

Syd Mead – A Visual Futurist

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When referring to Concept Designer Syd Mead, no title suits him better than 'Visual Futurist'. This endearing title is one that Mead chose for himself when asked how he would like to be described in the credits of Blade Runner (1982) and throughout his career, he had never failed to live up to it. Through intricate yet completely credible visualisations, Mead was able to fabricate and dominate a brand-new aesthetic, depicting what could be the world's future, be it for better or worse with its high technology but low living mentality, "the style set is not anything, it's neo everything" (Syd Mead, 2009).



1. Syd Mead

Some of Mead's most noteworthy works include concept design for "Aliens" (1986), "Tron" (1982) and "Star Trek: The Motion Picture" (1978) but his most influential and significant work resides in Ridley Scott's sci-fi drama "Blade Runner" (1982) which ultimately shaped how science fiction film art is designed today.

Mead has long been celebrated for his enticing work on these projects, including the president of the Art Directors Guild's (ADG), Nelson Coates, who praised Mead by saying "His pivotal role in shaping cinema was unique, with a singular ability to visualize the future." He then added "As one of the most influential conceptual artists of our time, his visions and illustrations of future technological worlds will remain as a testament to his vast imagination".

On July 18th, 1933, Sydney Jay Mead was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. He soon after moved various times along the western United States until graduating high school in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1951. Mead then joined the US Army Corps of Engineering, where he was sent to serve 2 years in Okinawa, Japan, "Okinawan culture is a mix of Japanese and Chinese. I became fascinated by the decorative geometry and the stylized depiction of scenario. Then, before I checked out of the Army, I spent a month in Hong Kong with a buddy on 'R and R' and got more exposure to the oriental culture" (Syd Mead, 2008). The "decorative geometry" of these cities along with the 'tiger economy' ideologies later inspired Mead when creating his futuristic environments.

After returning from the military, Mead went on to graduate from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, formerly the Art Center School in Los Angeles, in 1959. Mead's talents were quickly recognised as he was hired by Ford Motor Company's Advanced Styling Studio, where he worked for 2 years designing concepts for cars.

Mead spent the next few years working for large corporations including United State Steel, where he illustrated multiple catalogues.

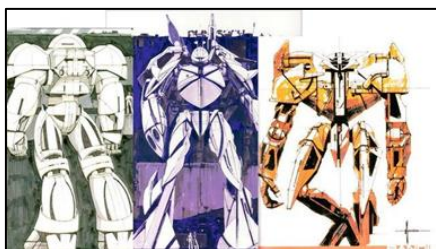


2. Syd Mead US Steel Series

Once leaving US Steel, Mead launched his own brand, Syd Mead Inc. in Detroit, Michigan in 1970. Throughout the '70 and '80s, Mead accepted offers from various architectural clients, including Intercontinental Hotels, 3D International and Harwood Taylor & Associates to design the interiors and exteriors of hotels and restaurants.

In 1979, Mead made his debut in the film industry as the production illustrator of "Star Trek: The Motion Picture". He continued to work on other feature films including "Blade Runner", "Aliens", "Tron", "2010" and "Mission Impossible-3".

As Mead's reputation sky-rocketed, he attracted the attention of various Japanese corporates, this included, Sony, Honda, NHK and Dentsu. Mead also contributed to the film "Solar Crisis" by Japanese storywriter, Takeshi Kawata and the Japanese anime film "The New Yamato". Continuing to explore the genre of anime, Mead was behind the design of the 8 iconic robots from the popular 1999 sci-fi anime tv series, "Turn A Gundam".



3. Finished Art for "Turn A Gundam"



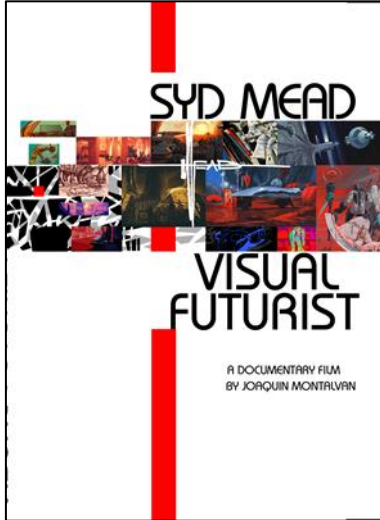
4. Concept Art for The SYSTEM V-99 V Gundam, By Syd Mead

Being and 'advocate for new technologies', Mead began to investigate computer aided design in later years, which he used for the 1991 Concours d'Elegance "Eyes on the Classics" official poster, in Detroit, Michigan.

In 1993, one of the 1st CD-ROMS in Japan which consisted of a gallery of 50 pieces of Mead's digital art was released.

Mead continued to show his work at exhibitions including "Cavalcade to the Crimson Castle" which displayed 114 original art pieces. Mead also took part in many interviews and his documentary, "Visual Futurist" in collaboration with Joaquin Montalvan, was released in May 2007.

Syd Mead relocated his studio to Pasadena, California, in February 1998 and on December 30th, 2019, he passed away peacefully at his home with his partner Roger Servick by his side. His last words were, "I am done here. They're coming to take me back."



5. Syd Mead: Visual Futurist

After reading over the course of Syd Mead's career, it has become apparent that he was rightly named, "Visual Futurist". Within his work, Mead put direct focus on how he believed automotive design would be designed in the far-future and subsequently designed the basis of the futuristic cyberpunk genre. This is evident in Ridley Scott's (1982) "Blade Runner".

"Blade Runner" set the scene for most futuristic movies and art to come, "Blade Runner" is one of the seminal science-fiction films of the 20th century" (Syd Mead, 2011). Mead's designs were first and foremost based on mobility and when working on "Blade Runner" he was hired originally to work solely on the vehicle design. This led to his focus being directed on the iconic spinner police car.



6. The Spinner, Blade Runner

The spinner as designed by Mead, had the ability to both drive and hover, this led to Mead designing larger skyscrapers and apartment complexes as well as fictional air traffic regulations. That is not to say that Mead's designs were not credible, Mead had an uncanny ability to create plausible machinery and he detailed the spinner to perfection, "It was very carefully designed to be insanely mechanical and also retrofitted" (Syd Mead, 2009).

The intense attention to detail on the spinner design comes from Mead's industrial and engineering background and his previous experience in car design with Ford Motors, as Mead said himself, "what drives the future really is the advancing technology based on previous technology".



7. Spinner Concept Art

As it turned out, Mead was right and in recent years, the design of Tesla founder, Elon Musk's Cybertruck was based off Mead's vehicle designs from "Blade Runner".

After designing the vehicles, Mead's city image began to grow around them and in keeping with Scott's envisioned noir-themed setting, Mead added the neon lighting, thick smoke and heavy rain to a dark urban setting drove his designs to the dystopian future that has become his signature style today.



8. City Design for Blade Runner by Syd Mead

To produce his detailed works, Mead tended to use older techniques. Using pencil, a straight edge, tracing paper and French curves, he carefully created the illusion of a 3D element within his drawings. Often his designs included a geometric balance, inspired by Asian imagery. After he decided on the main design, Mead would render using a type of opaque watercolour paint called gouache and large flat brushes for precise straight lines. In later years, Mead would also incorporate airbrushing gradations into his works.

A key part in rendering and shading in Mead's work lay in 'value contrast'. Mead advises to "cover the white of the board as quickly as possible and start to adjust from there" to avoid disrupting the "assessment of value contrast", meaning that the white of the page would distract and distort the contrast of light when shading.

To use a method so time consuming and precise, Mead was highly skilled in painting and through it was able to produce beautiful futuristic designs.

As a viewer of “Blade Runner”, I remember becoming encapsulated in the dystopian world Syd Mead created. His highly technical imagery darkly rendered with dramatic backlighting and neon lights served to emphasise the story of the film and gave context into the socially broken world. Through researching Syd Mead and his work and putting a name to the masterpiece of the ingenious automotive designs and intense cityscape imagery in “Blade Runner”, I have come to greatly respect and admire him as a conceptual designer and become even more inspired by the art he created and the skill and originality he used to produce it.

“Blade Runner” served as a turning point for what people expect of the future, including advanced technology, viable new methods of mobility and transport and worlds on the brink of economic or social collapse that questions the deeper aspects of morality.

Although I did not grow up in the time of Blade Runner’s release, I have seen the ground-breaking impact Mead’s distinctive art style has had on cinematography.

Surprisingly, inspiration from Mead’s automotive designs can be seen in one of the distinguishable icons of the Star Wars franchise, The AT-AT’s, also known as The Imperial Walkers, that made their debut in “The Empire Strikes Back” in 1980. The design drew on Mead’s mechanical influences and added more realism to the film.



9. The Imperial Walkers, “The Empire Strikes Back”, 1980

I have always been a fan of the cyberpunk aesthetic as well as science-fiction as a whole and it is clear I am not the only one, the graphic genre was adopted by modern pop-culture and has widely been used in the production of new video games.

One of the more recent games that has been heavily influenced by Mead’s designs is none other than “Cyberpunk 2077” by CD Projekt, which was released in 2020 and quickly became one of the most notorious games of the year. The game, as suggested by the title, has drawn on Mead’s futuristic aesthetic and the game even pays tribute to the Blade Runner film with various easter eggs for hardcore fans as well as a touching direct mention of Syd Mead himself.



10. “Cyberpunk 2077” Game Art



11. Direct Mention of Syd Mead, “Creator of Worlds” in “Cyberpunk 2077”

The entertainment industry has wholeheartedly embraced Mead’s envisioned future and it being grateful for his revolutionary work is truly moving to see. Looking back at his work, I am honestly awestruck at his realistic and with modern technology, nearly possible designs and how they continue Mead’s legacy of seeing into the future and exploring problems we may yet face, as well as how to solve them, “If you can successfully invent your way around the problem, you’ve won the game” (Syd Mead, 2016), proving Mead to be a true Visual Futurist.

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