

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

---

1987

## J.R.R. Tolkien: Pictures Fit for an Exhibition

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, [curtis.carter@marquette.edu](mailto:curtis.carter@marquette.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil_fac)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Carter, Curtis, "J.R.R. Tolkien: Pictures Fit for an Exhibition" (1987). *Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications*. 537.

[https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil\\_fac/537](https://epublications.marquette.edu/phil_fac/537)



## J.R.R. Tolkien: Pictures Fit for an Exhibition

by Curtis L. Carter



ince its first publication by George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. in 1937, followed by Houghton Mifflin's 1938 edition, J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892-1973) *The Hobbit* has been enjoyed by millions of readers around the world and has been the subject of endless scrutiny by critics, scholars, and enthusiasts.<sup>1</sup> The author himself, a philologist and professor of Anglo-Saxon at Leeds (1920-1925) and Oxford University (1925-1959), has become one of the most widely celebrated of all twentieth-century writers and a reluctant cult figure for some of his readers. His *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of The Rings* (1954, 1955), *The Silmarillion* (1977), edited by Christopher Tolkien, and various other writings have assured him a lasting place in the world's fantasy literature.

This opportunity for first hand acquaintance with Tolkien's pictures and holograph manuscripts helps to confirm his place among twentieth-century creators of myth. The popular appeal of his images is rivaled only by those of the American Walt Disney, another great inventor of twentieth-century mythical images, a rival whose works evoked in Tolkien "a heartfelt loathing."<sup>2</sup>

Few people are aware that Tolkien was a talented visual artist, or have had the opportunity to actually see his original drawings and watercolor paintings. These works are known primarily as the illustrations for *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's other books.<sup>3</sup> The principal body of thirty-some known drawings and watercolors relating to *The Hobbit*, executed between 1930 and 1937, are currently in the collection of Oxford University's Bodleian Library. A few additional artworks are with the Tolkien Manuscript Collection at Marquette University (Cat. No. 1), and at least one additional is in private hands (Cat. No. 41). (There may, of course, be others not presently recorded, such as a drawing of Mirkwood that Tolkien reportedly gave to a Chinese student.) Nine of the black and white drawings (Bodleian Library MS. Tolkien drawings 7, 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 23, 24, and 25) appeared in the first editions in England and America, and four of five watercolors (Bodleian Library MS.



Tolkien drawings 27, 28, 29, and 30) were initially published in the first American edition.

This exhibition at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art offers their first American showing; however, a selection of the *Hobbit* drawings was previously shown in 1977 at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and at the National Book League in London.<sup>4</sup> An exhibition, "Drawings for *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien," at the Bodleian Library in 1987, was organized in conjunction with the current Haggerty Museum exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

Tolkien's drawings and watercolors in the setting of an art museum, where they will be considered first as original works of art rather than in their secondary role as illustrations of the text, invites consideration of their artistic status and qualities. Letters No. 13-15, and 27 in Carpenter, written in 1937 to Allen & Unwin, show that he had certain reservations about the adequacy of his pictures for the purpose of illustrating *The Hobbit*, particularly about drawing figures.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless it would be a mistake to be misled by Tolkien's often self-deprecating and overly modest reservations, or perhaps ambivalence, about his art. It must be noted that Tolkien also speaks confidently about his ability to produce on demand the requisite drawings, and he does not hesitate to propose the question of remuneration. Such postures are not those of a sometime-amateur artist.

Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's biographer, lends valuable insight into the scope and seriousness of Tolkien's status as a visual artist when he reminds us that Tolkien had regularly practiced art from his childhood and throughout the remainder of his life. According to Carpenter, Tolkien illustrated several of his own poems during undergraduate days, and, after an interlude for the war and his other work, began regularly drawing again from about 1925 on. He subsequently produced illustrations for "Roverandom," pictures of landscape scenes in his *Silmarillion*, as well as illustrations for *Mr. Bliss*, *The Lord of The Rings*, *The Father Christmas Letters* (begun as early as 1920), and his other works. Carpenter cites the lavish illustrations, in particular those done for *Mr. Bliss*, executed between 1932 and 1937 in the same period as *The Hobbit* drawings, and the fact that *Mr. Bliss* was actually constructed around the pictures, as "indicators of how seriously Tolkien was taking the business of drawing and painting." "He was by now a very talented artist," Carpenter writes, "although he had not the same skill at drawing figures as he had with landscapes."<sup>7</sup> Baillie Tolkien, writing in the introduction to the Ashmolean exhibition, similarly affirms the artistic skill of J.R.R. Tolkien: "He appears to have been unaware that he possessed considerable artistic skill and a wholly original talent. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

Stylistically the *Hobbit* drawings and paintings are difficult to classify into any distinct school or style. In some instances the artist appears to rely primarily on his own experiences. For instance, *The Mountain-path* (Cat. No. 21) and other mountain scenes referring to the journey from Rivendell to the other side of the Misty Mountains, may have been inspired by his youthful adventure at age 19 in the mountains of Switzerland. His letter to his son Michael, No. 306 in Carpenter, describes in detail incidents from this hiking trip through the mountains, where he narrowly escaped the rush of boulders dislodged by melting snow.<sup>9</sup> There are, however, reminiscences of a delicate oriental sensibility in some of the works (*The*





*Misty Mountains looking West from the Eyrie towards Goblin Gate*, Cat. No. 24), and of art nouveau (*Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves*, Cat. No. 37), expressionist (*The Mountain-path*), and medieval-like style in others (*The Hill: Hobbiton across the Water*, Cat. No. 6). Perhaps the wide variety of stylistic devices is a result of the artist's strongly original creative impulse that can freely appropriate any available stylistic conventions for its own unique purposes. There is some precedent for this approach in the literary texts where Tolkien's extensive knowledge of the northern fairy tales and myths is woven into his own highly original tales. While he disclaims any comparable acquaintance with pictorial art, we may assume a similar approach to his pictures.

Whatever the sources of Tolkien's pictorial conventions may turn out to be, the images themselves reveal a pristine individuality that carries the artist's own stamp throughout. Although the pictures range from bare sketches to highly finished jewel-like images, each possesses a richness of structure and detail that warrants continuous exploration for subtle visual properties and relations that go beyond any merely illustrative powers. In these respects the images reveal themselves as works of art of interest for their intrinsic aesthetic features. These special qualities of form and fantasy are available for discovery to any knowledgeable viewer who seizes the opportunity to explore Tolkien's drawings and watercolors.

The question of artist's intent is sometimes considered a measure of relevance to the classification of the works. There is no evidence that Tolkien deliberately set out to produce art for exhibition purposes, as Baillie Tolkien and others have noted. His pictures, as well as his literary tales, appear to be the product of an essentially private activity. Tolkien's own words affirm the private nature of his creations.

It must be emphasized that this process of invention was/is a private enterprise undertaken to give pleasure to myself by giving expression to my personal linguistic "aesthetic" or taste and its fluctuations.<sup>10</sup>

However, the ceaseless endeavor to externalize images generated by a fertile imagination is the very essence of artistic motivation. Their origin in the realm of private activity does not preclude the images being perceived and valued as art by a larger public, and this is what has happened with Tolkien's literary and visual art. It began as a private activity and was then discovered and appropriated by others for aesthetic purposes. Hence it is appropriate that we view Tolkien's visual art in the context of an art museum.

While it is useful to think for a moment of the value of Tolkien's drawings and watercolors as independent works of art, their connection to the text must not be ignored either. This connection is maintained even here as representative textual passages from the original handwritten or typed manuscripts of *The Hobbit* are exhibited alongside the art. The opportunity to experience these two elements, the verbal and the visual texts, side by side or in proximity, provides the occasion for considering how they function individually and together. In this instance, the pictures do not so much help us to apprehend the complex "moral" or the action of the tale, concerning "the achievements of specially graced and gifted individuals," that is, "by ordained individuals, inspired and guided by an Emissary to ends beyond their individual education and enlargement," as the author has described *The Hobbit*.<sup>11</sup> However, the pictures do provide a visual landscape of the place and time





with sky, roads, mountains, caves, streams, and the architecture of the fantasy land in which the story takes place. Similarly, the hobbit figures provided by Tolkien enhance his verbal descriptions and assist the reader to enter into the magical world of *The Hobbit* and more deeply experience the feelings and actions portrayed. While the pictures alone would be unable to carry the full narrative richness contained in the literary text, it would be impossible to experience the special nuances of height, angle, and depth of the mountains, and the roundness of the Hill, or to grasp the vastness of the land and the mysterious qualities of the forest without the pictures. In these respects, word and image can be seen to fulfill their complementary non-reductive functions. *The Hobbit* experience would not be complete without both.

The relationship of Tolkien's literary text to his pictures cannot be fully appreciated apart from a larger, "philosophical" issue concerning language. Tolkien's childhood fascination with inventing languages eventually led him to the study of languages. For Tolkien, a language is a wholly invented enterprise constructed by a mind or set of minds and has no "natural" existence apart from its invention and use by a human mind or a community of such minds. Pictures are also invented "languages" according to Tolkien. In this instance, the pictures invented to amplify *The Hobbit* form a coherent set of visual images, or a visual "language" and provide viewers with clues necessary to a fuller understanding of this invented reality.

Just as it is possible for the human mind to construct verbal and visual languages, it is equally feasible to invent fantasy or secondary worlds with their own systems of logic and/or alternative structures. The world of *The Hobbit* is such a construction with its own delineation of names corresponding to players and places that reside solely within Tolkien's invented secondary world. The creation of such worlds is the essence of mythopoeia, that is, the making of myths. Within this imaginary landscape, Tolkien supplies the definition of a hobbit, as "one of an imaginary people, [in the tales of J.R.R. Tolkien] a small variety of the human race, that give themselves this name (meaning "hole-dweller") but were called by others "halflings," since they were half the height of normal men."<sup>12</sup> Thus the term "hobbit" has meaning only in Tolkien's invented world, and similarly, the names "Bilbo" and "Gandalf," though drawn from Tolkien's primary world, refer or otherwise have meaning here primarily with respect to characters that reside in the context of a fictive hobbit world. In this secondary world, visual and verbal inventions join together to create an intensely rich fantasy land intended first for the pleasure of the artist and his viewer-readers. If they are so inclined, his viewer-readers can also search out edifying connections, some intended by the author and others invented by themselves, linking Tolkien's fantasy world with their own worlds. Such questions of imaginary worlds, constructed from our visual and verbal languages, have fascinated contemporary philosophers such as Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, and Saul Kripke, whose theories attempt to explain how the invented worlds of the mind relate to the "real" worlds that we inhabit. Perhaps such thinkers would benefit from a study of Tolkien. For him, fantasy provides an opportunity to explore in greater depth historical and newly invented myths for their aesthetic pleasure, intellectual growth, and moral insight. At the very least, the philosophers might find the exploration of Tolkien's images and texts an intriguing adventure, and possibly a complement to their own quest for beauty, truth, and wisdom.



## Footnotes

1. George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. published revised editions 1951, 1966, and 1978. Houghton Mifflin Co. published the first American edition in 1938 with subsequent editions. A paperback edition was issued by Ballantine in 1965. Unwin Hyman and Houghton Mifflin issued fiftieth anniversary editions in 1987.
2. Humphrey Carpenter, editor, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, no. 13, p. 17.
3. Tolkien created the illustrations for *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *The Father Christmas Letters*, *Mr. Bliss*, and others.
4. *Drawings by Tolkien*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, December 14-February 27, 1976-1977 and at The National Book League, London, March 2-April 7, 1977. The catalogue includes a brief introduction by Baillie Tolkien and biographical note by Humphrey Carpenter. The exhibition contained 35 drawings and watercolors from *The Hobbit*, and 32 from *The Lord of the Rings*, with individual descriptive catalogue entries.
5. "Drawings for *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien" (an exhibition to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its publication), Bodleian Library, Oxford Library, February 24 - May 23, 1987. Organized by Dr. Judith Priestman, this exhibition includes MS. Tolkien drawings 1, 2, 5, (7-10), (12-15), (17-21), (23-33) and a selection of editions of *The Hobbit* and earlier published works of Tolkien.
6. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, pp. 17-20, 35.
7. Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, pp. 162-164.
8. *Drawings By Tolkien*, introduction.
9. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 306, pp. 391-393. A pencil drawing showing a rugged mountain landscape with a sign post in the foreground pointing "To the Wilds," currently in the Wade collection at Wheaton College (Illinois), may derive from this adventure.
10. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 297, p. 380.
11. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 281, p. 365.
12. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 316, p. 405.