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Romantic Fantasy and Anime/Manga-Style Artist**Nene Thomas**by [Kat Avila](#)

Nene Thomas is a full-time romantic fantasy artist, as well as an authentic anime/manga-style artist, which is why I was browsing her booth at this year's **Anime Expo** in Anaheim, California. Talent runs deep in the Thomas family. Her oldest brother, Chance Thomas, may be better known as he is an Emmy- and Oscar-winning composer closely associated with the game soundtracks industry.

Oklahoma-born and raised, Nene (pron. "neh-neh") is a completely self-taught artist whose professional career began in 1993 when she was approached by **Wizards of the Coast** to do cards for **Magic: The Gathering**. She is the second oldest in a family of two brothers and three sisters. Sister Ann-Juliette inks her black and whites and helps with costume designs for some paintings; she is also Nene's webmaster. Another sister Jan-Annette is Nene's production manager. Nene's husband Steven Plagman designs and cuts fancy mats for her artwork and is in charge of her away team for conventions.

Sequential Tart: *Do you basically work with watercolors?*

Nene Thomas: I am primarily a watercolor artist, but in the past three months I have started to experiment with Adobe

Photoshop. I have found that by painting the elements of a painting traditionally, then scanning the image and doing touchups digitally, I can turn out a far stronger image than with watercolors alone.

ST: *What brushes and paints do you use?*

NT: For traditional painting, I use Winsor & Newton watercolors and red sable brushes. I paint on Crescent hot press illustration board, because the paper has a very smooth surface and holds detail better than watercolor paper does.

ST: *What is your production process?*

NT: When I have an idea for a new image, I start by drawing a thumbnail sketch of it. The thumbnail takes about five minutes to do, and it allows me to see the pose on paper. Once I have a good thumbnail, I do a larger sketch with a rough background. From here comes a considerable amount of refining, until the finished sketch is ready to be transferred to a board. I do this with an art-o-graph projector. I enlarge the work with the art-o-graph until it is the size that I want, then I trace it lightly by hand. I tighten the work on the board, correcting any anatomical flaws and such, then I ink the painting with waterproof brown ink. After that I erase the pencils, and paint on the board.

ST: *Do you use live models?*

NT: Not really. I've taken a few pictures, but I'm not a professional photographer. Invariably, the lighting is wrong, or the perspective is wrong, or something! I prefer to get reference material out of books and magazines as those photographers know what they are doing!

ST: *When you are painting one of your heroines, what do you pay the most attention to?*

NT: The face is the single most important feature of a painting. A good face can hide a multitude of sins, so I take

extra care in making sure that the facial structure is as close to perfect as I can get it. I immediately follow that with anatomy. If the anatomy is wrong, it has to be corrected before I'll even consider painting it.

ST: *Boris Vallejo has said he gives his dragons "basically human musculatures while Julie [Bell]'s are usually based on animals." How about you?*

NT: I base my dragons on the standard set by the masters at **TSR** like Larry Elmore, Jeff Easley, and Clyde Caldwell. A lot of artists that I know like to paint eastern dragons (Chinese dragons), but I prefer the winged western dragons. They just seem more powerful than their eastern cousins.

ST: *The half-masked fairy in "Orchestral: Symphony in Black & White" looks like the mascot of [your web site](#). Where did she come from? Are the butterflies in the background from real life or imaginary?*

NT: I have had several mascots on my web site over the past few years. Symphony is just the latest in a long string. I really like the dynamic of the black and white diamonds on her stockings and bodice. As for the butterflies, yes, they are real, but I can't remember their names off the top of my head.

ST: *I really enjoyed one of your newer lithographs "Blue Dream." You can feel the coolness of the breeze wafting through the fairy's blonde tresses and satin drapes as she rides along on a soap bubble. What is she thinking as she gazes toward the twilight horizon? Or should we just leave the interpretation to the viewer?*

NT: Interpretation is one of the most important aspects of art, especially print art. If you tell people what to think about a piece, it loses some of the mystery. Personally, I think that she is wondering if she left the gas on, or whether or not she left the front door unlocked before going to bed. But that wouldn't be especially deep, would it?

ST: *Was that "Wisdom" that I stood in front of and stared at in your **Anime Expo** booth? It was the painting with the statuesque goddess standing in front of a pointed arch with attached columns and a circular stained glass window. There is a red dragon resting contently behind her, its outstretched wings framing her.*

NT: That was indeed "Wisdom" that you saw, and it is still my most popular piece. It was a print run of 2500, and I have only a handful left. I'm truly sorry to see her go. I didn't really have an inspiration for it, but all of the elements that make up the piece just clicked. I've only had that happen a few times, but the results are always intense. It took me a full month of 16-hour days to paint it. (The prints are the same size as the original 24" x 34".)

ST: *Whose work is similar to yours in style?*

NT: I've been compared to Bev Doolittle, Thomas Canty, and Jody Lee ... all of whom are wonderful artists. Stylistically, I would say that my work is the most like Jody Lee.

ST: *When did you start doing anime watercolors and pen & inks? As a **Saint Seiya** fan artist?*

NT: Ah, the hallowed mists of antiquity! Long before I considered being a professional artist, I was involved in a fanzine devoted to the '80s series **Saint Seiya**. (Incidentally, **Saint Seiya** [by Masami Kurumada] has just been translated and is showing here on one of the cartoon networks!) **Saint Seiya** was a bishounen series that really appealed to me as a high school student. For those of you who aren't familiar with the term "bishounen," it is a Japanese term that refers to "pretty boys." I was absolutely smitten with some of the characters in this series, and most of my early work was *heavily* inspired by it. Sadly, like all schoolgirl crushes, it eventually ended. But **Saint Seiya** left its mark on my work.

ST: *Have you ever been to Japan? It's interesting that your nom de plume comes from the familial reference "o-neisan."*

NT: Wow! Not many people get that reference! The name "NeNe" is from the Japanese word for "elder sister." When I was 19 years old, my family hosted a Japanese exchange student named Chika Kato. It was because of Chika that my sisters and I fell in love with Japanese culture and the Japanese language. When Chika went back to Japan, she invited Ann-Juliette and I to visit for a summer ... an offer we gladly took her up on. That was an incredible experience, and I look forward to going back someday.

ST: *What is your favorite anime?*

NT: The greatest anime series of all time was undoubtedly **Zeta Gundam**. I'm absolutely obsessed with it — even today! — and so is Steven. I also really, really enjoyed **Gundam Seed**, **Trigun** [by Yasuhiro Nightow] and **Cowboy Bebop** [by Toshihiro Kawamoto]. Steven is a bigger fan than I am, and when he recommends a series to me I'll watch it. For sheer character design, my two favorites are **Chobits** by **CLAMP** and **The Five Star Stories** by Mamoru Nagano. If you haven't seen either series, you are really missing out. My current anime print series was heavily influenced by **Chobits**.

ST: *What is your favorite manga? If you read manga, how do you read it — in the native Japanese, fan scanlations, translated editions?*

NT: I get manga in two different ways: pure Japanese and translated. I can translate hiragana and katakana, but I can't actually read what is being said, so I buy the Japanese manga for the pretty pictures and the American translations for the story.

ST: *Do you like to cosplay?*

NT: I don't like to cosplay, but I do like to dress up on occasion. At **Gen Con**, I bring a kimono and my Ren Faire garb. I love to see a good costume though!

ST: *Your online store offers originals, prints, cards, bookmarks, stickers, daggers with scabbards that have your heroines on them, figurines, and more. All prints are signed and numbered limited editions, and are generally available from two to four years.*

NT: That is correct. My print runs are set from anywhere between 100 prints and 2,500. Once I sell out of a print run, I will not reprint. Reprinting ruins the resale value for my customers, and I won't do that. I do use the images on other products, like t-shirts, figurines, etc. But not on prints.

ST: *Who molds and paints the figurines?*

NT: I license out my work to a company called **Dragonsite**, and they take care of sculpts. If you have seen any of my sculptures, you know that they do excellent work!

ST: *Any plans for an artbook of your work?*

NT: Absolutely. As soon as I have enough images, that is!

ST: *Which conventions do you make it a point to go to every year?*

NT: I always attend the same shows each year: **Gen Con** in Indiana, and **Dragon*Con** in Atlanta. This year I attended **Anime Expo** for the first time in a long time, and I will be attending it from now on.

ST: *The first time I heard of **The Sims** was on your site. What is it?*

NT: **The Sims** is a game for control freaks and megalomaniacs. In it, you build a house to your own specifications, decorate it to your taste, and populate it with mindless drones that you can control at will. Then, you force the little drones to do your bidding or suffer the consequences. In other words, it's a lot like owning your own business! Seriously, it's an animated doll house. You can create families, make your own dramas, and tell your own

stories ... all in a house that you have created from the ground up. It's really fun ... and addictive.

ST: *You have six cats?!*

NT: I couldn't tell you why I'm such a cat person. Originally, Steven and I had decided to have only two cats: Snowmane and Shadowfax. But stray cats know an easy mark when they see one, and it wasn't long before we had four stray cats that decided to make our house their home. I'm happy to serve them, though. I live for the rare moment when one of the cats deigns to notice me ... normally around feeding time. Sometimes, when I've been particularly good, they may let me have a moment or two to myself to do unimportant things like paint or draw! But such moments are few and far between. Mainly, I content myself with carrying out their every whim. And no to the dogs. My maste ... er, that is, my wonderfully cuddly kittens wouldn't allow it.

ST: *What is your favorite food and drink?*

NT: Nabeyaki udon is my favorite food, and Barq's Root Beer is my favorite drink.

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