[Guillermo del Toro: Crafting Pinocchio]

“No art form has influenced my life and my work more than animation, and no single character in history has had as deep of a personal connection to me as Pinocchio,” Guillermo del Toro has stated. For the film director, animation is not a genre reserved exclusively for the entertainment of children; it is a medium fully capable of engaging people of all ages. This belief has inspired his first work in stop-motion, a technique in which objects are positioned and photographed, then manipulated slightly and photographed again, over and over, to produce the appearance of movement.

The Adventure of Pinocchio (1883), a folktale by the Italian writer Carlo Collodi, has been published in countless editions (242 in Italian alone), translated into more than 135 languages, and illustrated repeatedly for generations of readers and moviegoers. Setting his adaptation in Fascist-era Italy, del Toro connects this classic story about a wooden boy in the adult world with themes central to all his work: youth and maturity, authority and disobedience, aloneness and spirituality.

Organized while the film was being made in Portland, Oregon, Guadalajara, Mexico, and Altrincham, England, this exhibition focuses on the crafts employed in the process of bringing del Toro’s vision to the screen. Materials from the “look development” phase reveal the diverse approaches and mediums used in fabricating the handmade physical world fo the film, the historical research grounding it in reality, and the different forms the puppet characters took before they appeared before the camera. Large-scale working sets from the film’s production offer a behind-the-scenes experience. Supporting documentation - time-lapse, motion study, and animation software videos – demonstrates the coordinated efforts that empower the art of stop-motion to be as expressive and resonant as live performance.

Look Development

Look development is a creative process that occurs before shooting begins on a film. Artists and craftspeople send many months experimenting with the different mediums and methods required to visualize what is described in the script, storyboard, and concept art. Bringing Guillermo del Toro's unique adaptation of the Pinocchio tale to life on screen involved a significant amount of research and testing.

On view here are examples of the film's look-development teams' explorations of the natural elements that compose Pinocchio's world, including wood, stone, metal, foliage, and light; the historical period in which the story is set; and the different ways the human and supernatural characters would appear and move. Often crafted using unconventional or recycled materials, these crucial exercises aided the crew in developing a cohesive design. As the film went into production, materials like these were kept on display in the studio to help the project's many collaborators – designers, puppet makers, and animators – maintain a consistent vision.

Pinocchio encounters the Dogfish, a sea-dwelling beast, on his quest to discover what it means to be alive. With the goal of grounding the design of the fantastical Dogfish in nature, some of the first look-development experiments for this character invovled everyday foods. Silicone and resin castings of tomatoes, kale, and other vegetables – which showed their texture, color, and veining – provided inspiration for the Dogfish's skin, texture, and scarring. Lead look-development aritst Caitlin Pashalek recalls "stealing from nature as opposed to 'making a sculpted thing'... I tried to find materials and processes that could be slightly uncontrolled, that had interest and a life of their own."

Wood is the most prominent material in Pinocchio, and all the wooden elements – from Geppetto's carpentry workshop to the town church to Pinocchio himself – needed to work together from a visual and narrative perspective. Therefore, the exploration of the tone, texture, and overall feel of wood was a key aspect of look development. As art director Rob DeSue recalls, "We worked with noncompetitive colors and values and also used diminished details for grain and relief. That way, in an environment composed of earth tones, stone, and wood, Pinocchio was always the most special object in the frame."

Archival photographs were an important source for the considerable historical research that went into creating the look of Benito Mussolini's Italy, the period in which the film is set. "Even the most stylized building in the movie, the Fascist recruitment and training center, which has a huge M (for Mussolini) at the entrance, was based on a photograph of a real place," del Toro explained. "We did not want to make this whimsical. The buildings in the moive have charm, but they are not whimsical. They are not stylized, curvy, stretched, leaning – none of that."

“I really wanted this movie to land in a way that had expressiveness and the material, tactful nature of a handmade piece of animation, and artisanal, beautiful exercise in carving, painting, and sculpting,” del Toro explained. “But also the sophistication of movement that research on rigs and puppetry have taken us to.” In this motion test, animators and puppet makers explored the intricacies of Death’s wings with a set crafted from paper before arriving at the final design. Cinematographer Frank Passingham worked with lead camera assistant Gavin Brown to create bespoke lighting that evokes the magical world Death inhabits.

Reflecting the notion that there is no life without death – one of the most significant themes of del Toro's *Pinocchio* – the two are embodied as inseparable sisters, named Wood Sprite and Death, who guide Pinocchio to the afterlife, called Limbo. The doors to Limbo were crafted in gray to allow precise on-set lighting in carefully selected shades of blue. "The Dogfish, Death, the Sprite, the Cricket, and the rabbits all have the same sort of unwordly blue-violet skin, because they are all related," del Toro explained. "The rabbits are an extension of death, which is the sister of life. And they wear identical masks."

Puppets

A puppet begins with a design. After its shape, features, and scale are explored, a maquette (a preliminary model) is crafted, which allows a film's creative team to see the design in three dimensions and at full scale, and to make adjustments accordingly. From there, the technical elements are developed. For example, armature specialists engineer the mechanical insides of the puppet – a complex system of miniature gears, wires, and paddles – enabling an animator to move it. Finally, the armature is padded with foam, finished with silicone, painted, and costumed. "We wanted the sets and the characters to feel beautiful, sculpted, and old-world," Guillermo del Toro explained. "This is a movie that emphasizes the fact that it's handmade."

After the design of a puppet is finalized, the figures is sculpted from clay, piece by piece. Next, each piece is cast in resin in order to create a mold. This mold shows that the texture of Death's tail is similar to that of the acorn from which Pinocchio is born – reminding us that life and death are never far apart in this story. From this mold, a silicone casting was made and then fitted with an interior armature that allowed the puppet to be animated.

On the Set

Between January 2020 and August 2022, a day of production on the film involved as many as thrity-eight animation units (which at various points in a scene can consist of the director, an animator and animation supervisor, animation riggers, assistant directors, electricians, grips, set dressers, and puppet doctors) shooting different scenes on as many as fifty-five sets. With stop-motion, the animator slightly moves a puppet or an object, shoots a still image, then repeats those steps until enough still images have been recorded to convey movement when viewed sequentially. The colorful scheduling board to your left documents this complex and time-consuming process.

In this area, five working sets – Geppetto's workshop, the carnival stage, the ocean cliffside, the doctor's house, and a war-games campground – demonstrate the nuances of puppet staging, lighting, and camera movement. The attention to detail that characterizes stop-motion filmmaking is especially evident in Volpe's wagon and a corner of the church. Animation screens and time-lapse video recorded during production enhance the impression of being on set.

Production on Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* did not slow down during the pandemic. Crew members transformed their homes into workshops and continued look development and prop- and set-making on their own, communicating through virtual check-ins and digital schedules. Once the entire crew assembled in person, physical scheduling boards were created using a system that tracks each shot for every animation unit. Individual units are represented horizontally, weeks are pictured vertically, and rubber bands track animator's progress. This board, which is one of dozens, was more than just a schedule; it created a physical space where crew members could gather to communicate, make decisions, and look ahead.

How do dozens of animation units stay on the same page, tracking the inner life of their main character? Although del Toro's *Pinocchio*, unlike most previous versions of the character, does not transform physically, he does go on a formative emotional journey. The story's central themes of disobedience and belonging emerge as Pinocchio learns which rules are created with compassion and which rules need to be broken. His story and personal turning points were carefully plotted on this board, which animators and craftspeople referred to over the multiple years of design and production.

“We wanted to make it really reflect his history,” director Mark Gustafson said of Geppetto’s home. “He lived in this house his whole life, so you see all of his work that he’s done over the years. He’s a craftsman in the same way that the people who built this stuff are craftmen.” Here, a drunken and sleeping Geppetto has just finished carving Pinocchio, and the life-giving Wood Sprite will soon arrive to bring the boy to life. Wood Sprite, who is too large to fit in Geppetto’s workshop and was therefore animated separatedly and then digitally composited in the film, is represented here with a blue light.

At the center of Geppetto’s village is a church that was built over centuries by residents using different materials and woodworking techniques, and which shows both modern and medieval influences. The wooden sculpture of Christ, which resembles Pinocchio, was carved by Geppetto himself. The stained-glass windows and frescoes visually refer to other parts of Pinocchio’s story as well as to del Toro’s other films, in particular their themes of war, innocence, and monsters. Multiple versions of this meticulously crafted set, a portion of which is on view here, were created to allow multiple animation units to film simultaneously.

Most of the time, light sources that appear on screen only give the appearance of lighting the scene; offscreen lights do most of the actual lighting. However, in this pivotal scene, set on a cliffside just outside the Fascist re-education camp, director of photography Frank Passingham was able to make the most of lighting effects created in real time in front of the camera and then combined digitally in production. Functioning as more than props, the bonfire and the torch were used to illuminate the characters. Careful attention was also paid to the scene's wash of moonlight. In their intensity, the fire and the sky underscore the drama of the impending liberation of Spazzatura and Pinocchio.

This is a small portion of one of the largest sets built for the film. In the story, the rise of fascism causes this village to go through many subtle physical changes. While nearly everything seen in the finished film is tangible and handcrafted, green screens were used to place artificial backgrounds and enabled multiple scales of puppets to appear in a single frame. Here, the green screen is used to digitally place a hand-painted image of the sky.

“Rigging” describes the different kinds of mounts used to hold puppets in place during the production of a stop-motion film. Take note of the various kinds of rigging featured throughout the exhibition. Of particular interest are the green armatures used to pose characters on set; there aren’t visible in the final image because separately filmed backgrounds are added in postproduction.

Del Toro has always been interested in Frankenstein. “Pinocchio and Frankenstein have similar strands,” he explained. “Both are about an innocent, a pure force, created and abandoned in the world, and learning to cope morally with the world. He’s not a normal character, so he’s viewed with suspicion, with wonderment. He’s imprisoned, tortured.” Here, Pinocchio lies lifeless on an exam table, bringing to mind Frankenstein’s creation. Like Frankenstein, Geppetto made his creation by hand, which resulted in some imperfections; Pinocchio’s knees are different heights, one hand is more finished and one is more tree-like, and a branch springs from his head.

“The animators are our actors,” reflected director Mark Gustafson. Animators filmed themselves performing the characters’ movements in live action videos (LAVs). They then referred to that footage while animating in order to better understand the characters’ motivations and movement. They strove to capture the human movements often missing from stop motion: active listening, hesitation, fumbling hands, or an aching joint. As del Toro explained, “To me, the most sacred and magical form of animation is stop motion, because it’s the bond between an animator and a puppet which goes back to the most basic traditional storytelling.”

Reflecting on the decision to set the story in Mussolini-era Italy, del Toro said, “I thought Pinocchio could be a great opportunity to talk about disobedience. Obedience isn’t a virtue; it’s a burden. Disobedience is the seed of reason – it’s a desirable way to gain your own soul.” To emphasize this point, del Toro traded the Land of Toys in Carlo Collodi’s original *Adventures of Pinocchio* – where children are lured with the promise of freedom from school but ultimately turned into donkeys as punishment for their bad behavior – for a children’s Fascist re-education camp. Director of photography Frank Passingham and his camera team employed technology known as motion control to be able to move the camera in sync with the characters during this complex training sequence.

Few scenes in Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio take place inside Volpe's wagon, which serves as his home, but the vehicle offers a world of backstory if you look closely. The space is full of props like reused tea bags, the taxidermied ancestors of Spazzatura, who also lives in the wagon, and luxurious textiles that speak to Volpe's former wealth. Around fifteen thousand props were made by hand for this film, each imbued with purpose and meaning.