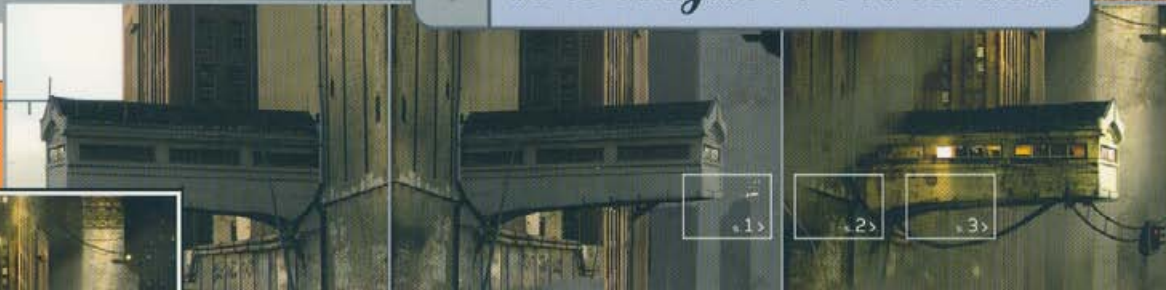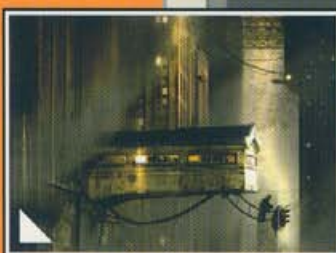# ILLUSTRATIONS WITH PHOTOSHOP

A Designer's Notebook

<1> <2> <3>

Demonstrated by leading French artists

BENGAL

NICOLAS BOUVIER

BENJAMIN CARRÉ

JUDITH DARMONT

NICOLAS FRUCTUS

HIPPOLYTE

JOËL LEGARS

ANTOINE QUARESMA

MARGUERITE SAUVAGE

Translated by

WILLIAM RODARMOR

O'REILLY®

The High Terrace
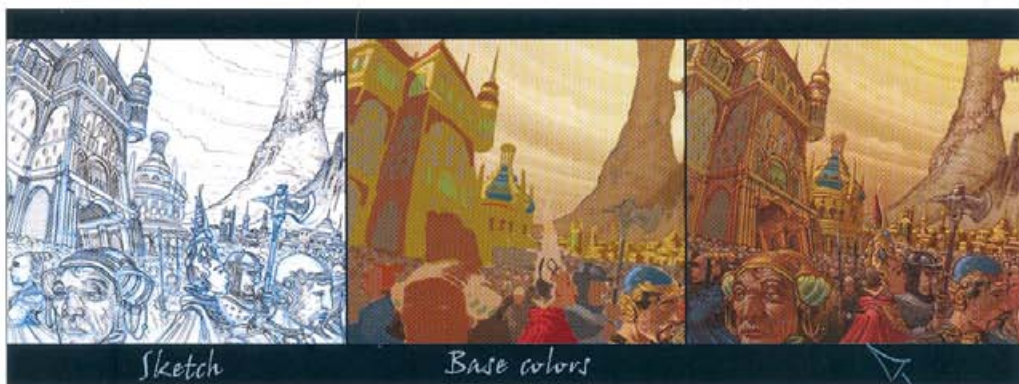
NICOLAS **FRUCTUS**

NICOLAS **FRUCTUS**

The High Terrace

Hardware used
- Power Mac G3 350 MHz
- 512 MB RAM
- 40 GB hard disk
- Agfa Argus 1200 scanner

Software used
- Photoshop 4

Sketch   Base colors

Final image

My task was to create illustrations for nine chapters of a special issue of *Casus Belli* magazine devoted to a mythical city called Laelith. Each illustration was supposed to show the atmosphere of the neighborhood being described.

The image presented here is of The High Terrace, a rich and colorful environment where Laelith's leading citizens are found. The rocky spires are magicians' towers—the highest points of the city—where occult experiments take place. The idea was to present the neighborhood as if seen by a wandering tourist, but at the same time suggest the ethereal but omnipresent power of magic in the city. This is why I chose the point of view of a person in a crowd, but with a very wide-angle view.

The idea was to (suggest the ethereal but omnipresent *magic in the city.*

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Stage 1

Sketch and digitization

In traditional art, you almost always start by making a sketch on paper. Photoshop's graphic palette nearly replicates the same feeling. But the fact remains that shaping a drawing on paper is still faster and more intuitive.

The blue creates interesting (**halftones that aren't**
available with the drawing pencil.

When creating a series of illustrations it's a good idea to do all the sketches at the same time, then lay them on the floor and look at them as a group, scrutinizing the unity of the work. A computer's screen is too small; just imagine opening nine images onscreen at once.

There is nothing special about the digitizing stage. The image's basic format is 6 x 9 in. (15 x 23 cm.) at 600 dpi, and the final printed image will match the original. I usually work with formats larger than the printed size in order to gain detail and sharpness, as you would in photography. But in this case, increasing the resolution produces a more visible grain in the drawing. Of course, if you want more grain, it might be worth scanning at 1200 dpi to create texture effects similar to a drawing pencil's when seen extremely close up. ■

Even when the basic drawing is done on paper, computer techniques can produce some interesting effects. I do my initial sketch in blue pencil to lay out the shapes, and do a final rendering with drawing pencil. When the drawing is scanned, the blue creates interesting halftones that aren't available with the drawing pencil. In Stage 2 we'll see how interesting those colors can be.
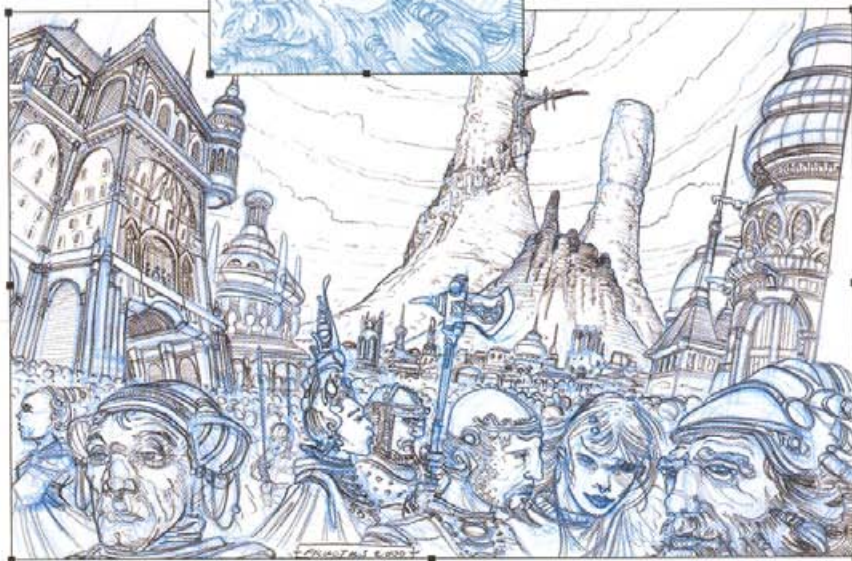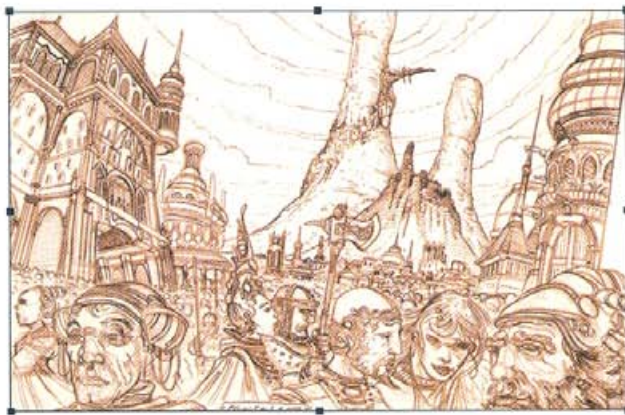
Stage 2

Preparing the layers

Adding color successfully depends on the colors not competing with the lines in the drawing, which they might otherwise weaken. At the same time, you don't want the sketch to overpower the colors. It's a matter of finding the right balance.

Once the drawing is imported into Photoshop, the image must be converted to sepia tones before the color work starts. For that, go to Image→Adjustments→Hue/Saturation, check the Colorize box, and use the sliders to colorize the lines into brown, reddish ochre, or yellow.

This simple method gives a pleasant silkiness to the line, an effect reinforced by the conversion of the original line, which is a mix of blue and drawing pencil. In sepia, the blue yields halftones that are more delicate than if the entire drawing had been done with a drawing pencil. The resulting image is easier to view but retains its basic structure.

The choice of sepia is dictated by technical rather than aesthetic considerations. Brown tones are the result of a mixing of all the colors, so when the picture is colored, the paint colors will blend more easily with the lines. If I had rendered the original line in blue or green, the edges between line and color would be more distinct and less subtle. Using sepia isn't an absolute rule, of course, but it does give the drawing some softness while preserving its descriptive power.

I then create two new layers. From the Layers palette, I set the background layer (the sepia drawing) in Multiply mode, and insert it between these two virgin layers. My whole approach is to put colors on what I call the *under layer*, beneath the sepia line drawing layer, and adding detail and finish to the layer above it, in the *over layer*. ■

Stage 3

The under layers

To avoid getting lost in the details—especially in a picture with so many characters and such elaborate scenery—it helps to choose a dominant color that you can relate all the secondary effects to without losing basic contrast. In this case, the starting point was a fairly dark ochre, which would stand out strongly against the light yellow sky.

Two essential elements had to be brought out: the crowd, which fills the entire bottom of the page; and the open area between the buildings, which leads the eye toward the rocky spires in the distance. The result is a tension between the heavy densities at ground level and the airy feeling of objects above the horizon. I wanted the reader's eye to travel to the characters' faces in the foreground, then look into the distance toward the sky in the center of the image, then come back to the crowd, and so on, impelling the viewer to unconsciously go back and forth. The buildings on the sides of the picture tend to visually limit this movement while giving the picture a narrative element.
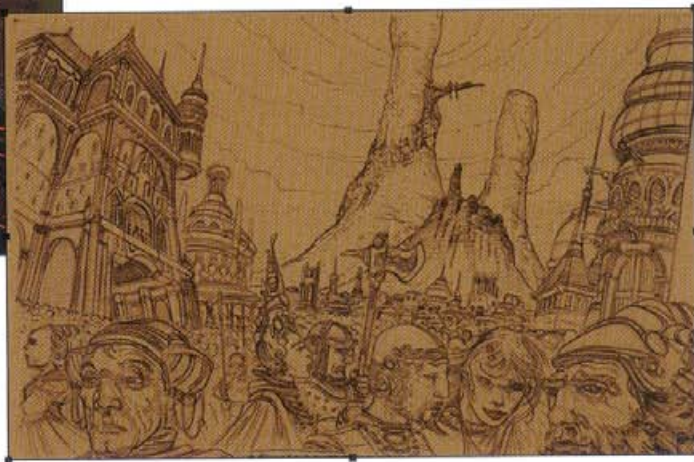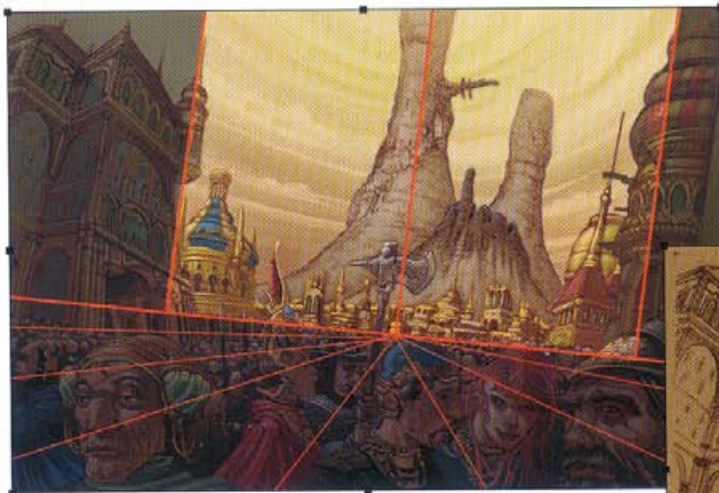
Let's come back to the masses of color. After applying the darkest tone on the entire surface with the Paint Bucket tool, you can then immediately add an overall grain to the under layer by going to Filter→Noise→Add Noise. This tool produces a kind of visual vibration that gives the image more surface texture.
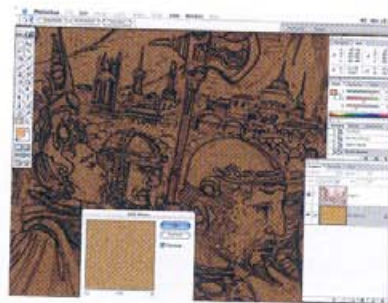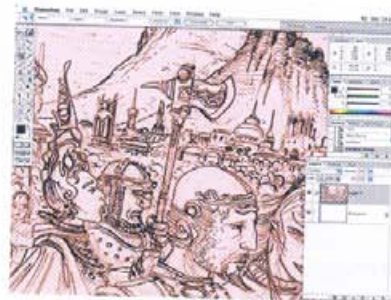
However, noise can conflict with the drawing, making it harder to view. To remedy this, I go to Filter→Blur→Gaussian Blur to soften the hardness of the noise (to about 1.0 pixels), which makes the drawing immediately reappear. Even though the noise isn't very visible at the end of this process, it gives you some grain to play with as you build the illustration.
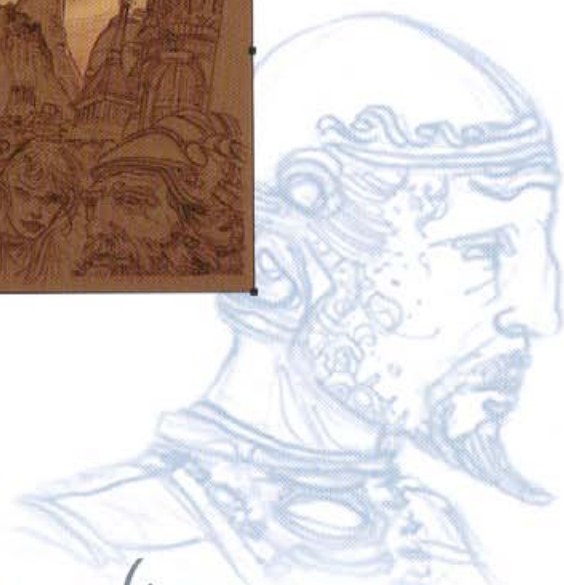
Stage 3
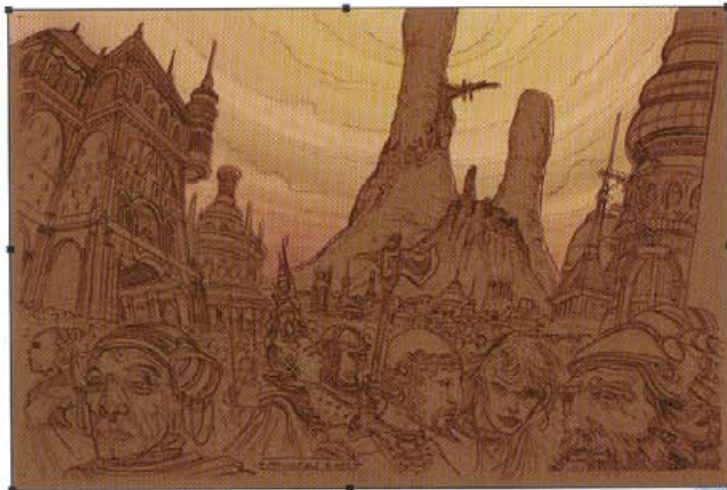
The next phase consists of placing contrasts in the sky. As with any illustration, you generate a mass of colors by going from the biggest to the smallest objects. Here, that means the sky, then the buildings, the characters' clothes, and finally, the characters themselves.

Material under the sepia layer can be set on several layers and adjusted separately. As you get closer to the final look of the image, you'll refine this or that detail. The important thing is to always work underneath the drawing.

The dynamic of an (image **is the hardest thing**
to generate on a computer.

working on an enormous surface, so your movements must be broad and dynamic. In a painting, when you look at a canvas from close up you see a random mosaic of dots, but from a distance, the eye synthesizes the masses and blends the colors. You can do exactly the same thing with a computer. You just need to use enough definition for the broad strokes. ■
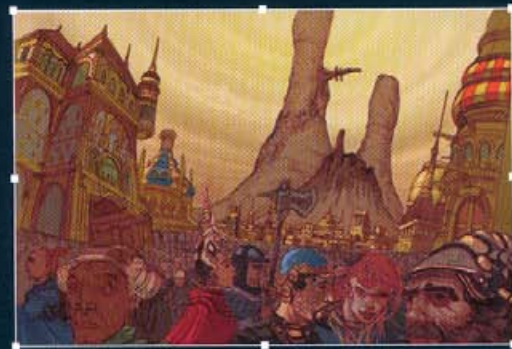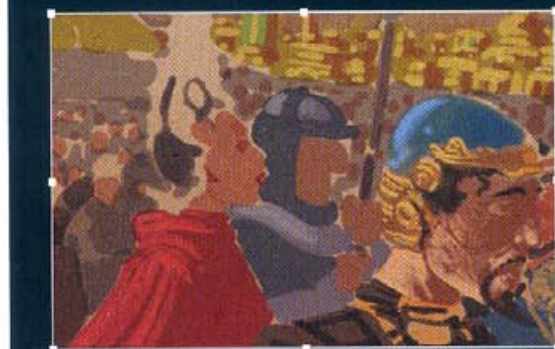
The masses of color are laid down with extremely simple brushes. The approach would have been much simpler in Photoshop 7 or CS, which make handling complex brushes much easier. In the under layers here, the image is filled in with broad brushstrokes of distinct and contrasting masses of color.

You place the color the same way you would with a large-format oil painting. You're
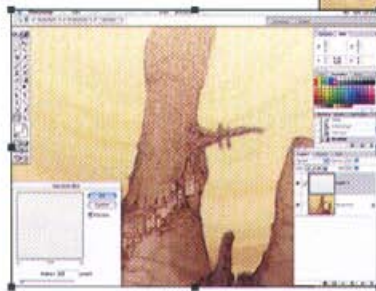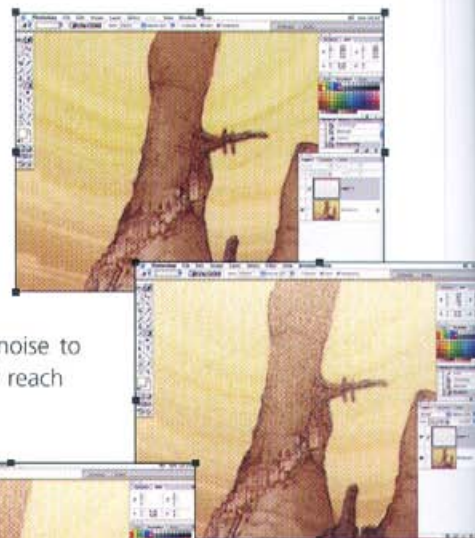
Stage 4

The over layer

The over layer is the place where you can adjust, correct, and refine the lines. When it is super-imposed on the under layers, the density of the lines can be pasty and hard to read. The image needs airiness and detailing. This is also the time to lay down the lightest colors, letting the highlights spill over some of the lines of the drawing. This will help smooth out the shapes.

Line

Over layer

Under layer + line

Over layer + line + under layer
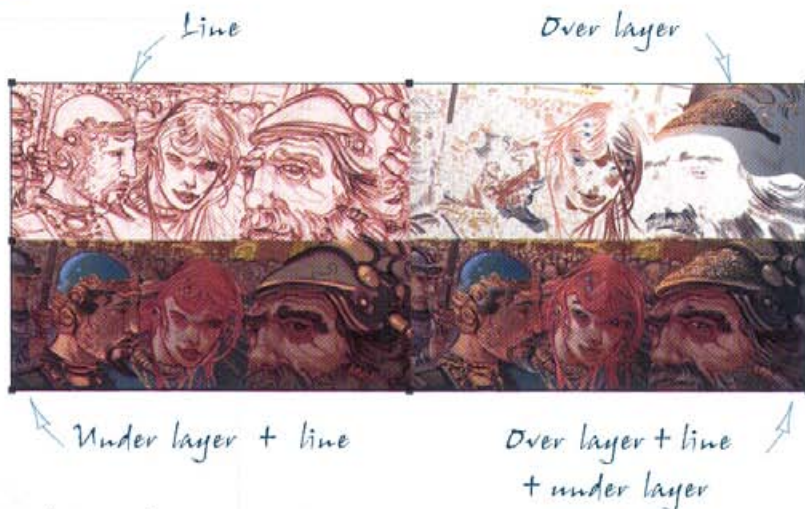
When the drawing is complete and has been colored, you will often find you are no longer satisfied with the original lines. Some lines may seem too heavy or needlessly repeat colored shapes. You'll need to soften or eliminate the lines that are overloaded with information. For example, the blade on the axe carried by the guard in the middle ground (left image) had too many confusing arabesques. It's better to "quiet" the drawing (right image) by suppressing some details.
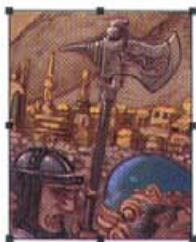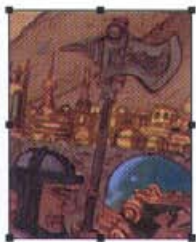
At this stage, most of the effects are manual, and come from pen strokes on the pad. It's impossible to describe them further, since they depend on each person's approach. Photoshop's effects, however, are an aspect of workmanship, of how you approach the image. Consider how the rocky spires climb and disappear into the sky. The way you make them fade is similar to the way we created noise for the under layers, except that you must use a light noise to fade the spires as they reach for the sky.
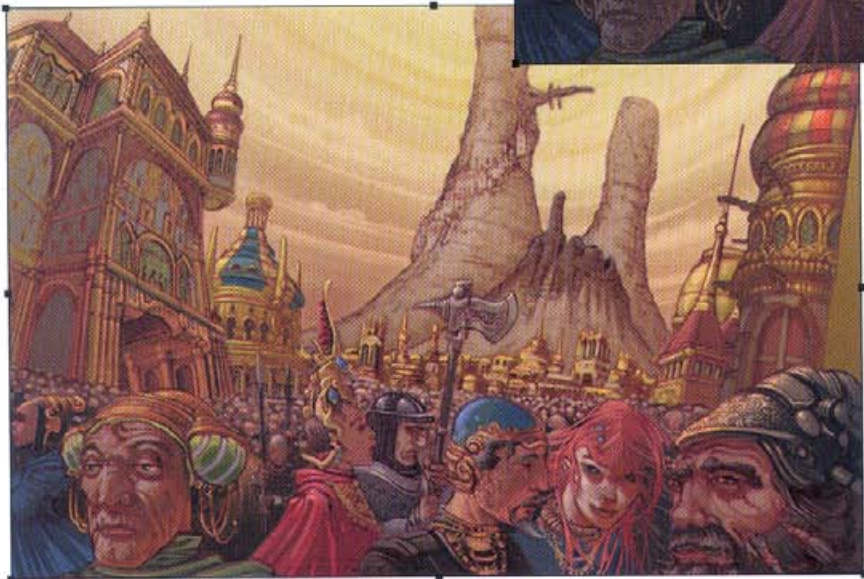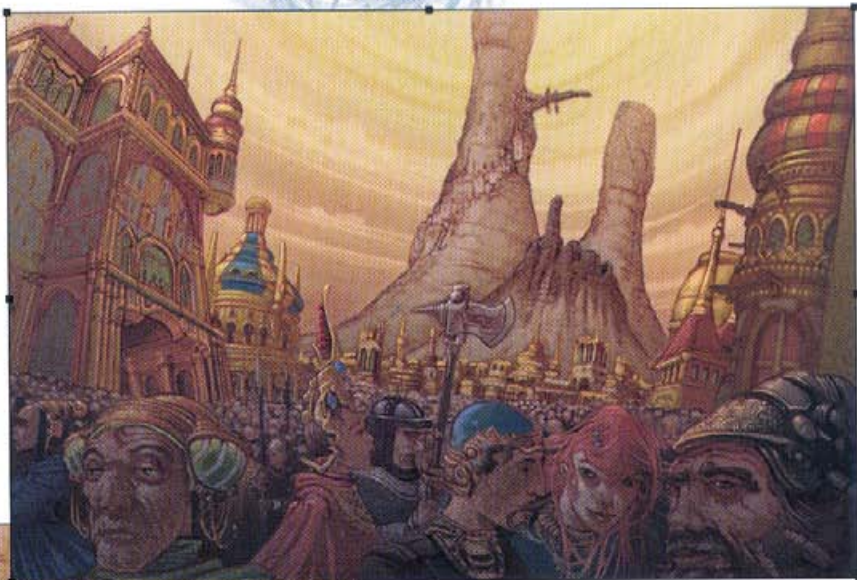
Stage 4

For that, I add a Normal layer and then use the Gradient tool's Radial Gradient style, placing the center of the gradient at the top of the rocky spire. (On the Layers tab, you must set the Gradient tool in Dissolve mode). Once applied, the gradient consists of a cloud of dots that create a noise, which I soften with a Gaussian Blur. You may want to play with the layer's transparency to reduce the effect still further. This yields a more successful result then merging with a simple gradient, which would flatten the surface texture and make the image less warm.

Done in the final stages, these gradients help sharpen the image enormously. They can be applied in various ways—for example, with a dark color starting from the four corners of the image. Darkening the edges of the picture restricts the visual field to the center. For this picture, another option would have been to stress the rocky spire instead of the characters, who would then blend into the scenery, as if they were in the shadow of the buildings.

One thing that is exciting about using computers: even at this stage, you can change an illustration's direction and the ideas it expresses. Of course, you can also do this with traditional art as well, but it's much riskier, after so many hours of work. We rarely set out on a project or a journey with the idea that we'll make our final decision at the end. In the same way, decisions made in these final stages rarely change the thrust of the image in any profound way. ∎