Scientific Illustrator Encyclopedia Article

Scientific Illustrator

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Scientific Illustrator

How do toads unfurl their tongues? What goes on inside a car's engine? How do hummingbirds hover? What happens when atomic particles collide? Scientific illustrators have the fascinating job of turning such ideas and theories into clever colorful charts, diagrams, and three-dimensional models. Artists with a keen eye for detail and a penchant for science and technology work with engineers, scientists, and doctors to make information that is difficult to convey with words comprehensible at a glance. Their assignments may range from illustrating the spores of a fungus to depicting the surface of Mars or building a model of an atom to making a model of a prosthetic limb. Scientific illustrators work with computer graphics, plastics, and modeling clay as well as traditional techniques such as charcoal, pens, and brushes.

Some scientific illustrators are self taught. One of the most famous was the English naturalist and author, Beatrix Potter. Potter never attended school, yet spent her entire life studying the world around her in finer and finer detail, rendering her observations—especially those of fungi—in exquisite drawings which were presented to the Royal Academy of Sciences.

Students who wish to become scientific illustrators must have a strong background in the graphic fine arts, with an additional emphasis on biology, engineering, architecture, or design. Some illustrators work for specific magazines or publishing houses, but most are freelance and work from home. To be successful, scientific illustrators must be able to run a small business.

The field of medical illustration is more specialized, concentrating on human anatomy and physiology. Medical illustrators produce drawings for textbooks and models for anatomical displays, and may also be called upon to present visual testimony in court cases. To become certified, medical illustrators must complete a special master's program which is currently offered only to a handful of students each year at six schools in North America. Prerequisites for entrance to these programs are a bachelor's degree with majors and minors in art and biological science. The coursework includes vertebrate anatomy, embryology, physiology, chemistry, and histology.

Bibliography

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