

Age of Extinction

Scientific illustrator Julius Csotonyi's dramatic images of dinosaurs resonate in troubled times.

by Dorothy Woodend

June 13, 2020 6:00 PM



Julius Csotonyi, "Sinornithosaurus Ambushes Liaoningosaurus," 2014, digital painting, 10" x 12"

Large, lumbering, toothy and filled with a savage desire to rip and devour: This could describe some American Republicans these days, but it applies equally to the work of Julius Csotonyi.

Csotonyi's métier is dinosaurs of various periods – Cretaceous through Jurassic. As a scientific

104
Shares

His large murals and installations in such august places at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., the Houston Museum of Natural Science and the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, Alta., have probably drawn many a child, and even some adults, into dinosaur worship.

Csotonyi, who has a PhD in microbiology from the University of Manitoba and now lives in Vancouver, doesn't limit his work to the prehistoric world, however. He created a series of five shark stamps for Canada Post and recently led an online drawing tutorial on the spotted owl for the Sierra Club B.C.

But dinosaurs are drama queens, and so it is in Csotonyi's work as well. Whether they're tearing each other to pieces, swallowing entire prehistoric elephants, or engaging in full battle royale, there's something positively operatic about these prehistoric creatures. And like most larger-than-life heroes and heroines, their destiny is a grand and glorious demise.

Telling the stories of these creatures with both accuracy and excitement is critical for Csotonyi.

"One of the strengths of carefully composed paleoart is that it can inform us not only about the appearance of prehistoric species, but also tell stories about their behaviour or significant events that they experienced," he says.



Julius Csotonyi (photo by Alexandra Lefort)



Julius Csotonyi, "Borealopelta's Last Meal," 2020, digital painting, 10" x 12" (© Royal Tyrrell Museum)

Csotonyi points to the asteroid 66 million years ago that created the Chicxulub crater under the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, an event that caused the extinction of all dinosaurs, except for a few birds.

"That very brief but highly impactful event so many thousands of millennia ago has been told in many different ways through paleoart, including foreshadowing and aftermath, in addition to the event itself," he says.



Julius Csotonyi, "Carcharodontosaurus," 2005, coloured pencils on illustration board, 5" x 12"

Conjuring creatures for which no photographic images exist requires a certain imagination. As the fossil record continues to emerge, creative interpretations have to keep pace with discoveries. In light of the evolving nature of paleontology, has Csotonyi ever been tempted to revisit a work?

"Absolutely! Not only does the alteration of an existing piece to bring it up to date with new research demonstrate a paleoartist's attention to accuracy, and thereby give the artwork a new life, it also presents a very enjoyable opportunity to celebrate the advance of scientific knowledge for anyone who is as much of a stickler for detail as am I.

"Working closely with scientists, or using their freshly published results to inform my work as an artist, is one of the highlights of my job. It also provides a wonderful opportunity to hone one's humility!"



Julius Csotonyi, "Guanlong Courtship," 2014, digital painting, 12" x 10"

Destruction, terror and power are exciting stuff, and Csotonyi's images overflow with moments of near escape and savage death. With so much inherent drama, how much creative licence is allowed when depicting these creatures?

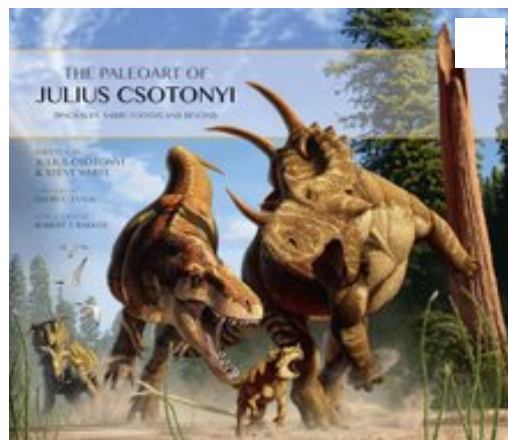
"Striking a successful balance between scientific rigour and creative speculation is a critically important skill to develop in order to both maintain the respect of scientific clients and also stimulate discussion among viewers, both of which make paleoart far more interesting and impactful," says Csotonyi.

"Sometimes, fossils are so exquisitely preserved that they leave us with relatively little guesswork as to how the organism looked when alive, sometimes down to the very tone, or even colour, of their integument. Even in these cases, only a tiny proportion of the life history of a species is likely preserved, so we absolutely need to do some guesswork about how it looked or behaved."

In a 2014 book about his work, *The Paleoart of Julius Csotonyi: Dinosaurs, Sabre-Tooths, and Beyond*, the artist let his imagination loose.

"The Guanlong Courtship" is a digital painting by Julius Csotonyi, depicting two Guanlong dinosaurs in a courtship ritual. The scene is set in a warm, golden-orange landscape at sunset or sunrise. One dinosaur stands on its hind legs, facing the other, with its mouth open as if calling or communicating. The second dinosaur is positioned slightly behind and to the left, also on its hind legs. The ground is a mix of dirt and water, with the dinosaurs' forms reflected in the shallow water. Tall, thin reeds or grasses are scattered throughout the scene, some in the foreground and some in the background. The sky is a deep orange with a bright sun low on the horizon, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The overall mood is dramatic and romantic.

"It also freed me to explore relatively novel camera angles, such as a vertical fisheye view of *Apatosaurus*, or a refreshingly looser paint-stroke style to convey the dynamic energy in a scene, such as with one of my favourite pieces that depicts a *Sinornithosaurus* ambushing the perplexingly small ankylosaurid, *Liaoningosaurus*, through a morning fog."



Julius Csotonyi, "Fisheye Apatosaurus," 2014, digital painting, 12" x 12"

Given that we're in the midst of another mass extinction event, how does Csotonyi's work influence his understanding the cycles of earth's history?

"This 'state of biological emergency' has become increasingly clear to me the more projects that I complete, as the evidence is written all over the background literature that I must review for my work," he says.

conservation in addition to my typical fare of prehistoric reconstructions."

Csotonyi says he feels impelled to do what he can to help turn the tide on the collective footprint humans are leaving on the earth's biosphere.

"I consider myself a stubborn optimist – even though I realize objectively that the outlook for a lot of life on earth is pretty grim, I also know keenly how powerful an impact on human motivation is a white-knuckled grip on hope. It can entirely change the outcome of things often relegated to the heap of the impossible."

Csotonyi's work makes me think about some future species, yet to evolve, looking back on the Anthropocene era and rendering human hubris at its manic, towering peak with giant bodies, tiny phones, rapacious appetites and an enormous sense of self-importance.

Apex predators have been wiped out before and, no doubt, they will succumb again at some point. It's easy to look at images of mighty dinosaurs, riven with ferocity, beauty and looming doom, and see ourselves. ■

PS: Worried you missed something? See [previous Galleries West stories here](#) or sign up for our [free biweekly newsletter](#)

Since you're here...

...we're asking readers like you to support quality writing about Western Canada's art and artists during these uncertain times. Galleries West tells timely stories with accessible yet informed writing by arts journalists and other arts professionals. Our magazine is open to all, regardless of what they can afford to pay. Every reader contribution, however big or small, is valuable. **Support Galleries West. It only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support Galleries West, Donate Now

Julius Csotonyi

16 June 2020 issue



Dorothy Woodend

Dorothy Woodend is the culture editor for the Tyee in Vancouver. She is a member of the Broadcast Film Critics Association, the Vancouver Film Critics Circle and senior festival advisor for the DOXA Documentary Film Festival.

June 13, 2020 6:00 PM