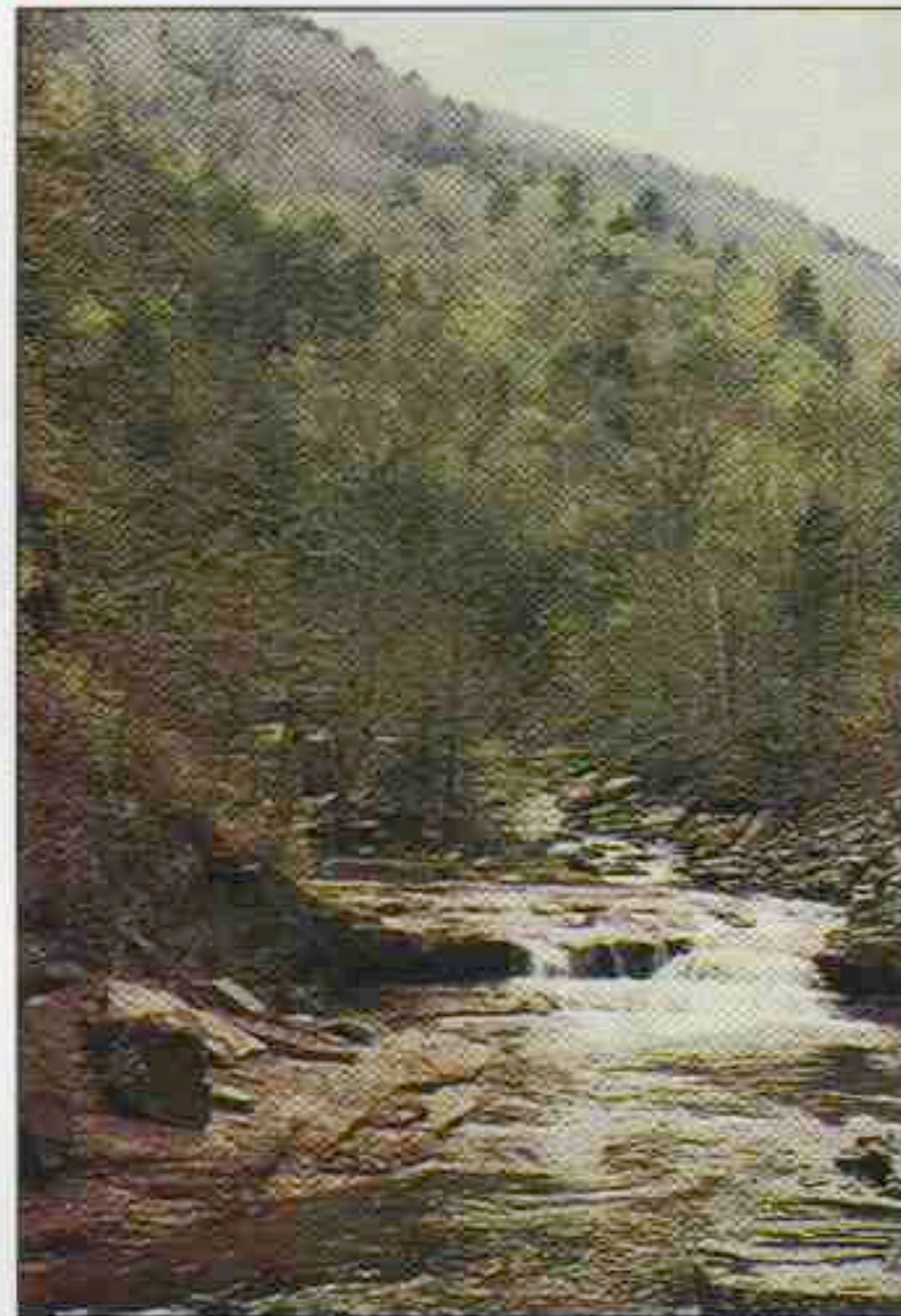
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◀ **The ship** in the poster is Henry Hudson’s Half Moon. According to Washington Irving’s story, Hudson and his men magically return to the Hudson River every 20 years, retracing the path they first explored in 1609. “This is a replica ship that sailed in 1909,” Kelley says. “I found it in a Time-Life explorer book when I was illustrating the book, so this time, I knew just where to go.”

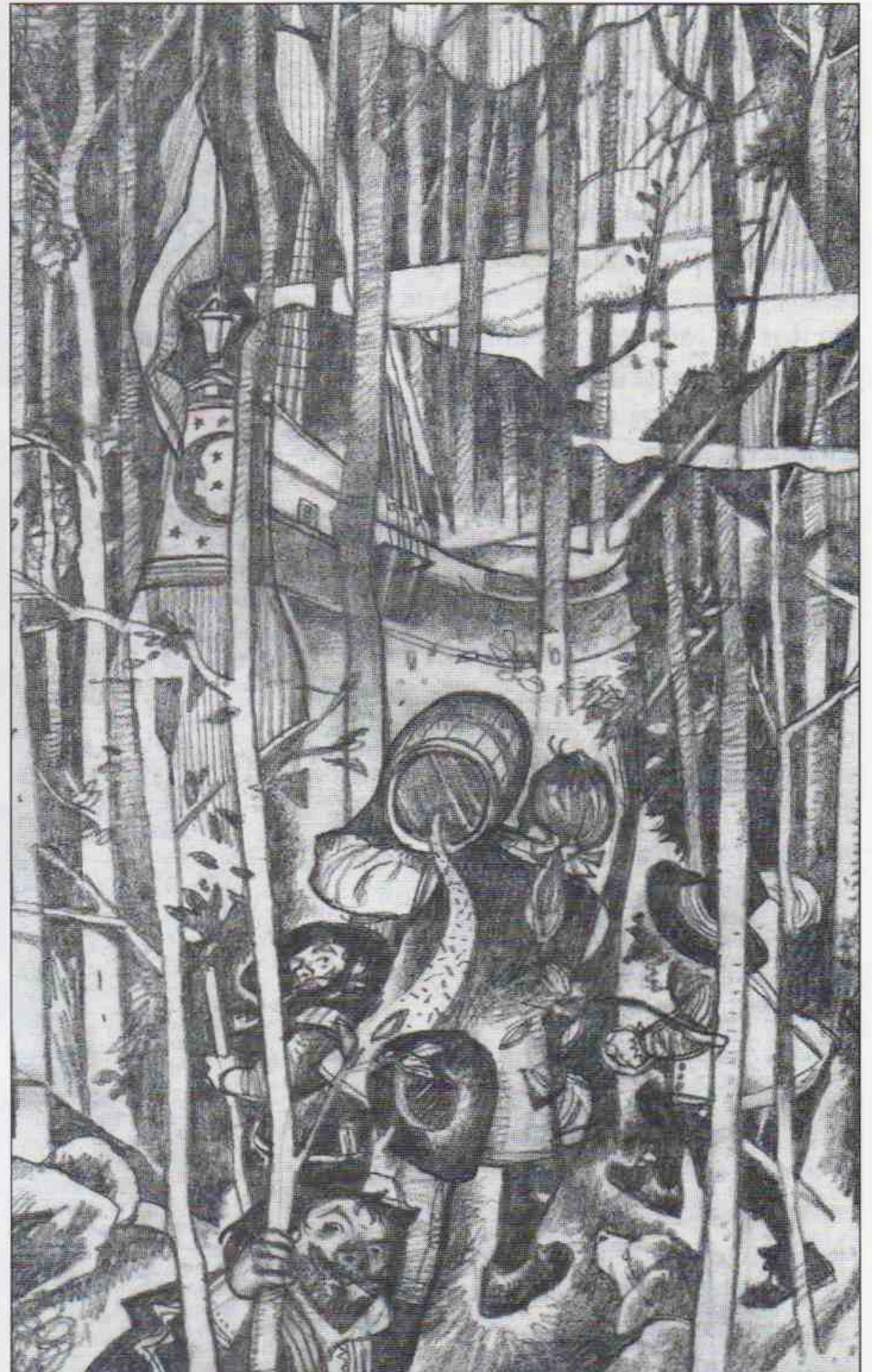
➔ **“I shot a** lot of reference on location in the Catskills for research for the book,” Kelley says. “I liked the feeling of the forest in this one. It was nothing I could copy for the poster, but it had the mood I wanted to go for. I use reference, but I also take a lot of leeway and improvise.”

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➔ **“The boat** and the forest are pretty well refined in this sketch, but at this point, I was still drawing the figures out of my head,” Kelley notes. “I’m deciding on the positions so I’ll know how to pose the models.”

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Kelley came to count on discovering new influences. "That's what has kept me evolving, kept the work fresh," he says. In recent years, however, he began to worry that he'd exhausted the search. "In 1985, there were a lot of inspirations I had not come across," he says. "But by 1995, I figured I had mined about every resource. What I didn't know was that there were resources there all the time that I didn't know I would ever use. If you had told me ten years ago I was really going to like Juan Gris' work or Max Beckmann's, I'd have said you were crazy, but they're major influences on my work now."

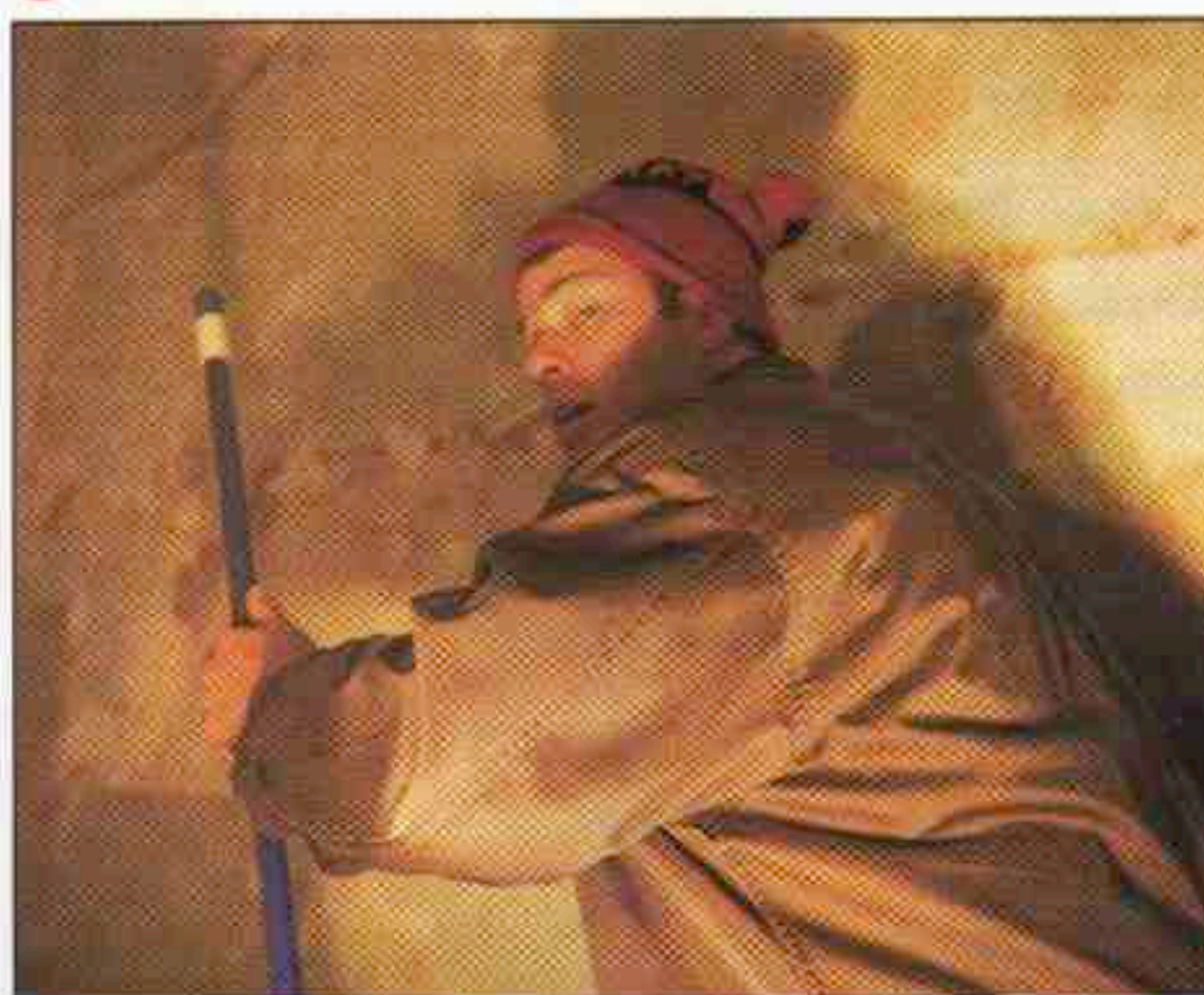
The change began in 1998, when Kelley made a trip to the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. "I had some visual experiences there that I thought matched up to what Van Gogh and Monet and Matisse saw." Many of the images he creates today are flooded with vivid Matisse-like color and rendered in a loose, amorphous style. "I'm rediscovering the joy of coloring outside the lines," he says.

Not that the artist has abandoned his art deco-inspired style. "I like having more than one approach. I don't want to get stereotyped," he insists. After two decades of working almost exclusively in pastel, Kelley is also doing more oil painting (for his gallery work) and venturing into monotype prints.

"Oil is very similar to pastel, so going back to oil was seamless," he says, "but monotypes are new for me. I love the spontaneity, the way you can scratch and rub and get expressive with the medium." Kelley has completed a few illustration assignments in monotype, and he has a more ambitious monotype project in the works: a book about the legend of blues singer Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil. The book was Kelley's idea. He pitched the project — as well as another book he plans to illustrate in the new Matisse-like style — to Tom Peterson of Creative Editions, a publisher he has worked with often.

"Five years ago, I absolutely, unequivocally loved the challenge of the assignment," Kelley notes. "I was always proud of that fact. I still am — and I certainly enjoy a challenging assignment, but I've also gotten to a point in my career where creating assignments has suddenly become much more intriguing to me. I have themes that I want to develop." ■

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▲ "When I shoot models for reference, I want to get the folds and shadows, but not detail. I'm looking for suggestion. I don't care about having every button in place," Kelley says. His models are two young artists, former students of Kelley's at the Illustration Academy, who dropped in to visit his studio: Jim Burke (who posed for two of the gnomish crewmen) and Sterling Hundley (standing in for Rip Van Winkle).

◀ Kelley set tracing paper over his sketch and redrew the figures, referring to his photo reference. (A third crewman, shown full figure in the poster, was concocted entirely in the artist's head.)

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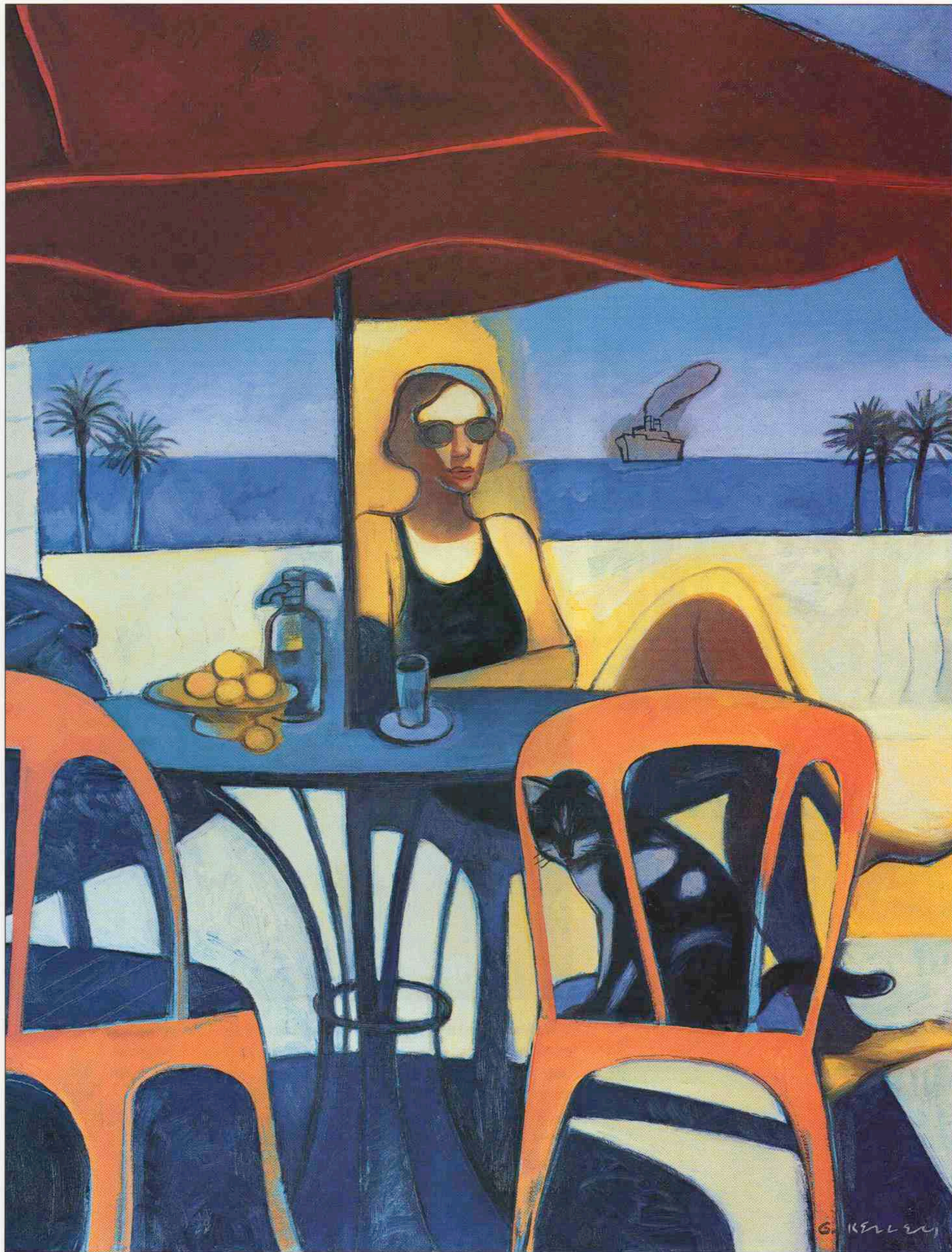
▲ **After photocopying** the two sketches, Kelley cut out the figures and taped them into the background. He projected this image onto his drawing paper and traced a line drawing to use as the basis for the finished pastel illustration. "I don't use the Artograph for anything but my own drawings," Kelley says. "I never trace reference photos, and I can always spot illustrations that are really projected photos."

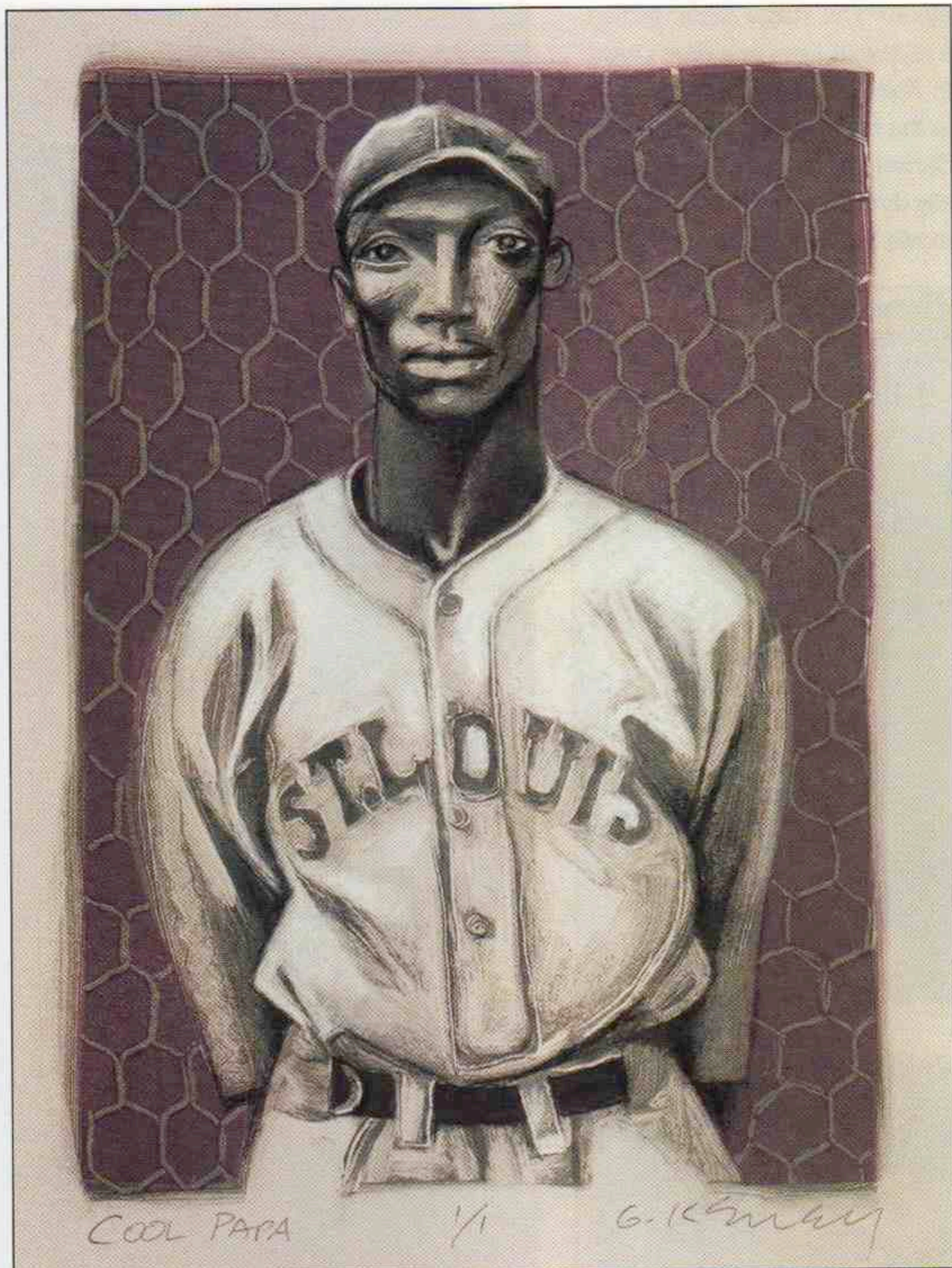
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▲ **Working in** pastel on pearl gray Stonehenge paper, Kelley built his color in layers. "I never use colors straight from the box. All my colors are compilations, the way oil painters work," he notes. "I work from dark to light. I'll lay down my

dark colors first — except black. It goes on last because it muddies up all the colors on top of it. I start out by creating an overall dark and light statement and then start to add color into the medium ranges and the highlight ranges."





◀ **Over the** past few years, the artist has begun to work in monotype, the medium he used to produce “Cool Papa Bell” for “Artist and Baseball Card,” a traveling exhibition organized by Murray Tinkelman. “I had a grainy old photo for reference — a wonderfully direct portrait,” Kelley notes.

✦ **When he** created a series of pastel illustrations for young readers’ edition of *Macbeth*, published by Dial Books, Kelley watched *Braveheart* “dozens of times” to get a feel for the Scottish landscape. “Then I found out *Braveheart* was filmed in Ireland,” he says. “I drew these witches pretty much out of my head, but I had some reference for fabric.”



◀ **“Degas used** to work pastel into monotype, and those pieces fascinated me,” says Kelley. He took the same approach when he developed this illustration — using his daughter as a model — for *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edgar Allan Poe, published by Creative Editions.

◀ **Kelley serves** as cover editor for *The North American Review*, the nation’s oldest literary magazine (Thomas Jefferson subscribed). “That means every two or three months I do the cover or beg someone else to do it,” he says. “We pay a pittance, but we offer lots of tears and great reproduction.” Kelley worked in oil on canvas to create this image for the 2000 “Summer Fiction” edition. The loose style and bright palette are recent developments. “I’m pushing work in a new direction,” he says, “and that feels good.”

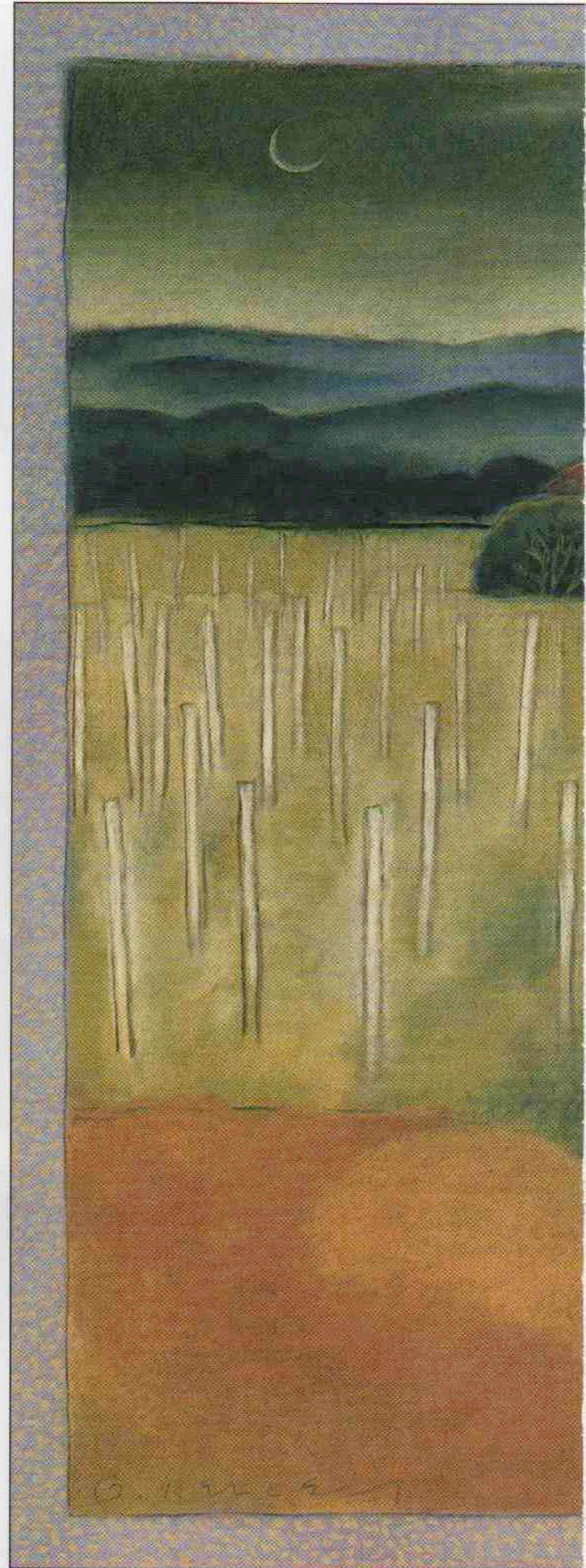


▼ **Kelley created** this pastel illustration five years ago, “and I’m still taking it along when I do slide shows for lectures or seminars,” he says. “I like it as a compositional study — there are so many compositional quirks in this

piece.” The image accompanied a review of *Devil in a Blue Dress* in *Rolling Stone*. The character in the foreground, portrayed by Denzel Washington, is intentionally downplayed to focus on the movie as a film noir period piece.



► **The artist** has ordered an etching press, but until it arrives, he uses a press at the University of Northern Iowa — with rare exceptions. “I did this the old-fashioned way,” he notes, “painting on glass, dampening the paper, and rubbing the hell out of it with a wooden spoon.” Kelley says he’s drawn to monotype when the subject is expressionistic, and in this *Rolling Stone* portrait of Fateh Ali Khan, a singer from India known for his soaring, ethereal music, “I wanted to capture him as a mystical spirit,” he adds.





† **Every year** Kelley produces a pro bono piece to help raise funds for the public radio station in his hometown of Cedar Rapids, Iowa; the image is used on a poster promoting a wine tasting, and the

original is sold at a silent auction. "This is a compilation of scraps," he says. "Acquaintances of mine from Cedar Rapids bought a vineyard in the Napa Valley, and this house is on their property."



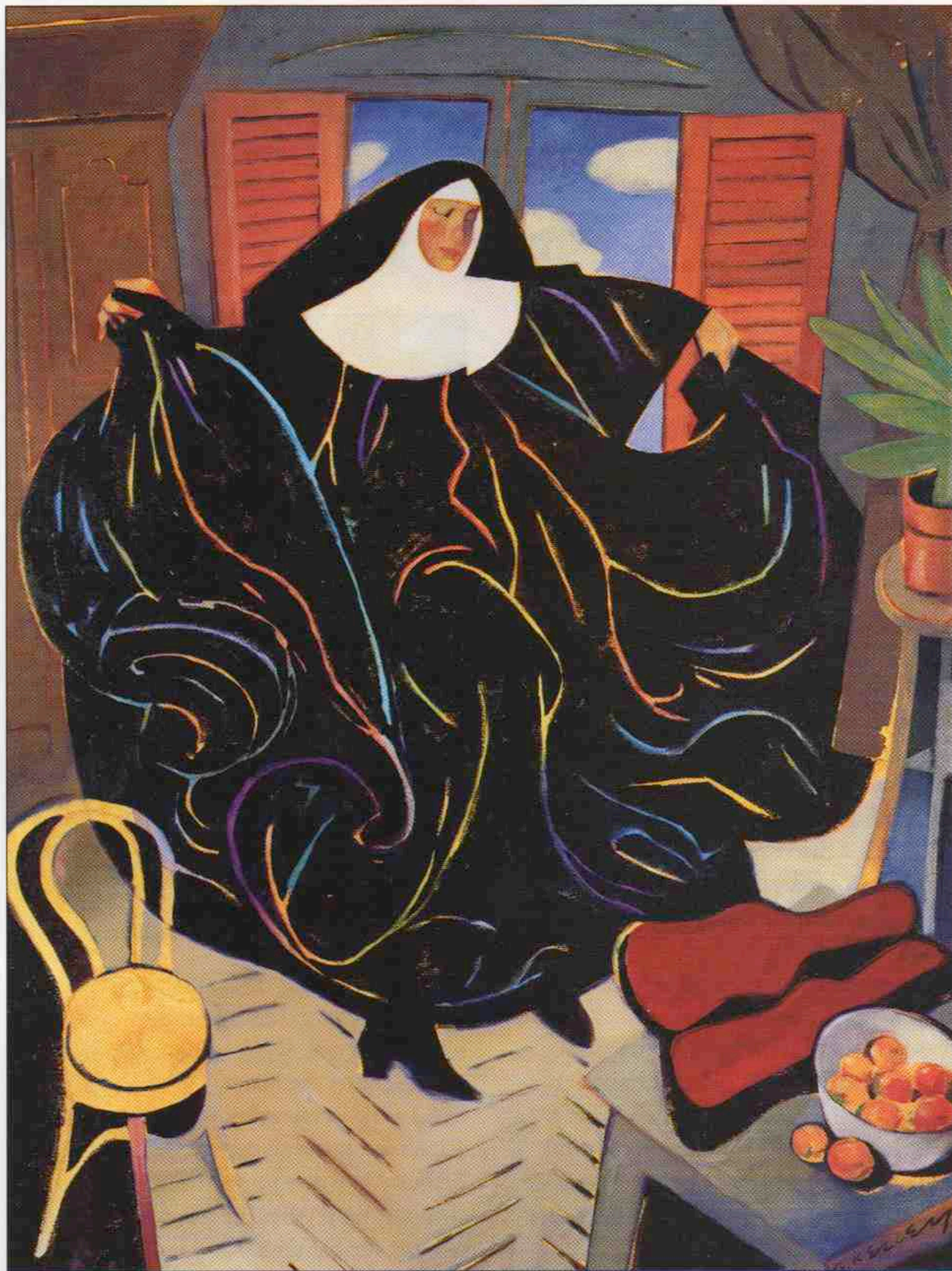
➔ **"Barnes & Noble** had a laundry list of authors," Kelley says. "The concept of putting them into one setting was mine." The artist designed the mural to span two walls, 60 and 70 feet wide, in New York City's 5th Avenue store. (Only a small segment is shown here.) The client later bought all rights, so sections of the composition are reproduced in stores, and on merchandise, throughout the chain. "Someone's tweaking the color, though," the artists says. "Those aren't the colors I used."





◀ **Kelley had** a few misgivings about this project: three illustrations for *Scenario* magazine to accompany the script *All About Eve*. “They told me it was about a Broadway star from the 1950s, and I wasn’t particularly interested in 1950s Broadway stars,”

the artist admits. “But the script was really powerful.” Kelley took a literal approach in this image, for the opening spread. “Since this was all about Eve, I decided to show all of Eve. So I posed my wife on the sofa and lit her dramatically,” he explains.



▲ **ColorFX gave** Kelley a lot of leeway when they asked him for this poster illustration. “They told me, ‘We’re a color printer. Do what you want,’” he says. “With open assignments like this, I often start with a quote, just to get myself

going.” Here, he used the folk saying, “In the fiddler’s house, all are dancers.” Kelley originally sketched a generic woman, but she developed into a nun as the image — which was painted in oil on canvas — progressed.