

ARTIST PROFILE

SUSAN JAEKEL



“THE CLIMATE FOR WOMEN ILLUSTRATORS WAS GREAT. I THINK ILLUSTRATION IS A FIELD WHERE GENDER DOESN'T MATTER—IT'S JUST ABOUT THE TALENT AND THE ABILITY TO GET THE WORK DONE FOR THE DEADLINE!”

SUSAN JAEKEL WAS born in Evanston, IL, to a pair of artist parents. "My dad was always bringing home manila paper for me to draw on," she said. "He taught me the alphabet at age four while drawing the objects that corresponded to letters. My mother had been an illustrator at David C. Cook in Elgin—that's where they met! My mom freelanced while my sister and I were little, till my dad got a job as an art director. However, they weren't thrilled that I had decided to make art my career. They felt teaching was a safer, more lucrative way to go, but I knew what I wanted. And I have been so lucky to be able to draw every day for a career."

Jaekel studied art at San Jose State University, and then was connected to Atari through her friend and fellow illustrator, Rick Guidice. Guidice was also working for Atari, NASA, and others. That friendship blossomed into much more, and the two formed a different sort of creative collaboration when they married in 1984.

"Artwork has always been a great selling tool," Jaekel said. "The '70s and '80s were a great time for illustration—art was everywhere, and it's different than now. But there will always be creative people making beautiful things. I worked in my own studio, freelancing, and worked in Los Gatos with a group of freelancers. I also worked in Sunnyvale. Los Gatos was a hotbed of artists—painters, sculptors, glass blowers. It was kind of secluded. In the '60s the freeway broke through, but it was isolated somewhat."

On working for Atari: "They gave us the assignments, but I never played any of the games beforehand. I came up with the initial concepts in pencil drawing and I'd bring it in for approval, then I'd paint the illustration. I used Dr. Martin's dyes on an illustration board."

"At the time I was also working for *Sunset* magazine, book publishers, and graphic designers. The Bay area was good because of the rise of technology. The children's market was my favorite. I guess I was in touch with my inner child. That was my way."

"I do a lot of research beforehand, looking at other illustrators for inspiration. My creative approach was to thumb through the New York Illustrators Annuals, my collection of children's books, or scrap file to get an idea—often sparked by an image that would get me thinking. Then I'd do several thumbnails and draw up a full-size pencil version that would be shown to the art director."

3D TIC-TAC-TOE □ A GAME OF CONCENTRATION □ ADVENTURE □ BASIC MATH □ CIRCUS ATARI
FUN WITH NUMBERS □ HANGMAN □ HUNT & SCORE

While some might try to pigeonhole Jaekel's style, she is slower to put a name to it. "I like the 'imaginative' label," she said, "but I think 'stylized' or 'fantasy' would be more accurate than 'cartoony.'" I shared my studio with a cartoonist for years. Maybe that did rub off! I did get more realistic as time went on, as did a lot of illustrators. The '70s were a great time for bright, loose styles, and then the trend went towards more realism."

"The climate for women illustrators was great. I think illustration is a field where gender doesn't matter—it's just about the talent and the ability to get the work done for the deadline! I was just thinking of the women illustrators that I knew. One did beautiful botanicals and flowers for *Sunset* books and magazines. Another did very polished airbrush illustrations for video game packaging. Another did a lot of advertising work—and I eventually found my career niche with textbook illustration, along with some advertising, cookbooks, and magazine illustrations."

At Atari, Jaekel reported to art director Steve Hendricks. "Steve gave me freedom to do what I wanted," she mentioned, "and that kind of faith brings out the most creative stuff in you. He was an enthusiast for whatever we wanted to do." Hendricks described the appeal of Jaekel's style: "She is a very creative person. Her work was more imaginative, less photographic, and more cartoony. It lent itself nicely to the games she worked on."

While she was aware of Atari's soaring popularity, the cutting-edge video game technology didn't exactly connect with Jaekel. "I knew Atari was really big, but the games were like a foreign entity to me, and I resisted technology for a long time until I was forced to use it. It's the opposite of the way I think." Still, she looks back on her time working with Atari fondly, "It's fun to recall those great days. They were like a feather in my cap."

Source: **Art of Atari** by Tim Lapetino