

# Master of the Macabre

## JOSEPH VARGO



The history of the arts, from ancient times until present day, all share a common purpose: to expand the mind, quicken the heart, and stir emotions. As history holds an influence over artistic expression, the resulting artwork likewise proves influential to future generations. One such influence on today's Goth scene can be found in the works of renowned artist and founder of Monolith Graphics, Joseph Vargo.

Vargo worked as a freelance illustrator for several years before establishing Monolith Graphics in 1991 as an outlet to self-publish and market his gothic fantasy artwork on t-shirts and posters. In the beginning, he mainly sold his artwork and wares at Renaissance Faires and local shops in the Cleveland area. In 1992, graphic designer Christine Filipak came on board, and the business has been growing steadily ever since. Christine's computer skills and elegant art nouveau style were a perfect compliment to Joseph's dark and primal creations and Old World painting techniques.

In the past decade, Monolith Graphics has sold and distributed hundreds of thousands of prints and other pieces of merchandise featuring Vargo's original artwork to fans worldwide. Vargo's Gothic Tarot is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed modern tarot decks in occult circles. Over the years Monolith has published the works of numerous other gothic artists, writers and musicians, and helped to promote and establish them in their respective fields.

Following is an exclusive interview with Joseph Vargo.

### **Was it difficult to break into the art market with your unique style?**

"Yes. It's a very competitive field and there are so many talented artists trying to break into it. I feel very fortunate to be able to make a living doing what I love. When I was trying to get started, I sent portfolios of my work to all the major book, magazine and comic book publishers and got rejected by every one of them. This was actually a blessing in disguise because it was the impetus for starting my own business. I simply wanted to get my art out there, and who better to do it than myself?

"Now I'm very glad that I didn't get

hired by any of those companies because I don't have to compromise any of my art. I hate to think of having an art director looking over my shoulder and telling me what to do. I also love to be able to create new projects of my own choosing, based solely on my own ideas."

### **What do you think is the appeal for people when it comes to dark themes, old architecture, and Goth in general?**

"I realize that the subject matter of my art may not appeal to everyone, but there are a large number of people that find beauty in darkness.

Overall, the whole Gothic era represents a very dark and mysterious period of civilization. Gothic architecture is one of the most ornate and artistic styles of design, and even though it originated in medieval cathedrals, it has a very sinister connotation.

"Gargoyles were originally designed as wards against evil spirits, but this idea faded and was forgotten through the years while these foreboding monstrosities of stone endured the centuries. Castles represent mysterious places to explore, filled with dark secrets and ghosts, and graveyards are literally

the domain of the dead, offering an eerily tranquil and serene escape from the world of the living.

"I feel that many of my creations are manifestations of primal emotions. Art can be appreciated on many levels, but if an artist can tap into his own subconscious and reflect it in his work, then his audience can identify with it on a subliminal level and it can stir deep-rooted emotions. I think that everyone should have an emotional outlet to express themselves creatively, whether it be through art, music or writing.

**Dark imagery and power associated with certain archetypes cause fear in some, while others identify with them. Why do you think some fear this part of our culture and history?**

"Folklore concerning supernatural subjects such as vampires, werewolves and witches were originally designed to scare people, teach moral lessons, and to explain things that could not be explained by the science or medicine of the day. As H.P. Lovecraft stated: 'The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.'

"I think it's basically a matter of taste and the difference in people's threshold for fear. Fear causes varying levels of anxiety. Some people love to be scared while others dread and detest the same sensation. I think many Goths identify with certain dark archetypes, in particular the vampire persona, because it exudes sensuality, dark mystery and power."

**Do you ever feel constrained in doing art of a particular style? I know you are your own creative muse and operate without an editor's red pen hanging over you, but do you feel forced to avoid certain images, nudity due to your select market age wise?**

"My earlier work has no restrictions, but once my art started appearing on book and magazine covers I had to tone it down a bit. I see this as a challenge to create work that will convey the intended idea in a



more subtle or clever way. A painting can be perceived as being very sensual without showing any nudity, or just tantalizing glimpses of it. Likewise, an image can convey a sense of horror without graphic gore or blood. I still sneak some fun stuff into my paintings, but it's just not that obvious. Considering the abundance of nudity and violence in so many classic works of art that hang in museums, it seems strange to me that modern society deems such things to be taboo.

"We once had a problem with one of the covers of *Dark Realms Magazine*. The cover painting depicted a beautiful sorceress who was conjuring a bat-winged demon from a ritual cauldron. Hot Topic refused to carry it, not because of the art, but because the title of the article had the word "witches" in it. We had to change the title of the article, which

was about the history of witchcraft, to 'The Craft' in order to appease them. Later, we did a mock-up of a new cover using my portrait of The Devil from *The Gothic Tarot* and sent it off to Hot Topic's magazine buyer, who actually thought that it was pretty funny."

**Your early work is full of Demonic, almost Giger-like art that many never knew you'd created. How much was he a pioneer to your styles, and who else inspired you?**

"Frank Frazetta was my major influence. All of my earliest work was patterned after his style. Then came Simon Bisley, whose work was teeming with vibrant energy. Then in the early 90s, I fell under Giger's spell. He truly is an innovator and a tremendous artist. I began to really study his work, and this influenced me to return to watercolors and try my



hand at some dark, surreal imagery. I have about a dozen or so paintings from this period that were directly inspired by Giger's work."

**What can you tell us about your musical project, Nox Arcana? Can you tell us a bit about your work with William? The two of you have produced a phenomenal amount of work in such a short time.**

"I originally began my music career way back in the 80s when I was the singer for several different heavy metal bands. In the 90s, I worked with the band Midnight Syndicate to create a new sound, which I termed "Gothic Soundscapes." We split up over creative issues, and eventually I formed a new musical project to continue what I had started with them. The new band, Nox Arcana, consists of William Piotrowski and myself. We write and perform all of our own music to create dark and haunting concept albums.

"Over the past three years we've recorded seven cds, offering gothic soundscapes that invite the listener to explore various dark realms. Our first disc, *Darklore Manor*, took listeners on a tour of a haunted Victorian mansion with a sinister history. Our *Necronomicon* cd was a tribute to Lovecraft's forbidden tome of black

magic and the Cthulhu Mythos. The next album, *Winter's Knight*, told a musical tale of a dark angel that haunts the ruins of a fallen cathedral. The cd contained a few vocal tracks of Gregorian chanting and minstrel songs. My friend Michelle Belanger even lent her beautiful voice to one of the tracks. Our *Transylvania* cd came next, delivering a tale of gothic horror and romance inspired by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Our latest album, *Carnival of Lost Souls*, was released on 6-6-06. Set in a creepy old-time carnival that harbors living nightmares and sinister secrets, the album allows listeners to explore the shadows of the carnival after dark."

More info on the band can be found at: [NoxArcana.com](http://NoxArcana.com).

A chronicle of the entire history of work with Midnight Syndicate can be read at: [LegionOfTheNight.com](http://LegionOfTheNight.com)

**I'm sure our readers as well as your multitude of fans over the years are curious, what new projects are in the works for Nox Arcana and Monolith for this Fall?**

"We are currently wrapping up our seventh cd, *Blood of the Dragon*. It's a majestic sword and sorcery epic that centers around an ancient quest. This is our most powerful cd to date, but

there are still some surprises. The music ranges from *Conan* and *13th Warrior*-style anthems, complete with gothic chanting, to mystical minstrel pieces and haunting harp melodies. We've been looking forward to doing this album for quite some time and the compositions are just pouring out of us.

"We also just finished recording an album with our mutual friend, Michelle Belanger. She has a beautiful operatic voice. She performed as a guest vocalist on our *Winter's Knight* album and she's worked with various other bands as well. William and I came up with an idea to take a one-week break from working on *Blood of the Dragon* to write and record an album with Michelle. We invited her down to our studio and worked together for a solid week of 16-hour days to mold some rough, basic outlines into a full-length cd. It was a real challenge, but the results speak for themselves. Both Michelle's album, *Blood of Angels*, and the new Nox Arcana cd, *Blood of the Dragon*, will be released this fall.

"Later this year, we'll begin working on another darkly romantic concept album that will pay tribute to a true master of gothic horror. In the meantime, we are working on a companion book to *The Gothic Tarot*, as well as a new book titled *Beyond the Dark Tower*, which is the first sequel to *Tales from the Dark Tower*."

**After all these years, how does it feel to be considered one of the most well known dark artists worldwide?**

"It's a great feeling to realize your dreams, yet I still feel that there is so much more that I want to do. I love the fact that I was able to get to this point by doing things my own way, coming up with my own original ideas, and making them a reality. But I still have many more ideas for creative projects in music, art, literature, film, live entertainment and so many other things in the years to come."

**We're delighted to have you in our premiere issue, your work is incredible. It's been a pleasure!**

"Thank you, and best wishes for much success with *The Ninth Gate*."