

## Interview: Official 'Star Wars,' 'Indiana Jones,' 'X-Men' Poster Artist Ciara McAvoy

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on January 20, 2016 - 3:28pm

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CHICAGO – “Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens,” which is currently the third highest-grossing film of all time worldwide, has restored faith in the beloved franchise and ushered in a whole new generation of fans.

Now that it's been about a month since the film's highly anticipated and critically praised release, HollywoodChicago.com's Jeff Doles caught up with one of the creative forces in the industry – a unique movie poster artist – to glean a behind-the-scenes understanding of what it takes to make it as a Hollywood artist.

One of the top female illustrators in an industry dominated by men and a “free electron” who isn't attached to any particular studio, **Ciara McAvoy** is an award-winning Scottish artist and producer who primarily creates hand-drawn film posters using oil paint. Her work has been used by movie studios and production companies for films including “Star Wars,” “Indiana Jones,” “X-Men: First Class,” “Filth” and more.

She has won numerous awards in the film industry including five Communicator Awards in 2015 for “Filth,” “X-Men” and “Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith”. McAvoy's current work includes projects for “Enemy of Man” and “Victor Frankenstein”. Enjoy our interview below!



**BEFORE:** Ciara McAvoy's sketch of the Millennium Falcon for “Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens”.

*Image credit: Ciara McAvoy*



**AFTER:** Ciara McAvoy's Millennium Falcon as used in "Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens".

*Image credit: Ciara McAvoy*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You were inspired by your French grandfather, Montmartre, who was a pre-World War II portrait artist. In what ways did your grandfather, "Star Wars" and artists like the Brothers Hildebrandt motivate you to achieve your current success?

**Ciara McAvoy:** I never had the chance to get to know my grandfather. He passed away before I was born, but I inherited his great talent for portraiture and loved studying his painting style. The difference between the two of us is that he was more interested in depicting strong physical features associated with female beauty in pre-World War I portraiture. I focus more on revealing the emotional and physical state of my subjects (especially in males). I have a real soft spot for men with prominent bone structures.

Also, my grandfather's work didn't include fantastical or science-fictional elements; but then, I think if he lived long enough to see "Star Wars," he would have been entranced by its magical force like I was.

I have a nostalgic attachment to the Brothers Hildebrandt illustrations. They were creators of a great number of Tolkien paintings (back in the 1970s, long before John Howe and his middle-earth art caught my eye) and a great source of inspiration for me.

I'll let you in on a little secret: the blue/orange/yellow color combinations they used as a base for their paintings can be found today in some of the most successful theatrical one-sheets. A good choice for a color base is important. It can attract our attention and influence our perceptions. It gets your audience to see what you want them to see and feel what you want them to feel.

Here's another little insider trick the Brothers Hildebrandt (and many other artists) use or have used: the "good" is often painted on top of the blue area and "evil" in the red. Complementary color combinations surely make things stand out. But then, breaking the "rules" is much more fun and the results can be simply magnificent!

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is it like creating a poster for a movie that inspired you to become an artist?

**McAvoy:** I was a born to be an artist; it was in my genes. I just didn't know what I was going to do with this calling until I fell in love with what we French call the "seventh art" (A.K.A. cinema).

I could draw/paint anything on any background (paper, canvas, wood, glass, etc.), but I got bored quickly and had nothing rousing to fuel my art "addiction". I wasn't challenged until someone dared me to paint a portrait. Since portraiture is one of the most difficult genres to master, naturally that made me want to do it even more. Back then, I was also looking for good models with interesting bone structures and expressions, which is how I stumbled on painting actors.

I learned that many actors have highly sensitive personalities. When it comes to playing a role, they tend to express themselves with greater diversity and much more freely. These were just the type of subjects I needed and I've always connected well with them as a fellow artist. I haven't looked back since.



Ciara McAvoy's award-winning "Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith" poster.

*Image credit: Ciara McAvoy*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Does being one of the top female illustrators in an industry dominated by men have any challenges?

**McAvoy:** Sure, it can be challenging, but if you persevere and prove that your gender has no impact on the quality of your work or on your ability to make a deadline, you're no longer seen as a woman trying to infiltrate the inner sanctum of a traditional "boys' club," but just as a poster artist. It's all about reducing unconscious bias and changing industry thinking. Smart decision makers in this industry understand the importance of diversity and inclusion as a competitive edge.

As a woman artist, sometimes you have to make some difficult choices. I fully embraced my role as an artist. In order to make my dreams come true, I knew this couldn't be a part-time job. For me, working 16 to 18 hours a day would not make me a perfect wife or mother. So, I decided long ago that in order to give my paintings a "soul" of their own and share that beauty with the world, it would mean a more solitary life. Thinking about it all, I do get a feeling of "giving birth" with each creation, which in turn connects me to my gender.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Please explain the process of creating a poster for “Star Wars,” “X-Men” or “Indiana Jones”. For example, do you use the actors for models or work from photos?

**McAvoy:** Ideally, I like to use movie stills taken during the production stage. It gives me time to create a better image and it's definitely the best option for a hyperrealist artist like me. Usually the directors are keen to help and share headshots or scenes via Dropbox. But when the poster is for a future blockbuster, things get more difficult. Marketing people tend to keep their material secret and big studios have agencies working on their projects. In those cases, you have to wait for the trailer or use pictures released to the press.

When a project is “in-development” or in “pre-production” stages, you can chose to create an iconic image without any picture and try to sell your idea to one of the distributors as soon as possible and hope for the best.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How specific are the studios with their design requests regarding composition, clothing, characters featured, etc.? How do you come up with a design?

**McAvoy:** Sometimes a studio will already have an idea, so I develop the art from there. If a studio has worked with me before, the big bosses know I don't disappoint and they give me the green light to run with it. I propose several compositions, and once we agree on the general idea, I paint directly onto canvas.

A quick tip: If you're an artist trying to get your foot in the door, you may want to comply with movie poster requirements and place more emphasis on the lead actors/actresses (i.e. reducing the size of all other characters/supporting cast in the poster).

It's not unusual to have your poster used for official promotions even if it's not for the one-sheet (i.e. an anniversary poster, DVD, soundtrack or character images licensed to product manufacturers). It's more unusual to suddenly see a piece you put aside (thinking it didn't make the cut) being used without your consent. Artists need to be aware that this does happen.

My “Victor Frankenstein” character poster, for example, was illegally used as a book cover for the new release of Mary Shelley's novel on Amazon. That's not a fun thing to find out, but as an artist, you have to stay on top of things like that.



Ciara McAvoy's "Victor Frankenstein" poster.  
Image credit: Ciara McAvoy

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Do you ever visit a set of a film for inspiration?

**McAvoy:** Yes, I've been invited to the set during the filming of a few big movies. It's a great experience, but since you're not allowed to take pictures, the accuracy of a composition can be compromised. To really understand the problem here, most often you're relying sole on memory. An artist has to remember that a poster is going to be printed in a relatively large format, so if they allow you to sketch, get as many

details as you can.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Talk to us about the craftsmanship behind your work from the initial sketch to final painting. What brushes do you use? What type of paint? How long does a painting typically take?

**McAvoy:** I'm an artistic purist and work almost exclusively in oils. I've always subscribed to the school of thought that in order to create powerful, audience-capturing movie posters, it should be done by hand and in oil.

I also only work with extra fine oil since it allows for a certain degree of flexibility during the painting process. It takes longer to dry than other media, but I don't feel the necessity to add another medium to adapt the consistency and drying time of a painting unless I'm working toward a deadline. If I do have to work fast, I use turpentine; it speeds up the drying time as it dilutes the paint and evaporates off of it. I apply my fast-drying layers first and take pictures to remind me of the first draft elements.

I draw my initial composition directly on canvas to be sure it's well balanced. Then I jump immediately to the middle to start with the main character's expression – delicately applying layer after layer of paint – each one taking longer to dry than the previous one.

Because I rarely use brushes above size 4 when I work on portraits (for tiny details, a size 2/0 is a must!), it allows me to apply hundreds and hundreds of meticulously placed brush strokes – like a puzzle with an intricate construction of tiny lines.

Then I thicken colors, create 3D effects and continue layering until I'm satisfied. The trick is knowing when to stop with the fine detail. Too much can be overkill. The last thing you want is to ruin the integrity of the work.

As for how long it takes, let's just say I always deliver on time. Seriously, though, each piece is different and each project has different parameters. Sometimes I take 2 months for a painting and other times (especially if working under some lofty deadlines) I paint a poster in one week. (That's where turpentine comes in handy). Those last few days are critical because I tend to stay up for days fixing and adding. That's usually when my work consumes me the most and I lose track of the hours.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How do you know when a painting is done?

**McAvoy:** A painting is never really done. I always find something to change and improve like adding new layers of paint to create a richer color effect. Unless I'm on deadline and asked to give my "copy" to the examiner, I'm reluctant to let work go. I definitely shouldn't keep original artwork in my studios, because more often than not, I find areas to tweak and make better.



Ciara McAvoy's sketch of the Millennium Falcon for "Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens".

*Image credit: Ciara McAvoy*


**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have had the opportunity to paint multiple actors in different roles (such as Harrison Ford as Han Solo and Indiana Jones). In what ways do you approach depicting the same actor differently based on the role he/she is playing?


**McAvoy:** Truly great actors transform themselves into the characters they play, create back stories and really put themselves in another person's skin. They've already done all the hard work for me, so all I have to do is reproduce what I see.

Of course, it's not as simple as that. What it boils down to is this: If the actor makes me believe in the genuineness of a character, I can bring that character to life on canvas as well. I believe audiences get my work because of that.

For example, let's say I were to paint Harrison Ford in his reprised role as Rick Deckard in "Blade Runner 2". I'd pay particular attention to catch the intimate nature of his future cop character's humanity and complexity – not necessarily the effortless charm and arrogant humor of

his Indy and Solo characters.

 [Ciara McAvoy on Twitter](#). [16]

 [Ciara McAvoy on Facebook](#). [17]

**HollywoodChicago.com: Do you ever get an opportunity to see the actors and/or general public viewing your work? What is that experience like for you as an artist?**

**McAvoy:** Yes, I've had the opportunity to get reactions from actors and public viewers quite a few times. It's a humbling honor, to say the least. The first question I ask is: "How do you feel about it?" I think I'm always a bit nervous when it comes to getting an actor's approval of his own image, but then I've never had a bad critique yet. Inevitably, the paranoid artist in me asks: "Did he just say that out of politeness?"

**HollywoodChicago.com: Thank you for the interview. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

**McAvoy:** I have seen some extremely poor marketing campaigns in my lifetime. Sometimes it's as if studios have given up on their movies long before they even begin promoting them – knowingly making very little effort to roll the dice and change their strategy before it's too late. That certainly has dire effects (especially on box-office returns).

As for me, I only work on movie projects I believe in. I'm fully engaged and will not drop one project to ensure the success of another. I may be a free electron that isn't attached to any particular studio, but when I'm attracted by a particular project, I can be the ally that draws audiences into their magnetic field.

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*Interview by:* **Jeff Doles**, 238 Studios

*Published and edited by:* **Adam Fendelman**

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Ciara McAvoy.

*Image credit: Ciara McAvoy*

**Source URL (retrieved on Sep 19 2024 - 4:23pm):**

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