




The Art of

KUBO

AND THE TWO STRINGS

BY EMILY HAYNES

FOREWORD BY TRAVIS KNIGHT



If you must blink, do it now!
Pay careful attention to everything
you see and hear,
no matter how unusual it may seem.
And please be warned: If you fidget,
if you look away,
if you forget any part of what I tell you,
even for an instant,
then our hero will surely perish.
His name is Kubo.
His grandfather stole something from him.
And that really is the least of it.

—Prologue, *Kubo and The Two Strings*






The Art of

KUBO

AND THE TWO STRINGS

By Emily Haynes
Foreword by Travis Knight


CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO



Kubo and the Two Strings™ the Movie © 2016 TWO STRINGS, LLC, all character names and their distinctive likenesses: TM and © 2016 TWO STRINGS, LLC. Licensed by Universal Studios Licensing LLC. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-4521-5315-5 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4521-5701-6 (epub, mobi)

Design by Cat Grishaver.

Page I: Trevor Dalmer / digital
Pages 2–3: Nelson Lowry / digital
Pages 4–5: Ean McNamara / digital
Pages 68–69: Image of the gold barrel courtesy of *Samuraiantiqueworld*; image of the helmet, era 1350–1460 © Metropolitan Museum of Art, courtesy of Art Resource, NY; image of the *dōtaku* bronze bell courtesy of Rinsenzan Bairin-ji and the Kyoto National Museum; *Shuten-doji* © The Trustees of the British Museum

Chronicle Books LLC
680 Second Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
www.chroniclebooks.com



CONTENTS

Foreword by Travis Knight 6

Introduction 8

PART ONE: Home 13

PART TWO: The Quest 71

PART THREE: The Return 135

Acknowledgments 160

About the Authors 161

FOREWORD

— BY Travis Knight —



CHILDHOOD IS A CRUCIBLE. No one emerges from it unscathed.

I was a lonely kid. Growing up on a sylvan mountainside in rural Oregon, my early life was a pale Polaroid portrait of idyllic isolation. My childhood home was fifteen miles away from the nearest town, itself a country-fried place little more than a frontier watering hole. It might as well have been on the other side of the world. I suppose it followed that I didn't have a particularly active social life. I made friends slowly, when I made them at all. But I didn't mind. Not really.

I'd spend those golden days exploring the vast evergreen forests near my house. Scrambling up the sap-soaked branches of towering fir trees, stomping through shallow streams, and rock-hopping across desiccated creek beds, I would lose myself in the untamed wilderness right outside my front door. At home, nestled in my room, surrounded by teetering stacks of tattered paperbacks, splashy comic books, and warped, well-worn VHS tapes, I would lose myself in their stories. *Star Wars*. Tolkien. Greek and Norse mythology. *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Those stories showed me the world through eyes that weren't my own. They allowed me to wander through faraway lands, to experience someone else's story as if it were mine. And with every adventure I would come back somewhat changed. Those stories became a part of me.

Eventually I started creating my own. I scribbled down daydreams and conjured up characters and worlds for them to live in. At my older brother's Little League games, I would sit on the bleachers with my nose buried in my sketch book, happily drawing the outrageous exploits of lantern-jawed heroes and mustachio-twirling baddies, while a parade of fellowship whirled around me unnoticed. I loved decamping to those far-flung places. They gave me so much joy. But between imagining other lives and reading about the lives of others, I became faintly aware of the notion of life's end.

The idea would inevitably seep into the most powerful narratives, the specter of impermanence, of finality, of death. It troubled me. Looking for reassurance, I sought out my closest friend, the font of all human knowledge, and the center of my universe, my mom. I asked her if she would die. And with a single word, my world was shaken and thrown upside down. Something changed. Something had been lost. Before long, what was once an abstraction became very real, as dear friends and loved ones passed irrevocably from my life. Each loss a raw wound unhurriedly fading to a faint scar. But then, that's growing up, after all. Happiness and heartbreak locked in a tight embrace.

Childhood is a kaleidoscopic wonderland teeming with beauty, magic, miracles, and discovery at every turn. But it's also a fragile

thing. It's an unguarded eggshell bombarded by fear, helplessness, uncertainty, and swelling darkness lurking at the edges. The great Robert Frost wrote, "Nothing gold can stay." And he's right. Beauty is transient. Magic is fleeting. Wonder fades, and life itself is not built to last. But, as it happens, there is something that can go on. Our stories. Our memories. Long after the thing itself is gone, our memory of it can endure, thrive, and grow in power and meaning.

Those are the essential ideas driving LAIKA's film *Kubo and the Two Strings*. We started developing the project five years ago. At the time, I was looking for something that was big, expansive, and epic in nature, evocative of those beloved stories of my childhood that spoke to a deep truth. And then there it was. Like an epiphany, the original idea for *Kubo* burst brilliantly forth from the fertile mind of our remarkable character designer, Shannon Tindle. Over the next half-decade, a small group of us, including indefatigable producer Arianne Sutner, inspired scribe Marc Haimes, editor extraordinaire Christopher Murrie, and masterful polymathic Renaissance man Chris Butler, coaxed and shaped the story into existence. Along the way, we gathered a rogues' gallery of wizards and geniuses, all bringing something of themselves to Kubo's tale.

We were magpies, scavenging from all aspects of our lives. Kubo became a patchwork of our dreams and nightmares roughly sewn together; childhood loves and obsessions tempered with the time-worn perspective of grown-up kids with kids of their own. We meditated on memory and mortality. On loss and healing. On frailty, failing, and forgiveness. And underpinning everything: the roiling experience of childhood, where the world is menacing and magical, easily understood and utterly unknowable all at once.

That's what it means to be a kid. Childhood is a crucible. We don't emerge from it unscathed. We all shoulder the bruises and battle scars of our youth, lugging them around for all to see or stowing them away in the dark cobwebbed corners within ourselves. Every scar is a memory, an indelible physical reminder of our past. But here's the funny thing: While scars can remind us of trauma, a scar is not merely a symbol of hurt. A scar is proof of healing. After the grief and anguish

of being rent to shreds, a scar is the thing that makes us whole again. Every mark and blemish is a part of our story. And our stories, in all their tragedy and triumph, are the reason we're here. Telling them. Living them. Sharing them. And, ultimately, ending them.

Kubo's story only exists because of the incredible artists who breathed life into it. These pages chronicle a half-decade's journey of artistry, painstaking craftsmanship, ingenious innovation, sleep-deprived struggle, and soaring, high-spirited joy. This book is a gooey mash note and a song of praise to the artists, storytellers, and beautiful freaks at LAIKA, that fellowship of lonely, scarred, virtuosic misfits who somehow miraculously found each other and together brought a unique perspective to the world.

This is our story. I hope you make it part of your own.

Cheers,
Travis



INTRODUCTION

BEATING HEART

GREAT FILMS, the ones we remember long after we've left the theater, the ones we want to share with our sons and daughters though the films predate them by years or decades, have a beating heart. They are not just a series of explosions and chase scenes, or witty banter and funny gags. They find a place in our lives and send down roots, knitting themselves into the narratives of millions of individuals the world over. *Kubo and the Two Strings* has one of those beating hearts.

While the story has plenty of drama—epic battles, frightful monsters, magic, and mythology—if you took all of that away you would be left with a core story with a resonance that transcends its parts. A story about a boy who loses his family but gains himself, tested through a quest that asks him a question we all grapple with throughout our lives: What kind of human do you want to be?

It is no chance happening that this story comes from LAIKA, the stop-motion animation studio founded by Travis Knight. Knight, CEO, animator, producer, and director of *Kubo and the Two Strings*, has approached all of the studio's films with the same core principles in mind. "Humanism is an undercurrent to all of our films," he commented. "Tolerance, compassion, and forgiveness are values that we believe in and express in our work—those are the kind of storytelling experiences that we aspire to create. Good stories are keenly felt. They elicit empathy, actually becoming a part of how you view the world."

These principles are not realized only in the grand themes of the films. They also resonate in the small moments of connection with the viewer. These are moments of art in motion, when a shot that is built from a thousand elements results in a sum that is even greater than its parts. When Kubo is looking into his mother's eyes, hearing the horrific story of his origin, we are completely swept into his world. The minute breathing motion of his chest, the natural fold and rustle of his



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital

kimono as he moves, the subtle shift in the expression of his eyes, all conspire to make us almost unaware of these details. We are able to become absorbed in his voice and his story.

For most actors, it would take great skill to bring that kind of subtle emotion to the screen. For a stop-motion animated puppet, where each movement and expression is painstakingly recorded frame by frame, it takes the experience, skill, artistry, and pure genius of a small army. One of the main reasons that LAIKA has been able to consistently turn out films of such emotional depth and stunning technological artistry is that, over the past decade of filmmaking, the core group of artists, technicians, storytellers, and designers has remained the same. “We keep the band together,” Knight said. “We have essentially the same team that we had ten years ago on *Coraline*. We collectively learn and grow and build on every project’s artistic

and technological innovations. It’s why our appetite for the kind of stories we tell becomes increasingly more expansive. We can do more with each film.” This is a rarity in an industry where most productions hire a crew that is then disbanded upon completion with every lesson learned and advance made scattering along with them. LAIKA is able to make leaps of artistry and innovation that are unparalleled in the industry. This doesn’t result just in spectacular sets, puppets, animation, and effects. It results in better storytelling, which is where that beating heart resides.

THE WOODBLOCK EFFECT

EACH OF LAIKA'S films has a unique look, often centering on the line quality in the designs. On *Coraline*, illustrator Tadahiro Uesugi's clean, elegant, and confident line informed the film's style. *ParaNorman* employed a sketchy, rough-hewn scribble. *The Boxtrolls* favored an organic, irregular, and nervous line evocative of German Expressionism. For *Kubo and the Two Strings*, the kind of line used in the early conceptual designs ended up mattering less than what filled the surfaces. Texture became the unique signature and through-line for the designs. In researching various eras of art, production designer Nelson Lowry referenced Japanese woodblocks and classic Japanese designs, incorporating large blocks of strong colors overlaid with tactile textures.

In researching various eras of art and history in Japan, one artist rose to the forefront as a source of inspiration. Kyoshi Saitō (1907–1997) was a woodblock printmaker in the *sōsaku-hanga* art movement of twentieth century Japan. As opposed to traditional printmaking, where various parts of the process—drawing, carving, and printing—were divided up amongst several artisans, Saitō executed all aspects of his work, putting the focus on personal expression and style. His prints have strong shapes with a limited palette, almost verging on pop art as they reduce complex three-dimensional scenes to graphic two-dimensional representations. The part of his work that most excited the filmmakers at LAIKA, however, was his use of texture. “His work is really bold,” Knight commented. “He uses simple colors and shapes. But within those shapes, he uses the texture of the wood to give dimension and nuance. This use of texture became a focal point for the film.” Lowry described the moment when they realized that the Saitō textures held a key to the film's design language: “We did a model of one of our sets and then painted a Saitō texture on top of it. It looked just like you would expect a traditional Japanese building to look like, but upon closer inspection it had the look and feel of a Japanese woodblock print. Everyone totally freaked out over it, and from that day on it's been the look of the film.”

The patterns aren't just on the walls of the buildings. They're everywhere, uniting sets and characters that range from a furry white monkey to an ancient samurai warrior and a bright endless expanse of snow to the inside of a whale. “You don't want the audience to really notice it,” added art director Alice Bird. “You want it to be something that they

sense. The same patterns that we used on the road surface in the village might appear embedded in the surface of the water in the Long Lake. This design is not something that folks will look at and say, ‘Aha! I've seen that before!’ But hopefully it will unify the film in a subliminal way, give it all the same voice.”

As the artists learned more about Saitō and his work, a kinship arose that went beyond the particulars of his designs. “There is something really interesting about him that is relevant to what we do here, beyond his artistic inspiration,” Travis elaborated. “At LAIKA we have a fusion of old and new, a sense of tradition and history mixed with innovation and modernity. We work in a medium that's over one hundred years old, but we also bring a passion for cutting-edge technology and modern creative approaches. Saitō did much the same thing. He was part of the ancient practice of Japanese woodblock printing, but he was very progressive. He was inspired by European painters of the early twentieth century—Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch among others. He synthesized and infused these divergent ideas into his own work. It felt almost like kismet that we would find Saitō and his work as such an ideal source of inspiration for our film.”

“On every film we try to push beyond the edges of the form,” Knight continued. “This film demanded the scope and scale of a big epic fantasy, which doesn't fit naturally within the medium. But I think we all find that challenge very exciting.” *Kubo and the Two Strings* delivers on that promise, and then some. The artists and artisans whose work you'll see in these pages have forged new pathways and visions as they moved from the early character and set designs to putting the final touches on the costumes and visual effects. This book chronicles an artistic journey that is eclipsed in its challenges and triumphs only by the journey of Kubo himself.



Hisako Watanabe, copyright owner for Kiyoshi Saitō / woodblock print



Hisako Watanabe, copyright owner for Kiyoshi Saitō / woodblock print



Dan Casey / digital



An aerial, painterly illustration of a village with a torii gate and a river, set against a backdrop of a dense forest. A red banner is overlaid on the right side of the image.

PART ONE
HOME

IN THE BEGINNING

KUBO'S STORY begins with his mother travelling across the ocean with her infant son, escaping the wrath of her father, the Moon King.



Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital





K
U
B
E



THE HERO OF THE STORY, Kubo, is a scrappy and kind-hearted teenage boy. He wears the kimono of his deceased father with the family's beetle crest emblazoned on the back. The finely-patterned silk is folded and tucked to fit his smaller frame. At his side he carries his mother's shamisen, a three-stringed instrument imbued with magical powers. The patch over his left eye is a reminder to him and the world of his troubled past, which soon threatens to catch up to him.



Shannon Tindle / digital



Kent Melton / clay



Shannon Tindle, Kent Melton, Trevor Dalmer, Deborah Cook / mixed media



Early tests for beetle crest on Kubo's kimono

Deborah Cook / collage

Kubo wears his father's kimono and it is actually from a much earlier period than the setting of the film. I researched very early Heian and Nara era dress for it, just to see what informed their clothing. At the time, members of the imperial court constructed their kimonos from incredibly beautiful fabrics—rich brocades and silks—which is what we ended up using for his costume.

DEBORAH COOK, costume designer



Joe Moshier / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital

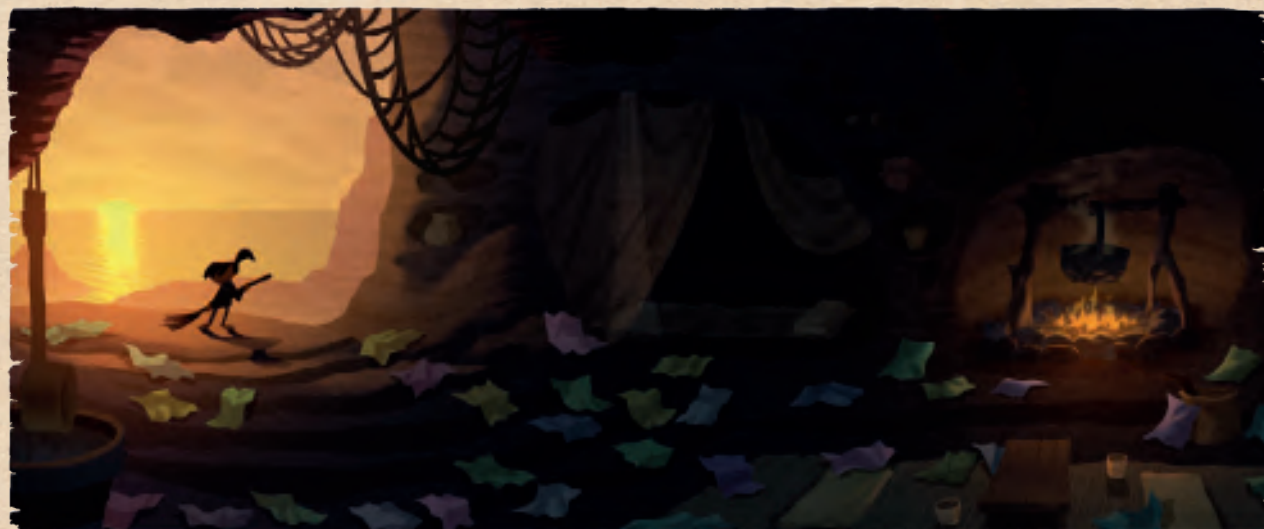


Kubo's design evolved considerably during the film's development. In early versions of the script, he was a much younger character, around seven years old. As we refined the big ideas and the overriding maturation metaphor animating the narrative, it became clear that we needed to age him up, to bring him to the precipice, straddling the Rubicon between childhood and adulthood.

—**TRAVIS KNIGHT**, director and producer



Film still



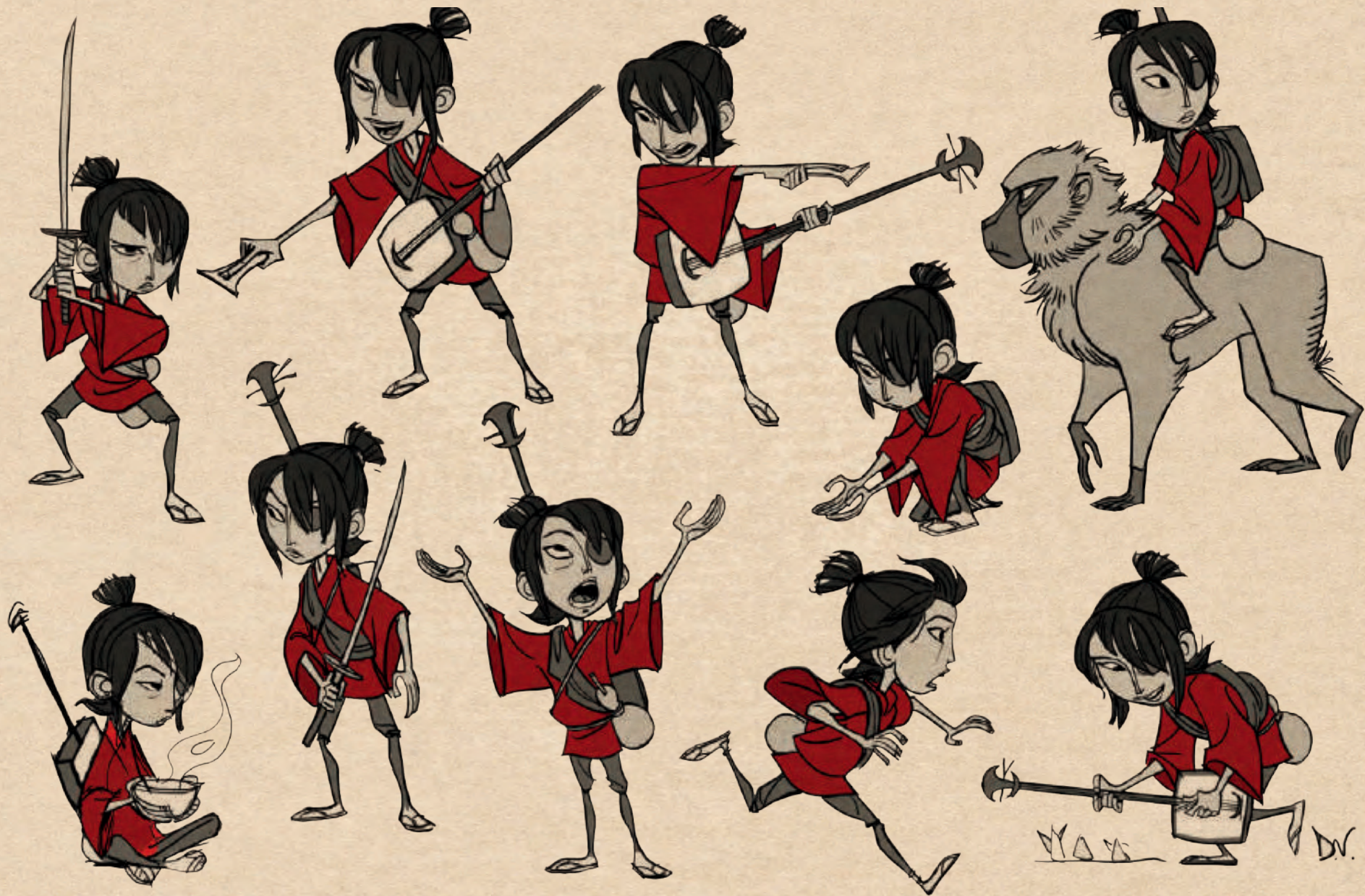
Lou Romano / digital



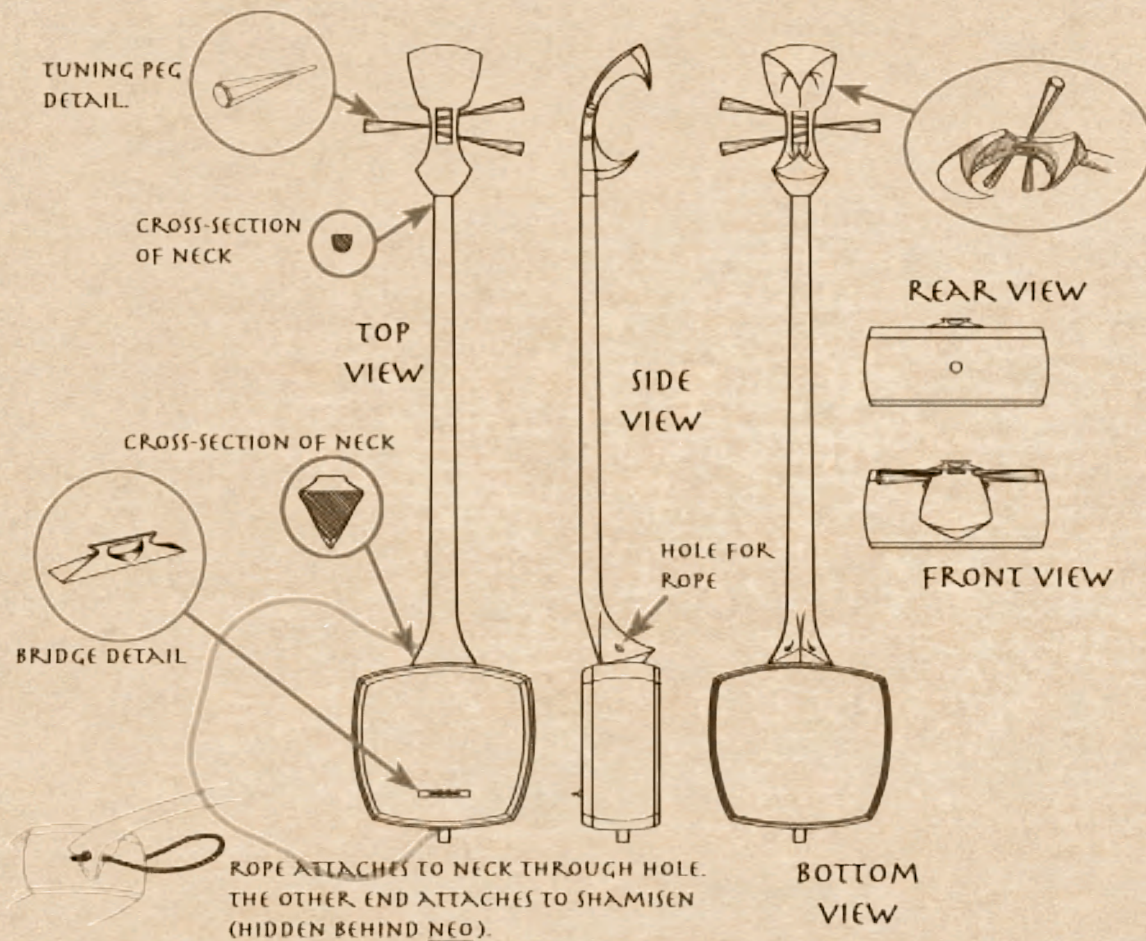


Kubo was particularly challenging because so much of his face is hidden by his hair and eye patch. Emotions being largely communicated with the eyes and eyebrows. Kubo's face provided much less visual material to work with. As the protagonist, his range of possible expressions had to be great, if not greater than the other characters, so we worked really hard getting what was viable to deliver all the subtlety and emotional breadth that he absolutely needed to have.

DAVID VANDERVOORT, lead 2D facial animation designer



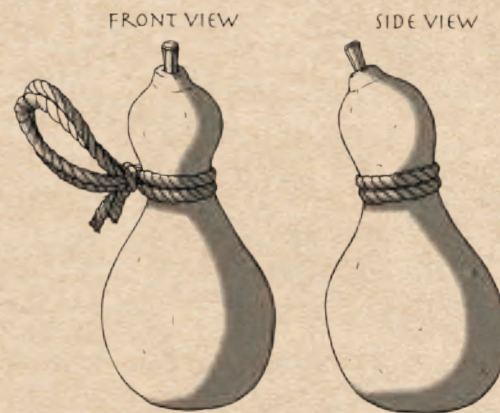
David Vandervoort / digital (both pages)



David Lee / digital



David Lee / digital



David Lee / digital



Kubo's two most precious objects are also imbued with a powerful magic that protects him on his journey to come. The netsuke is a small, handcrafted totem that was used to help secure a pouch or box to the waistband of a kimono. The shamisen is a traditional three-stringed instrument that has been popular in Japan since the seventeenth century.

-KEITH MCQUEEN, head of model shop



Shannon Tindle / digital

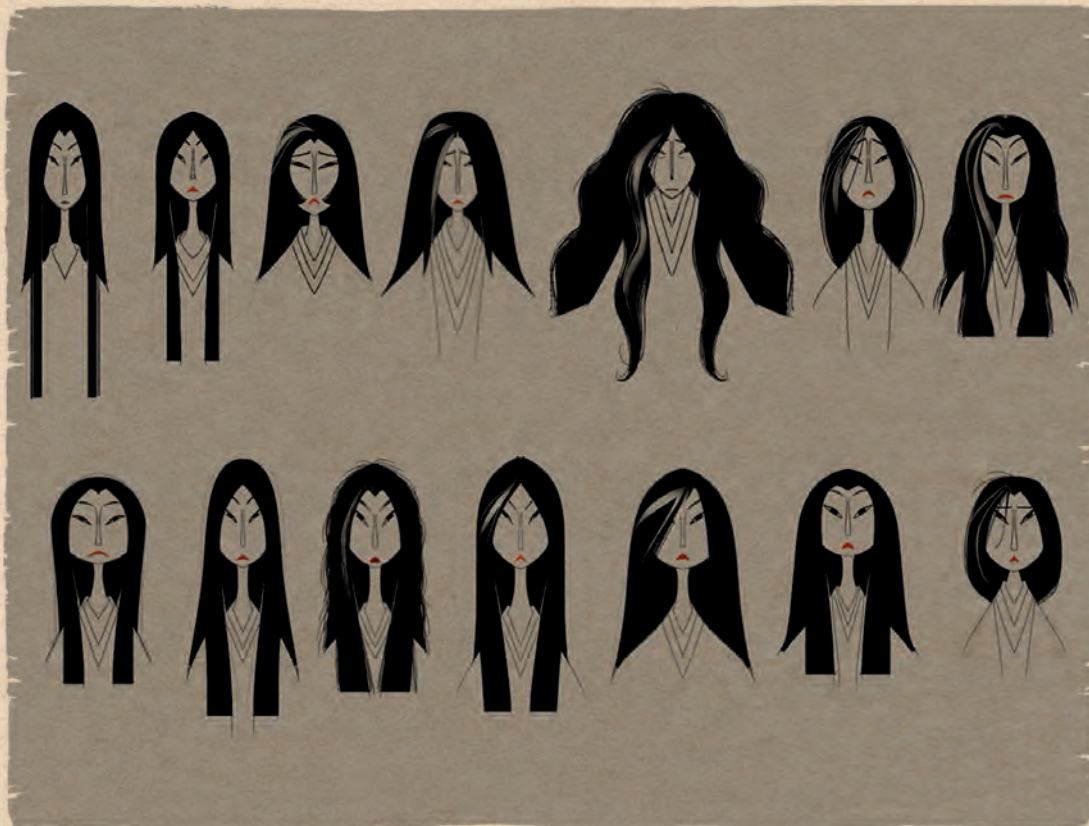




MOTHER



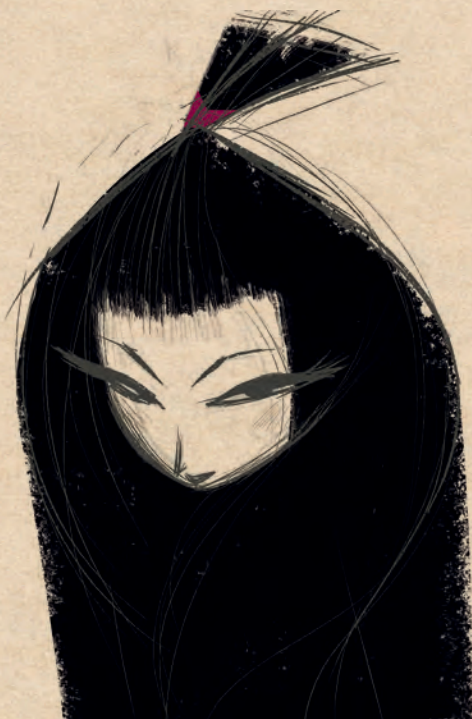
KUBO'S MOTHER is the heart of the film, a symbol of maternal devotion and faded glory. An imposing figure, she still wears her formal kimono, and it swirls around her in multicolored layers as she moves. The colors and patterns on her clothing suggest autumn, an allusion to her waning powers.



Shannon Tindle / digital



Joe Moshier / digital



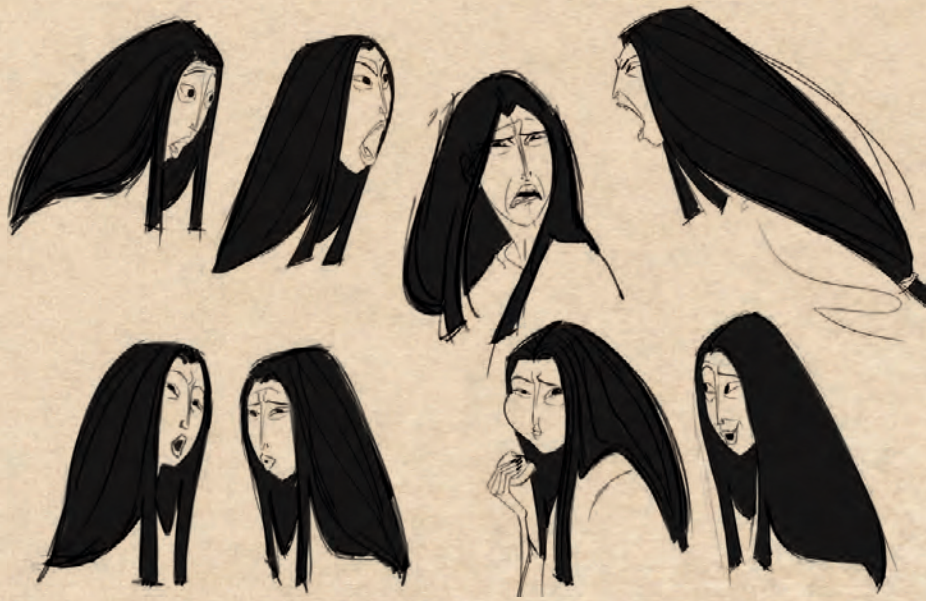
Joe Moshier / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



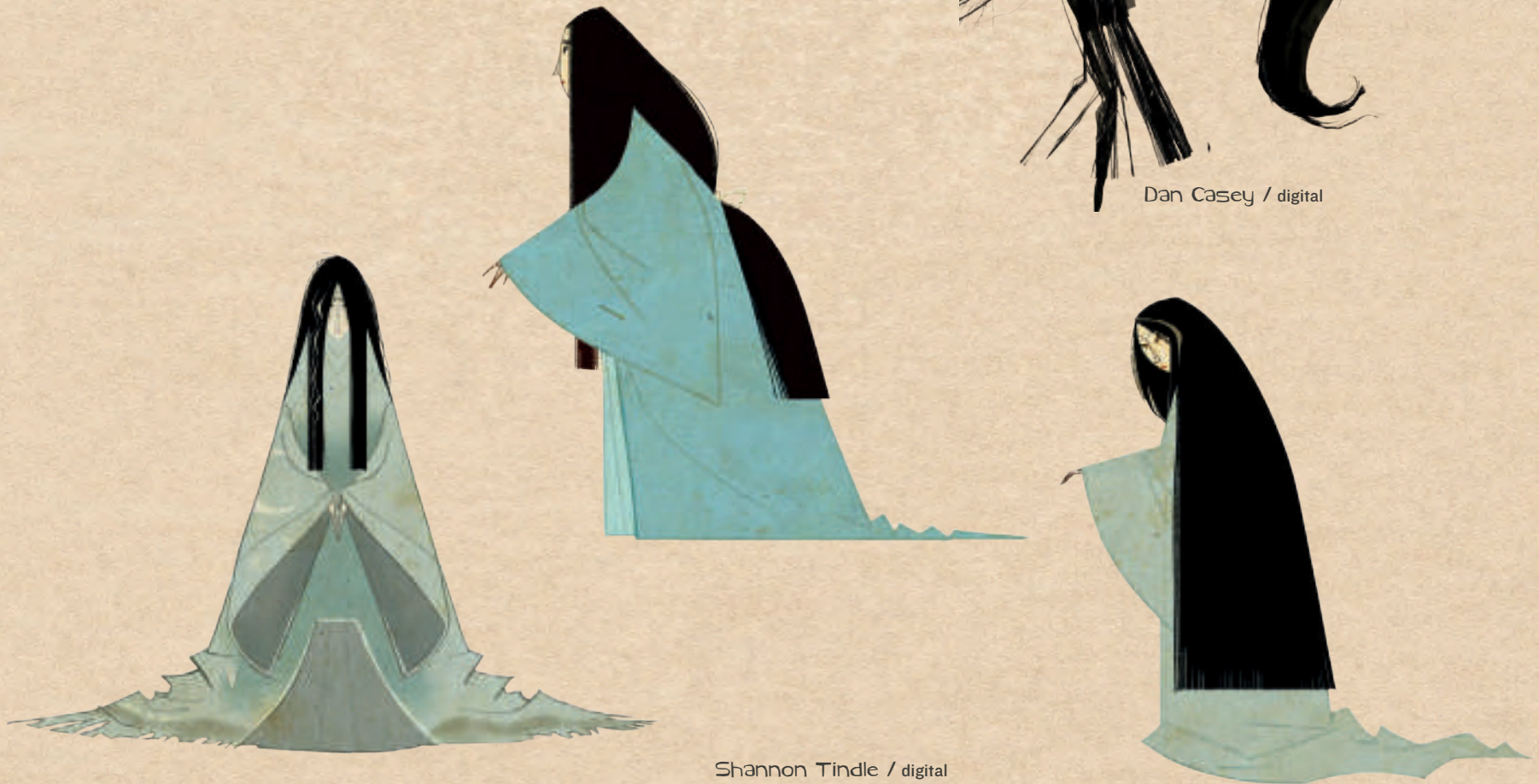
Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Dan Casey / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Courtesy of the Trustees of
the British Museum / ink and paper



Deborah Cook / collage



Dan Casey / digital



Benjamin William Adams / digital

Kimonos come from an ancient system of clothing that doesn't relate to Western clothing at all. They're made out of long, flat strips of beautifully textured fabrics that are the width of a loom. They're worn and move in a very particular way. We've done some live action shoots with people wearing kimonos just to see how the fabric actually moves. The sleeves are quite slow because they're so weighty. They don't fly around like a bed sheet on a washing line.

-**DEBORAH COOK**, costume designer



Hisako Watanabe, copyright owner
for Kiyoshi Saitō / woodblock print



Deborah Cook / collage

THE CAVE

KUBO AND HIS MOTHER make their home in exile in a seaside cave. Though rustic and isolated, it is full of the light and warmth of the love between mother and son.



Film still



Ean McNamara / digital



Film still



David Lee / digital

Kubo has been sequestered, kept isolated, and yet is constantly in danger of being discovered by his grandfather. Kubo's cave isn't so much a cave, as it's the result of a few large rocks falling against each other to create a triangular aperture. That shape frames the seated figure of his mother, her mind clouded, as she looks toward the sea.

-EAN MCNAMARA, designer/illustrator

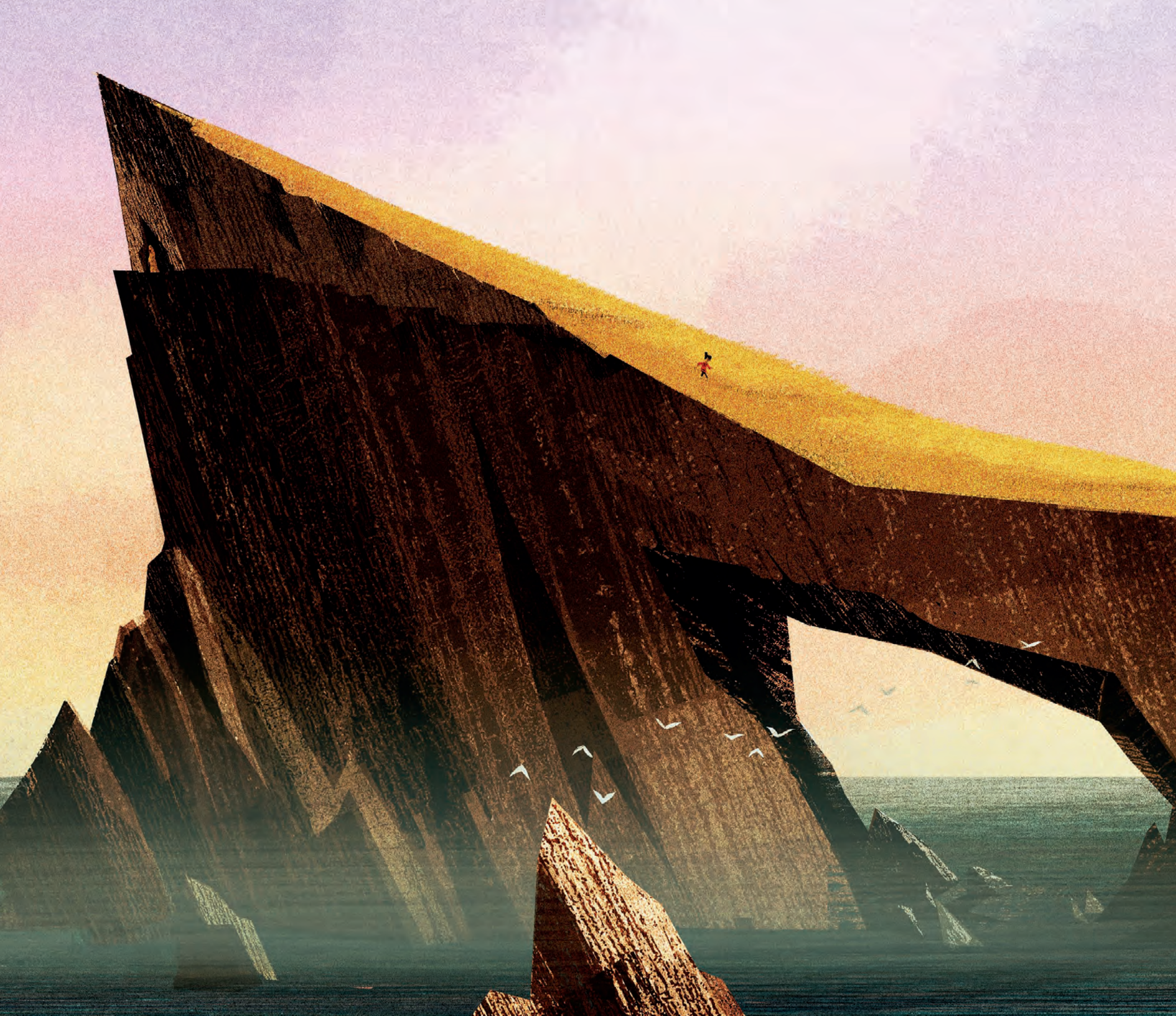




Set for Kubo's cave exterior, ready to be delivered to the stage



August Hall / digital



THE MOUNTAIN

KUBO'S CAVE is nestled beneath the peak of a sharply angled mountain. The path along its crest leads down towards the village, and the beginning of his quest.



Ean McNamara / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



August Hall / digital



August Hall / digital



THE VILLAGE

THE HAMLET near Kubo's cave bustles with activity during the day. Based on towns of Heian-period Japan, the village is where Kubo ekes out a living to provide for himself and his mother.



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



August Hall / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



August Hall / digital

For the sets we tried to capture the spirit of the Japanese word *wabi-sabi*, which translates loosely as imperfect beauty. So our buildings might not be perfectly square, there's some movement in their design.

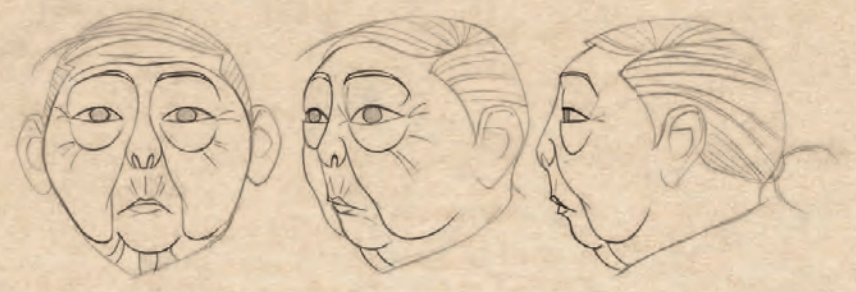
-**PHIL BROTHERTON**, assistant art director



KAMEYO



SHE'S KUBO'S UNLIKELY best friend, a fellow busker on the streets of the village. After a long and arduous life, she exudes hard-fought wisdom. She pushes Kubo to take risks and find adventure.



Shannon Tindle / digital





Deborah Cook / collage



Kent Melton / clay



Amy Wulfinf / paint



Collection of Kameyo costume fabrics

Kameyo's clothing is meant to be slightly more wintery despite the film being set in later summer around the Obon festival. It's constructed to look like a garment made in the boro tradition, using scraps of fabric to patch it over many years. As soon as one little surface piece of the fabric would wear away, they'd add another. The textures that result from that kind of handwork are amazing.

-**DEBORAH COOK**, costume designer

THE SHAMISEN SHOW

A CONSUMMATE STREET PERFORMER, Kubo entertains and fascinates a rapt audience. Using his magical shamisen, he transforms simple scraps of paper into animated origami characters that act out stories drawn from myth and his family's history.



Jesse Aclin / digital



Shannon Tindle and Ean McNamara / digital



Even though I know the basics of origami, I had to learn more complicated techniques for these puppets. I used all kinds of paper to create the prototypes, sometime even scraps from the recycling bin!

-MARI TOBITA, look development artist



Shannon Tindle and Ean McNamara / digital

THE VILLAGERS

OBON, the festival held to honor ancestral spirits, uplifts the town as the story begins. The villagers celebrate on the streets with music and dancing.



Josh Holtsclaw / digital (above)





Alice Bird / digital



Deborah Cook / collage

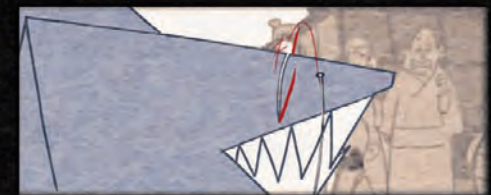
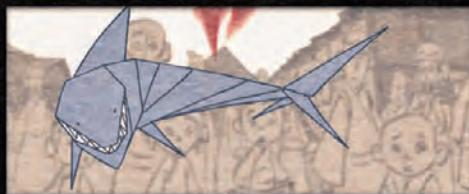
Since Kubo is set in a Japan of a couple centuries past, we needed to learn the rules and variables of that period of culture and dress. We needed to know this history before we could make creative choices—we broke the rules, but we knew them first.

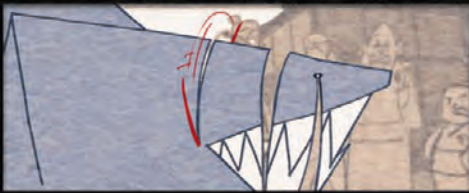
-NELSON LOWRY, production designer





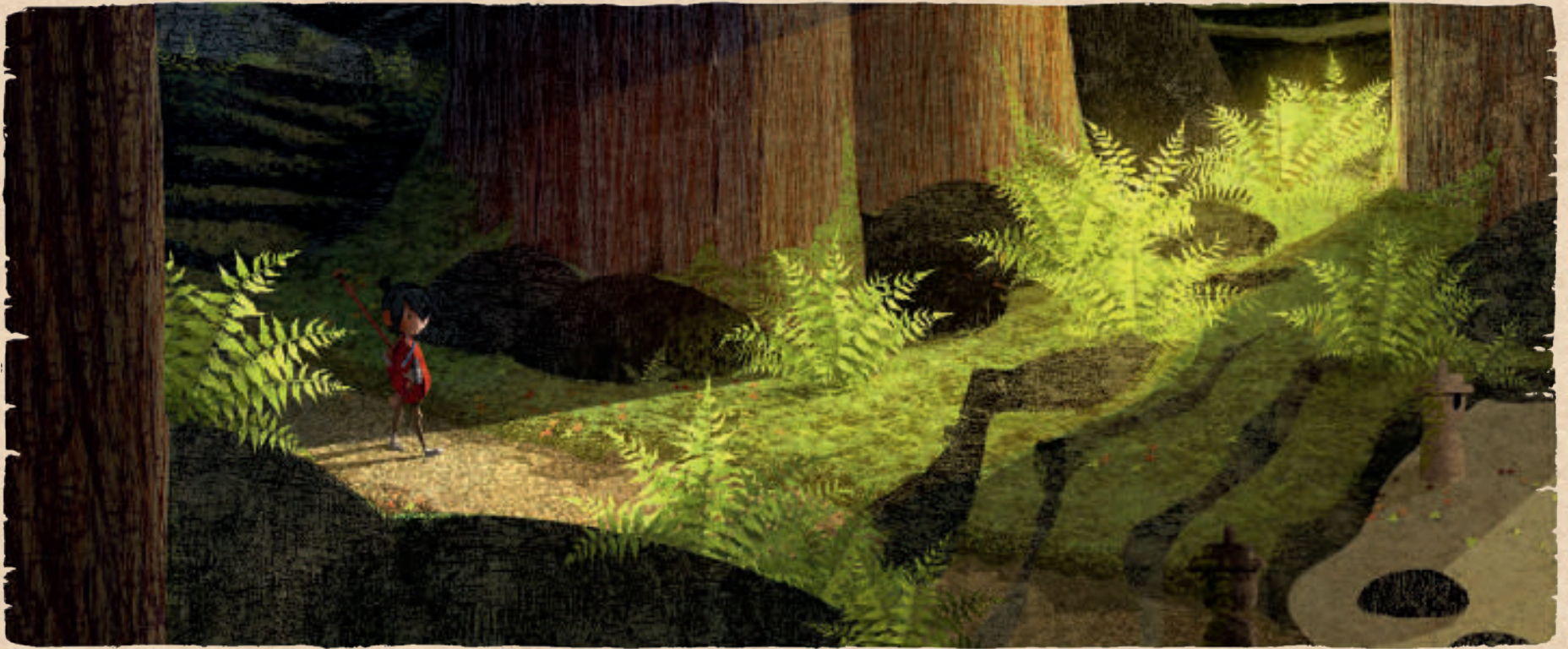
Shannon Tindle / digital (both pages)





Our diminutive hero's battles with colossal creatures offered us the opportunity to pay homage to the great Harryhausen-animated fantasy epics that entertained us as kids.

CHRIS BUTLER, writer and head of story



Nelson Lowry / digital



Ean McNamara / digital

MEETING THE ANCESTORS

AT THE END of the Obon festival, the villagers pay their respects to their ancestors in the town cemetery. They light lanterns and set them adrift down the river. It's a way for the townspeople to connect with their memories of their loved ones.





Film still



Reverence for the natural world is central to Japanese culture. We wanted to reflect this in our cemetery design. The monolithic cedar trees, the soft mossy ground cover, and the way light filters through the foliage, all contribute to a sense of hushed sacredness.

-ALICE BIRD, art director



Ean McNamara / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



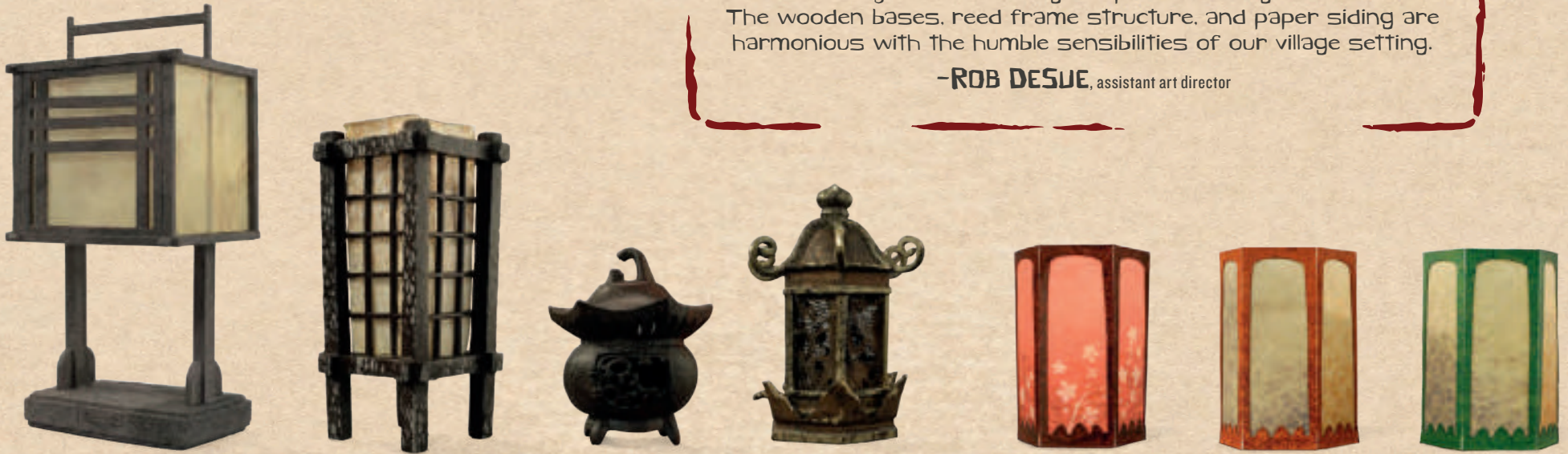
Nelson Lowry / digital



August Hall / digital

The floating lanterns are made from materials that would have been readily available during the period setting for the film. The wooden bases, reed frame structure, and paper siding are harmonious with the humble sensibilities of our village setting.

-**ROB DESUE**, assistant art director





THE
SISTERS



MOTHER'S TWIN SISTERS are frightful and cruel. They represent the cold, merciless realm that she left behind.





August Hall / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle and Trevor Dalmer / digital



Joe Moshier / digital



A closer look at the layered "feathers" of the sisters' cloaks



Shannon Tindle / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



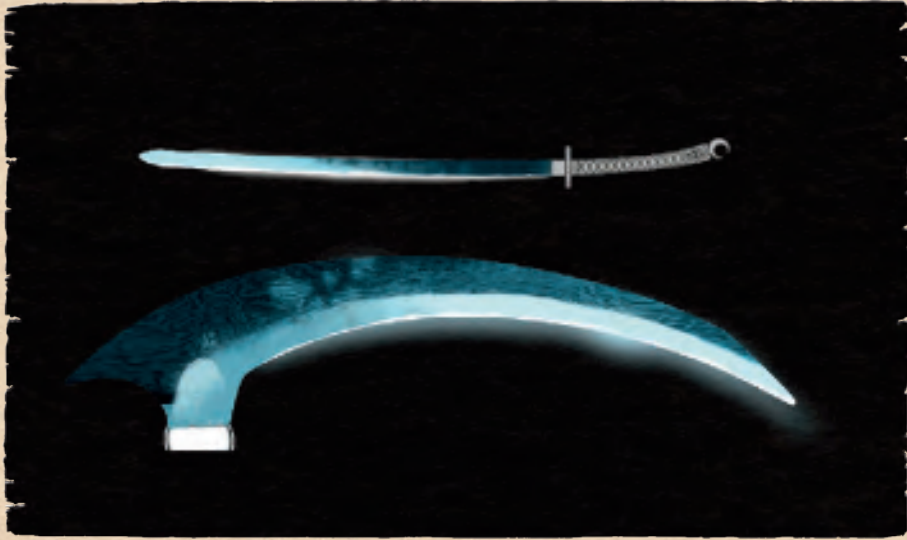
Shannon Tindle / digital



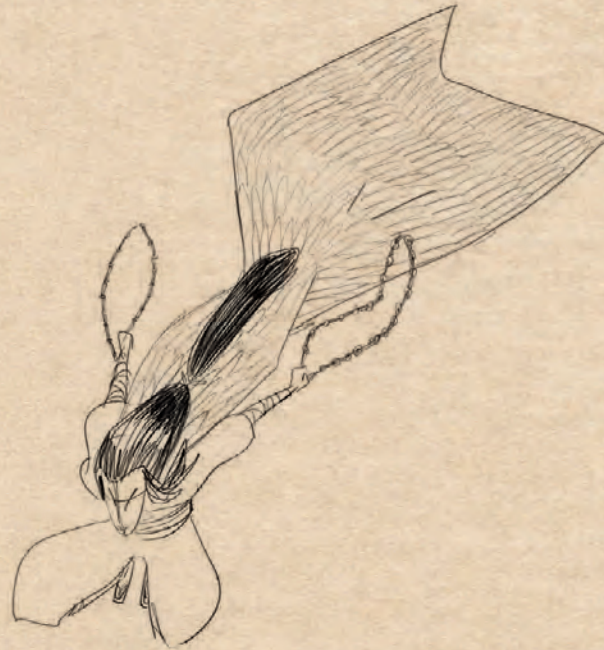
Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Anthony Holden / digital



The quality and color of the moonlight changes throughout the movie. At times we use a pure powder blue, like in the cave scene where we first meet Kubo. At other times the moonlight takes on a more sinister quality, as it does when we first meet the sisters—then it is a more saturated green blue.

-FRANK PASSINGHAM, director of photography



Shannon Tindle / digital



Film still



Ean McNamara / digital



August Hall / digital

Key artwork and practical reference were critical for developing the look of the smoke demons. They needed to be beautiful yet frightening. Voluminous yet tangible. The artwork provided a clear path for texture, color palette, line detail, and even character. We decided that denser lines would hold shape and move erratically while the softer texture would flow and dissipate like a mass of rancid smoke.

—STEVE EMERSON, VFX supervisor



Ean McNamara / digital



August Hall / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital (three images)

MOTHER'S MAGIC

MOTHER SUMMONS the last of her energy to protect her child by sending him out of harm's way and taking on her assassin sisters.



Ean McNamara / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



Early artwork development of Mother's magic taking effect on Kubo's kimono



Shannon Tindle / digital

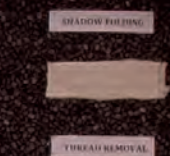
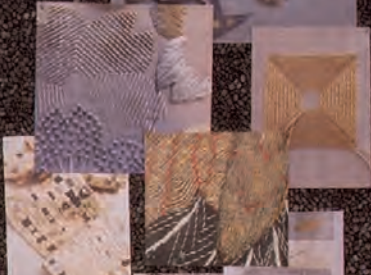


Nelson Lowry / digital (three images)

The film's magic was a cross-departmental effort. First, the art department designed the various magical effects. The puppet department and model shop then built the corresponding physical puppets and props. The camera team lit them on set for reference and VFX brought it all together. Having all departments in one place ensures that we have a unified look. It's hard to tell where one solution begins and ends, creatively. The audience can enjoy the moment without being taken out of the film.

-NELSON LOWRY, production designer





SHADOW FOLDING

THREAD REMOVAL

STITCHING

SURFACE PAINTING

LASER CUTTING

VINYL CUTTING





PART TWO

THE QUEST

MONKEY



BRUSQUE AND IMPATIENT, Monkey instills herself as a guardian in Kubo's life when he awakes in the Far Lands. She seems to be all business, but just beneath her gruff exterior she has a deep well of love for the boy, along with some surprisingly adept sword-fighting skills.



Kent Melton / clay



August Hall / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital

My concerns with Monkey at the outset were mainly about her color. She is a white monkey seen against snowy landscapes, which makes her very low-contrast in relation to her surroundings. On top of that, she is often in scenes with Beetle, who is very dark, and has an opposite level of contrast to the snow. Working with this range of contrasts can be a nightmare for a cinematographer, so I had to make sure that they could work together in all of the different lighting scenarios we see them in throughout the movie.

-FRANK PASSINGHAM, director of photography



Ean McNamara / assemblage



Shannon Tindle / digital



David Vandervoort / digital

THE WHALE

THE WHALE provides safe haven for Kubo and Monkey after his traumatic flight from his home. Strange and huge in scale, it also provides a place of warmth and security from of the vast expanse of snow and ice.





Miniature scale set of whale carcass in ice



Part of the whale carcass interior set



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital

In this cold and foreign environment, Kubo and Monkey take shelter inside the carcass of a leviathan. There's a beauty to it, like a grand cathedral of bone and frozen viscera. But it's also evocative of home. The palette, the use of light and color, are a callback to Kubo's cave at the beginning of the film. We're highlighting the growing connectivity between these two characters.

-TRAVIS KNIGHT, director and producer



Nelson Lowry / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



LITTLE HANZO



LITTLE HANZO is a magic little seven-inch-tall being that guides Kubo and his friends on his quest to find his father's lost armor.



انیمیشن ایرانی
animation.ir



Film still



Shannon Tindle / digital (two images)



Ean McNamara / digital

The armature of human and mammalian stop-motion puppets often correspond to the forms of actual humans and mammals: rigid, jointed internal structures surrounded by relatively soft, flexible exteriors. Little Hanzo's armature is more similar to a crustacean. His movement is limited to points where rigid body segments are connected.

MARK GAIERO, armaturist and CAD joint designer



Kubo's footprint in the snow with Little Hanzo

THE SNOW FOOTHILLS

THE LAND THAT Kubo and his friends must navigate on their quest is forbidding and perilous, full of vast expanses of snow and ice, oversized statues, treacherous cliffs, and mysterious caves.

The lighting needed to be naturalistic for our audience to believe in this special world that we were creating. To achieve this, we used a large number of traveling gobos—a pattern or object that you move in front of a light to create a desired effect. In this case, we aimed to imitate the racing broken-up light of a cold sun shining through a blizzard.

—FRANK PASSINGHAM, director of photography



Nelson Lowry / digital



August Hall / digital



Ean McNamara / digital









August Hall / digital



In the Far Lands, everything is larger than life. The half-buried statues are intended to bring to mind an ancient civilization of giants, now in ruins. It conveys an idea central to the narrative: that of impermanence. Everything is transient. Even the towering monuments of Titans are ultimately swallowed up by the earth.

-**TRAVIS KNIGHT**, director and producer

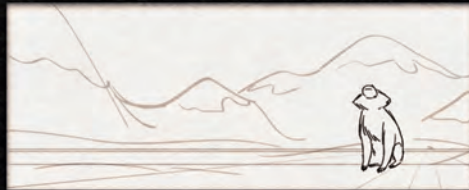
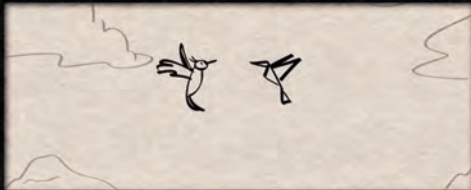
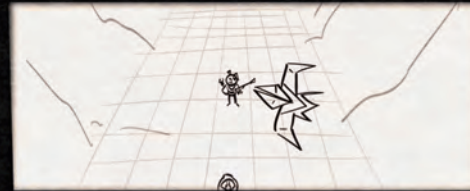
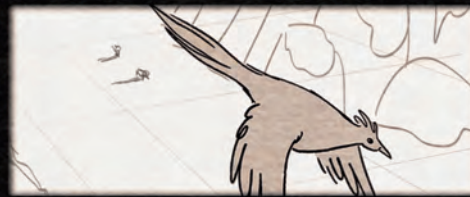


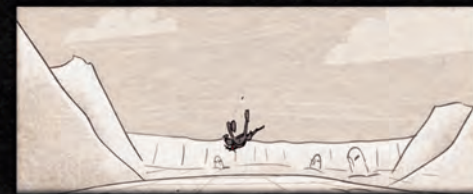
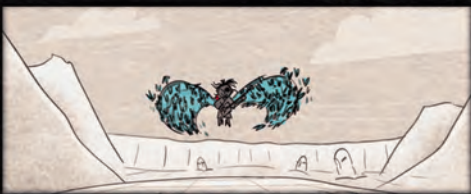
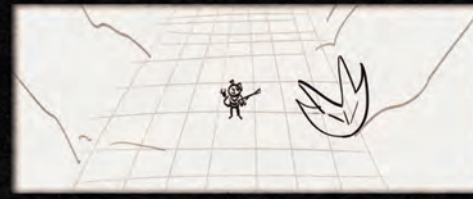
Film still

We always saw the movie as “an intimate family story played out in an epic world,” and it was this expansive backdrop that we fully embraced in the storyboarding process. In the same way Kubo towers over his tiny paper figures, so too is our hero dominated by giant monsters, monumental statues and sweeping landscapes.

CHRIS BUTLER, writer and head of story

Julian Nariño / digital









B E E T L E



BEETLE IS A **BRAWNY** oversized bug that was once a great and noble warrior. At least he thinks he was. Exuberant to the point of delusion, Beetle can't remember much of his past. But he is more than willing to help Kubo out on his quest.





Anthony Holden / digital (four images)



Kent Melton / clay



Shannon Tindle / digital



David Vandervoort / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital

In conceiving and designing the characters of Monkey and Beetle, we looked to animals indigenous to Japan. For Beetle, we drew from the Japanese rhinoceros beetle, known natively as *kabutomushi*, which literally means helmet bug. The insect's features resemble the headgear worn by medieval samurai. In Japan, the rhinoceros beetle is associated with strength and fighting prowess. And in mythologies and cultures around the world, the beetle is a symbol of transformation and metamorphosis. Since transformation is a central theme of the film, this is an instance where the film's thematic core fused with design for a perfect narrative synthesis.

-TRAVIS KNIGHT, director and producer



Nelson Lowry / digital



Anthony Holden / digital





Film still

The underground tunnels and caves where Beetle lives provided the only suitable refuge for the cursed half-man, half-beetle. They offered warmth and protection from the harsh elements of the frozen tundra. His furnishings are a mix of weapons and keepsakes from his forgotten past, and tools scavenged from his wandering travels. There is a somewhat ordered chaos to the "interior design" that betrays his internal conflict between pack-rat bug and noble Japanese warrior.

-PHIL BROTHERTON, assistant art director



Ean McNamara / digital

THE HALL OF BONES

THE HALL OF BONES is home to a monster, inspired by a specter from Japanese mythology. It's a huge skeleton, inside a giant cavern full of the bones of its previous victims. It will bite a person's head off if provoked.



August Hall / digital



John Elk, Getty Images / photo



August Hall / digital




Mari Tobita / paper



Josh Holtsclaw / digital





One of the key influences for the Hall of Bones scene was the iconic skeleton fight from *Jason and the Argonauts* by the great stop-motion filmmaker Ray Harryhausen. This is our attempt at one-upping the master with a pitched battle showcasing a skeleton puppet so immense that it dwarfed the animator bringing it to life. I think Uncle Ray would be proud of us.

-TRAVIS KNIGHT, director and producer



Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London / woodblock print

When we got the blueprint for the skeleton and we saw how large it was, we all just stared at it for a good five, ten minutes. How were we going to make this? It's huge! But once we got started, it didn't feel as big anymore. Once we figured small things out, everything just had a domino effect.

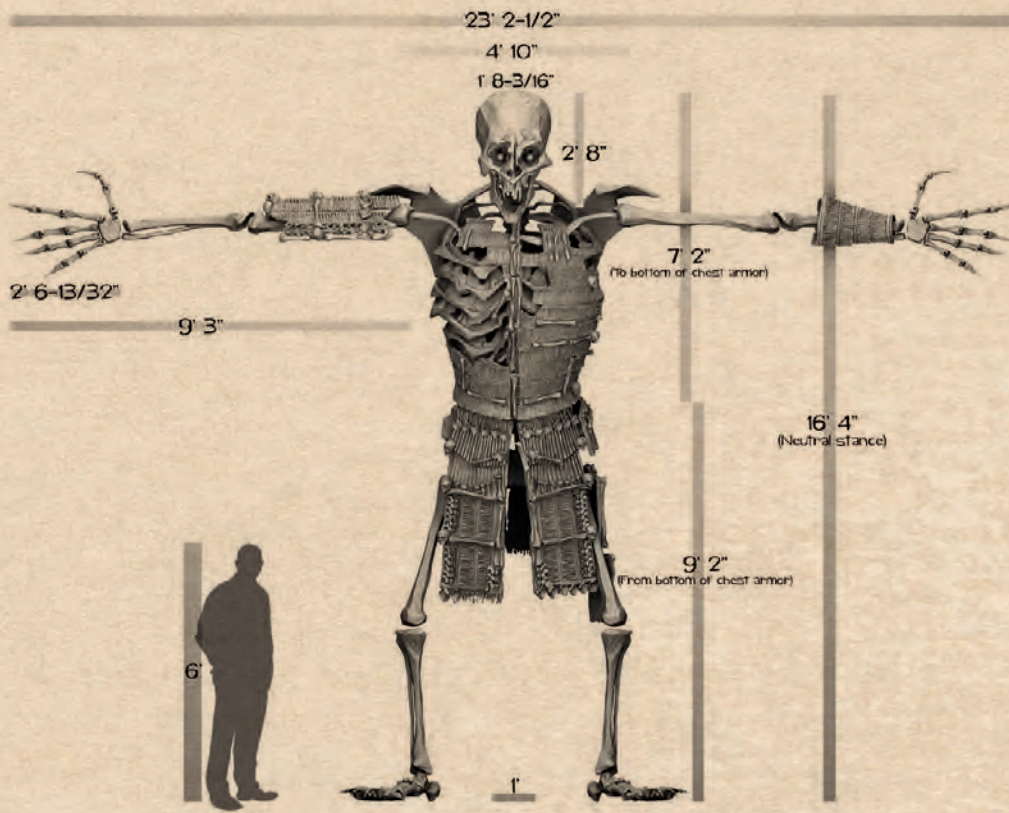
-**RAUL MARTINEZ**, lead model maker



Dan Casey / digital



Kent Melton / clay



Ben Adams checking the skeleton's skull before shooting starts

Nelson Lowry / digital



Josh Holtsclaw / digital

At first, we looked for ways to cheat the scale with different cameras when Kubo and Beetle are on the skeleton. But when it came down to it, there was no hiding. We had to bite the bullet and build it. He stands sixteen feet tall and his arm span is seventeen feet. Kubo is probably about six inches tall. So the skeleton is almost one hundred feet tall in relation to Kubo.

-**OLIVER JONES**, animation rigging supervisor



Nelson Lowry / digital



Ean McNamara / digital



Alice Bird / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital
(three images)







THE LONG LAKE

WHEN KUBO AND HIS FRIENDS reach the Long Lake they are confronted by a seemingly impassable expanse of water. It takes some magic and quick thinking on Kubo's part to figure out how to keep them moving forward. He uses his shamisen to construct a magical boat from the leaves and driftwood on the shore.





August Hall / digital



Set development by the art department for the shoreline of the lake

We knew that if the water's motion felt natural, we could push the design and create something really special. We worked closely with the art department and identified design characteristics that would pull the water into Kubo's world. We used the same Saitō woodblock patterns that are used throughout the film on the surface of the lake.

-STEVE EMERSON, VFX supervisor



August Hall / digital



Lone Wolf and Cub (Kodure Ookami)
© 2016 Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima / comic



Trevor Dalmer / digital



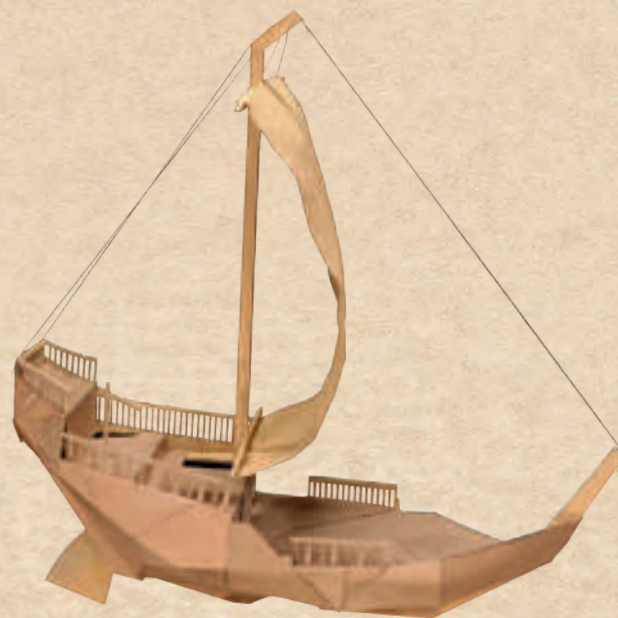
Trevor Dalmer / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Various early development models of the boat

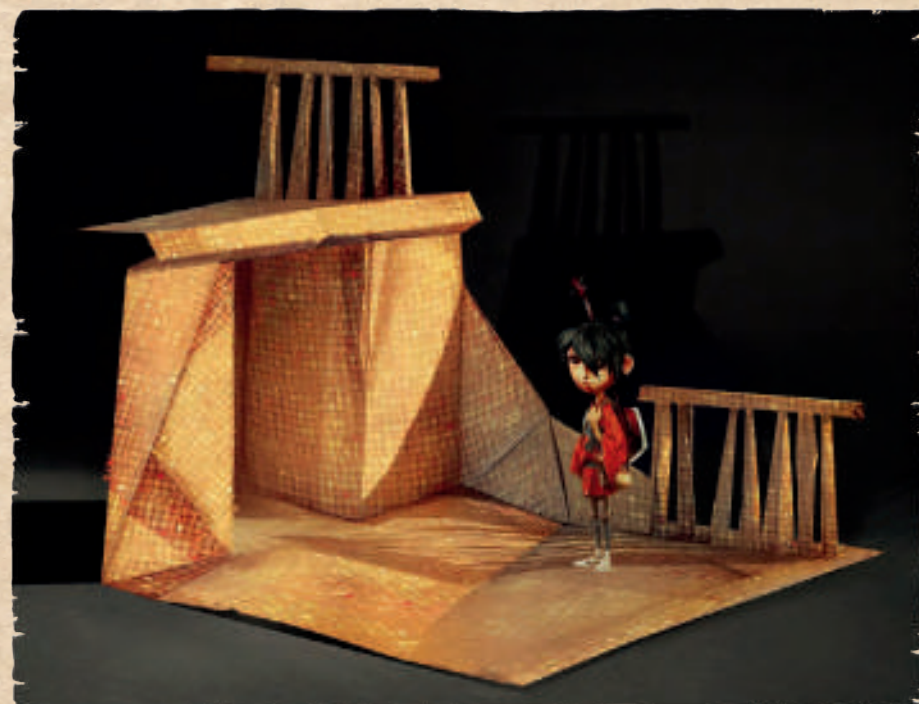
Trevor Dalmer / digital

Celeste Leipham and Lisa Chung applying the thousands of individual leaves needed to create the nature look of the boat



In keeping with Kubo's talent for origami, Kubo's magic sailboat, which was modeled after traditional cargo boats of the era known as "junks," was designed to look as though Kubo had folded it from one enormous piece of paper fashioned out of pressed leaves and twigs. There were many story points that the design needed to serve (e.g. furled sail, unfurled sail, billowed sail, torn and shredded sail). It also had to look beautiful and dry in warm sunshine, and wet and soggy in a driving rainstorm.

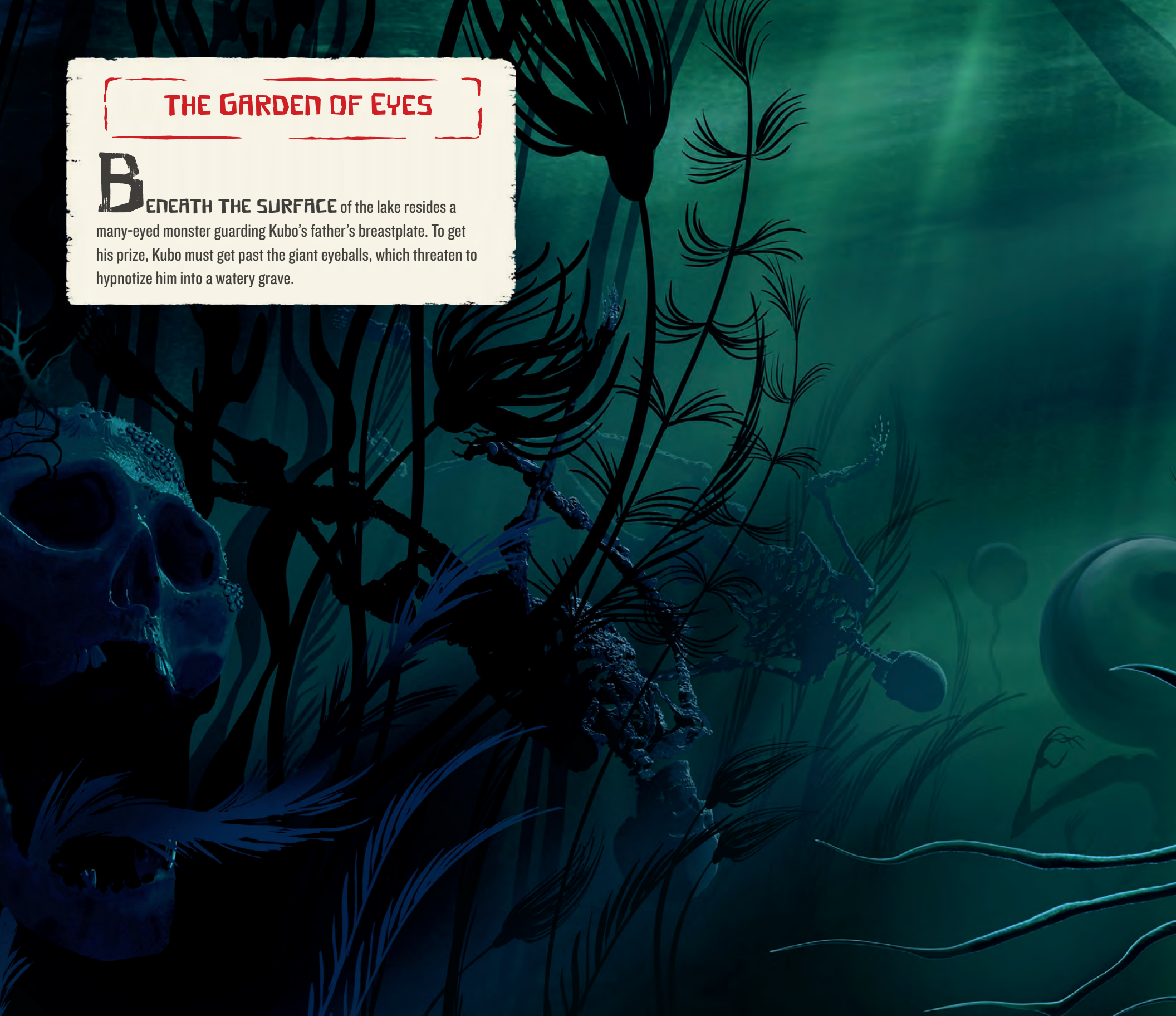
-PHIL BROTHERTON, assistant art director



Trevor Dalmer / digital

THE GARDEN OF EYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE of the lake resides a many-eyed monster guarding Kubo's father's breastplate. To get his prize, Kubo must get past the giant eyeballs, which threaten to hypnotize him into a watery grave.







Dan Casey / digital



Ean McNamara / digital

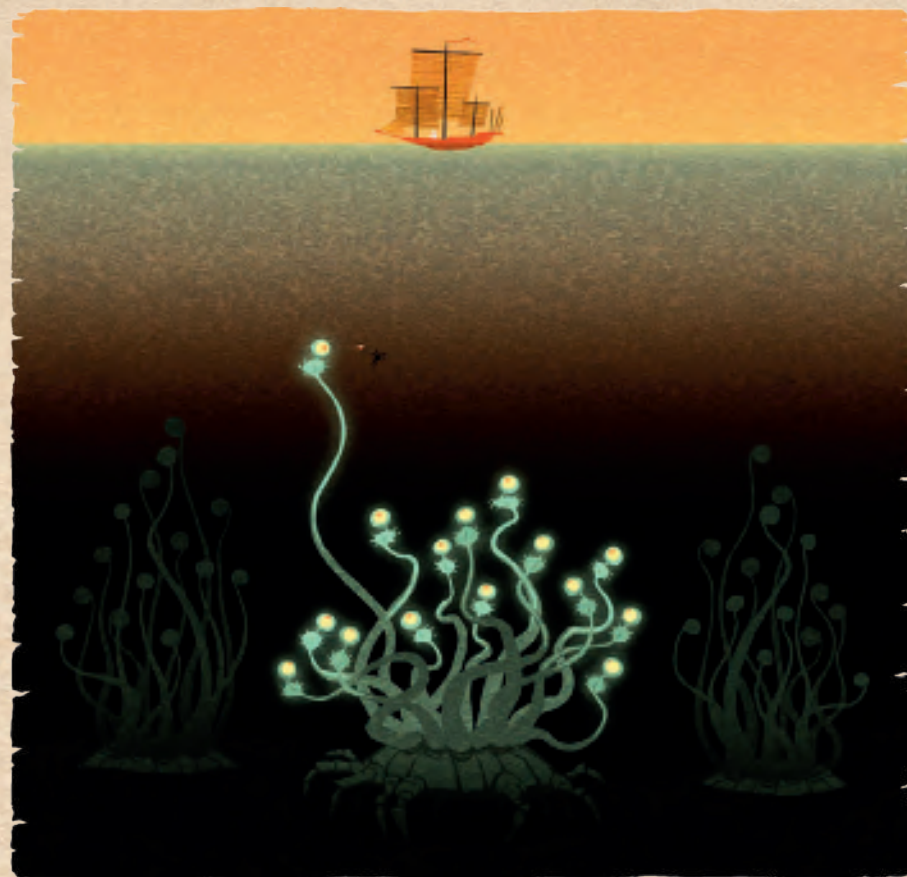


Josh Holtsclaw / digital





Nelson Lowry / digital



Ean McNamara / digital

I couldn't wait to take stop-motion puppets underwater. The idea was overwhelming and insane. The feel of an underwater environment is defined by lighting and motion. The concept artwork set the course for the color palette, mood, and how to best bring a Kubo aesthetic into an underwater environment. Then we collaborated with the animators to create authentic underwater motion, which was the key to making the monster believable.

-STEVE EMERSON, VFX supervisor



Nelson Lowry / digital



THE BATTLE

ONE OF THE SISTERS tracks Kubo to the boat in the middle of the Long Lake. As Kubo and Beetle battle the underwater monster, Monkey engages Sister in an epic battle.

Stop-motion action sequences are notoriously difficult. In a live-action film, an action scene is the concentrated distillation of hours of coverage surgically winnowed down in the edit bay to scant seconds of exhilarating footage. In stop-motion, we can't shoot coverage. Every shot has to be meticulously planned and choreographed. Every frame of every camera move must be programmed and translated to mechanized motion control rigs. Every gesture of every puppet is calculated, but it all needs to feel spontaneous. That it's alive. It's a testament to the collective ingenuity and toil of the story team, rigging department, camera and lighting crew, VFX artists, and the animators that it all looks so dynamic and effortless.

-TRAVIS KNIGHT, director and producer



Ean McNamara / digital (three images)



Film still (five images)

SAFE ON SHORE

WHEN KUBO, Monkey, and Beetle reach the far shore of the lake, they rest and regroup for the night in a cave. As Monkey tells a story, Kubo helps her animate the tale with the bits of wood, stone, flowers, and leaves that litter the floor.





Nelson Lowry / digital



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital





Anthony Holden / digital



Anthony Holden / digital



Japanese Crane Orchid
(fictional type)



Petals rotate
like hands
on a clock to
make a "star."



Katsura Pod
(Baby Kuba)



Undersides of feathered petals
are yellow, and can be flipped
to make Sariatu's kimono.



Sisters burnt
(like paper)

KATSURA POD
KUBO



MAPLE LEAF BECOMES
"DRIGAMI" HANZO



CASUAL
SARIATU



CASUAL
HANZO



ARMORED
HANZO





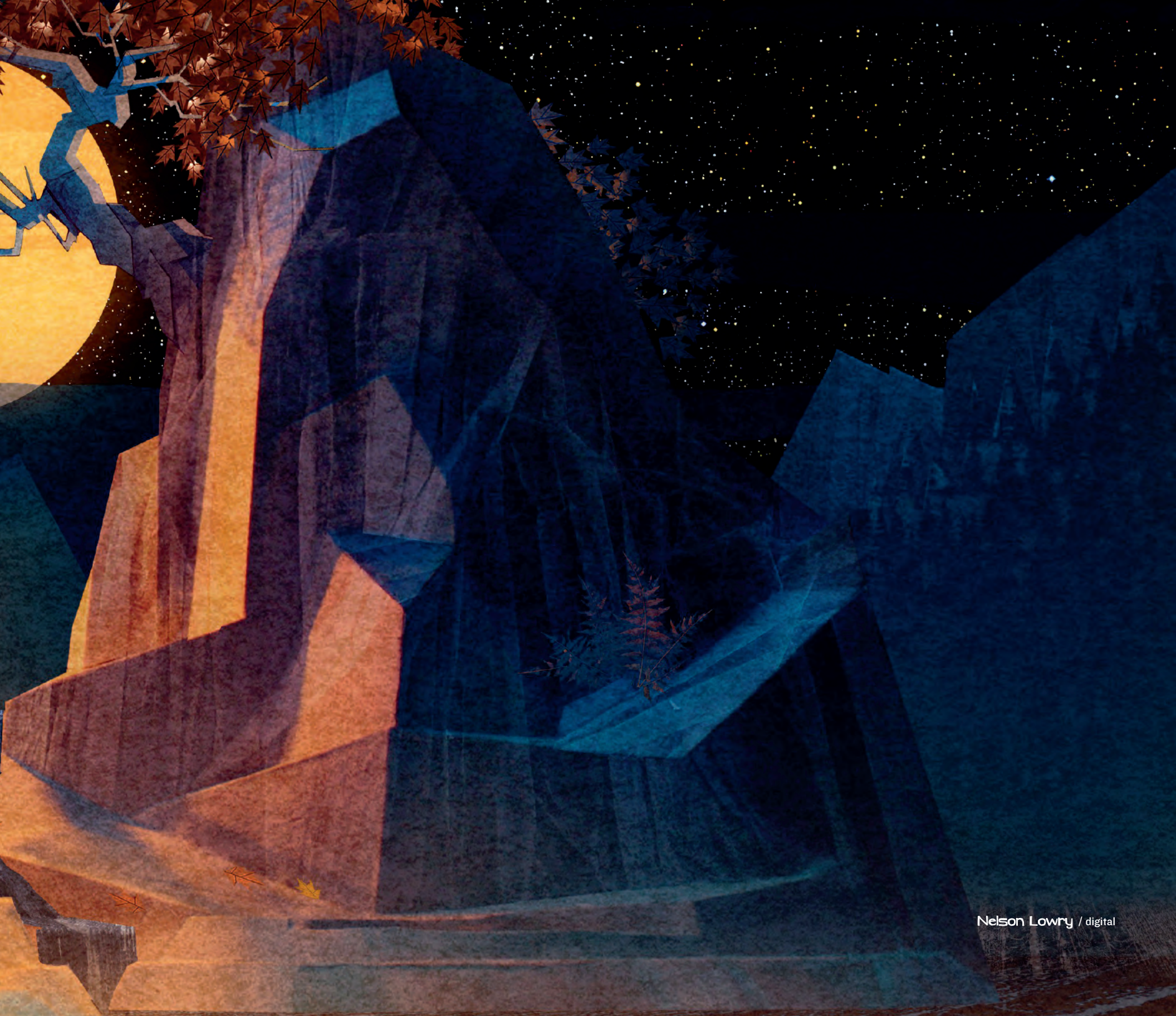
We always try to veer from realism. And that comes from the production designer's initial artwork. We take our concept art very seriously and very literally. We're always exploring how we can translate the art into a three-dimensional object that will look like the thing that you're trying to represent, but not be photorealistic.

-PHIL BROTHERTON, assistant art director

KUBO'S DREAM

KUBO DREAMS of his father's fortress and sees the helmet, the final piece of the armor he is searching for, being guarded by an army of samurai. He wakes inspired to set off in search of the final prize.







Nelson Lowry / digital

The artwork for Kubo's dream required restraint. We referenced the austere kabuki production style of the Japanese opera. The location needed to be magical but not distracting. For such a simple and elegant set we used all manner of trickery ourselves, including miniatures, folding waterfalls, and digital set extensions.

-NELSON LOWRY, production designer



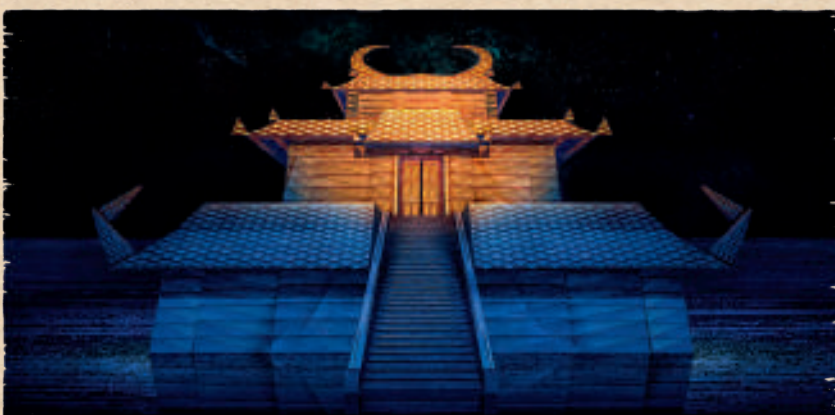
Trevor Dalmer / digital



August Hall / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



Megan Tindle / paper

Origami was key to so many creative and aesthetic choices in the movie. It enabled us to explore fantastical visions that could only ever be convincingly realized in animation.

-CHRIS BUTLER, writer and head of story





August Hill / digital



Origami maple tree for Kubo's dream sequence



Nelson Lowry / digital

THE JOURNEY

KUBO and his friends set off for Hanzo's Fortress, trekking over a magnificent landscape.







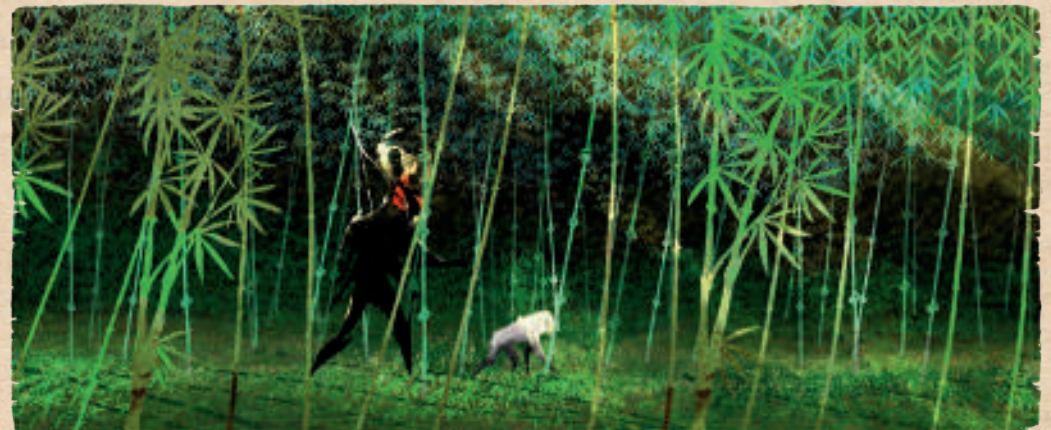


Although working within a mainly realistic lighting framework, we do at times get more stylized with the light. By exaggerating the colors and effects of light found in nature, we give a dramatic and epic look to our expansive exteriors while at the same time preserving an overall naturalistic feel.

-FRANK PASSINGHAM, director of photography



August Hall / digital



August Hall / digital

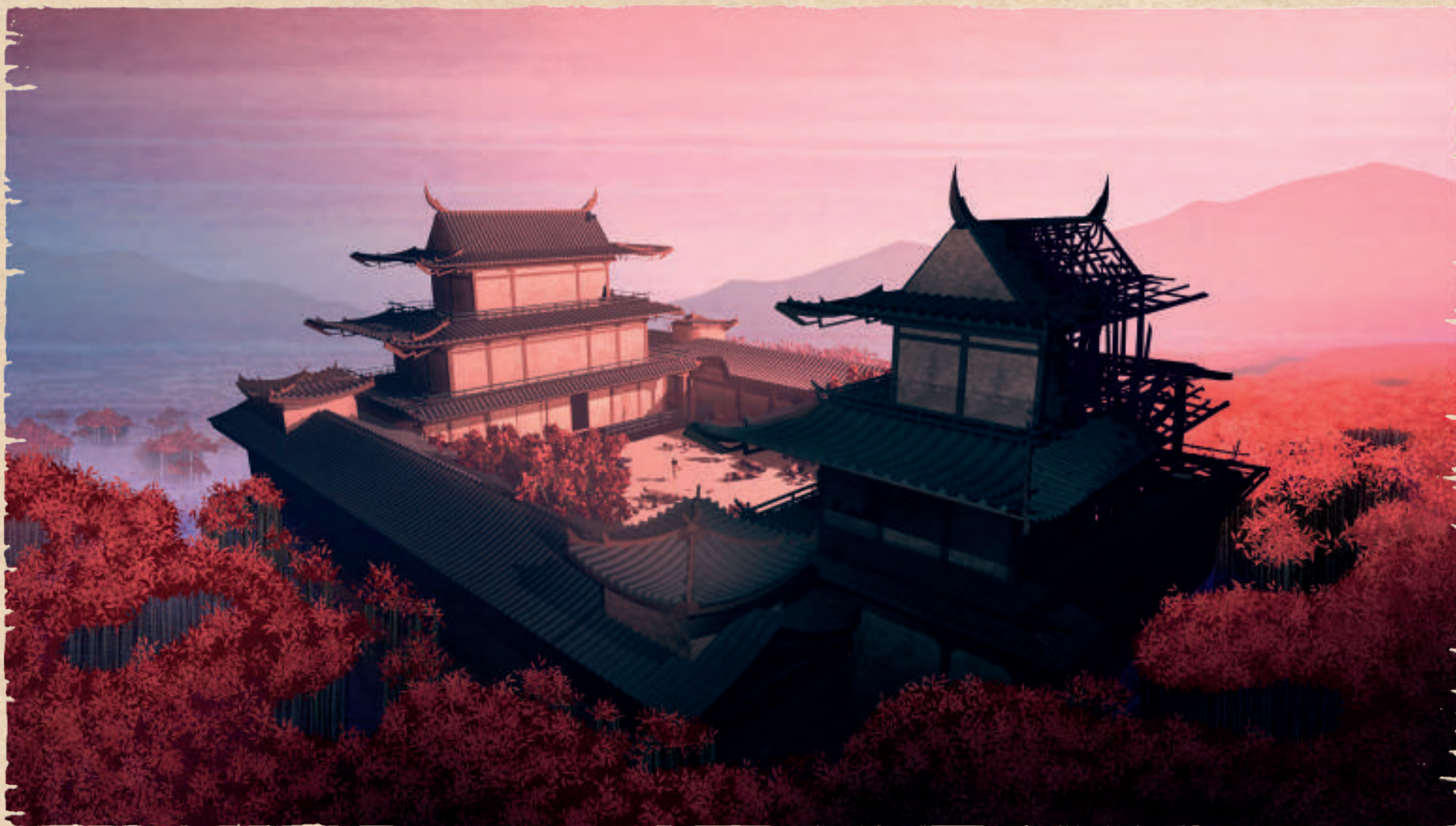




PART THREE
THE RETURN

HANZO'S FORTRESS

WHEN KUBO FINALLY opens the door to his father's home, he finds it deserted and covered in the dust of many years' neglect. A terrible battle took place there long ago, leaving behind a relic of death and destruction.



Ean McNamara / digital



Lou Romano / digital



August Hall / digital



Early small-scale development of Hanzo's fortress set



@IranianAnimationHome



Ean McNamara / digital



Ean McNamara / digital

Hanzo's Fortress inspired a lot of questions for the designers. Where does it come from? No one's been in the fortress for ten years. What does that mean exactly? Is it dusty, is it weathered? Every set design begins with some of these questions. We have to create the backstory to this world and what happened in this particular environment, and that in turn influences all of the small details.

-KEITH MCQUEEN, head of model making



Josh Holtzclaw / digital



Ean McNamara / digital











Blood-red bamboo busts through the ground as nature has taken over in the intervening years. A massive crack, created by some seismic force, splits the courtyard and puts all the action on an angle, making the space feel not quite right. Dark, cool colors throughout add to the sense of desolation. It's clear bad things have happened here—and are about to happen again.

—ALICE BIRD, art director



Film still

THE RUINS

THE TOWN that Kubo left at the beginning of the film is now in ruins, annihilated by the monsters on his trail.



August Hall / digital





August Hall / digital



August Hall / digital



August Hall / digital



Film still

THE BOOK OF KUBO



KUBO'S GRANDFATHER is powerful and serene, hiding a menacing and conniving nature beneath an exterior of wise benevolence. He wants nothing more than to capture Kubo and bring him back into the fold of his other-worldly family.



Grandfather's costume is based on a *sokutai* robe silhouette, which was the robe worn by emperors at the Japanese imperial court and by military officials. It has a long train that goes under the feet from front to back and requires a short, hardly visible sliding step. The shape of his collar is a cheeky nod to Klaatu, a humanoid alien visitor to earth in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

-**DEBORAH COOK**, costume designer



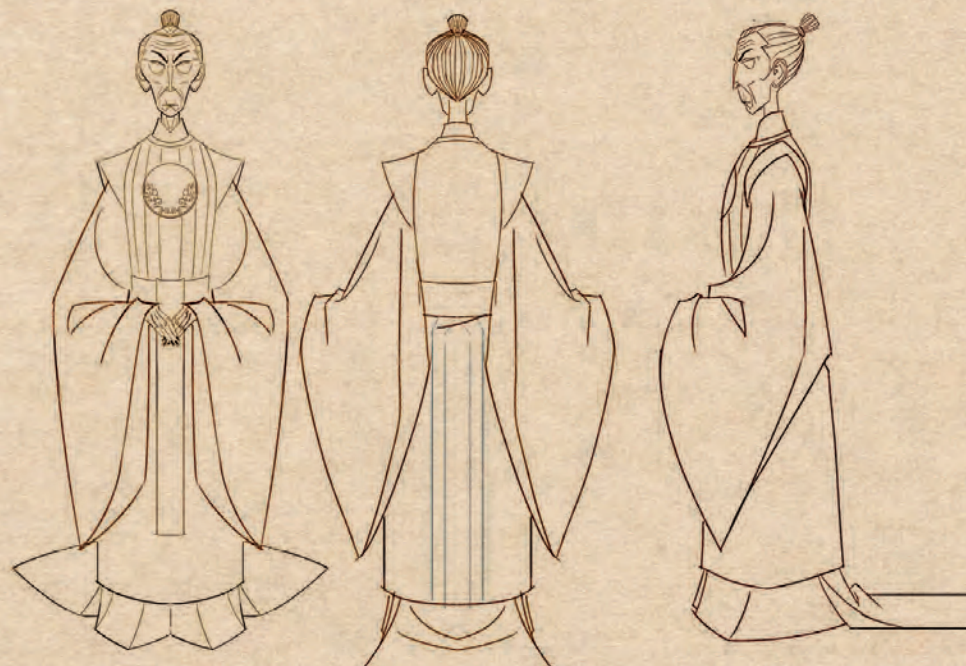
Josh Holtsclaw / digital



Deborah Cook / collage



Trevor Dalmer / digital



Shannon Tindle / digital

THE MOON BEAST



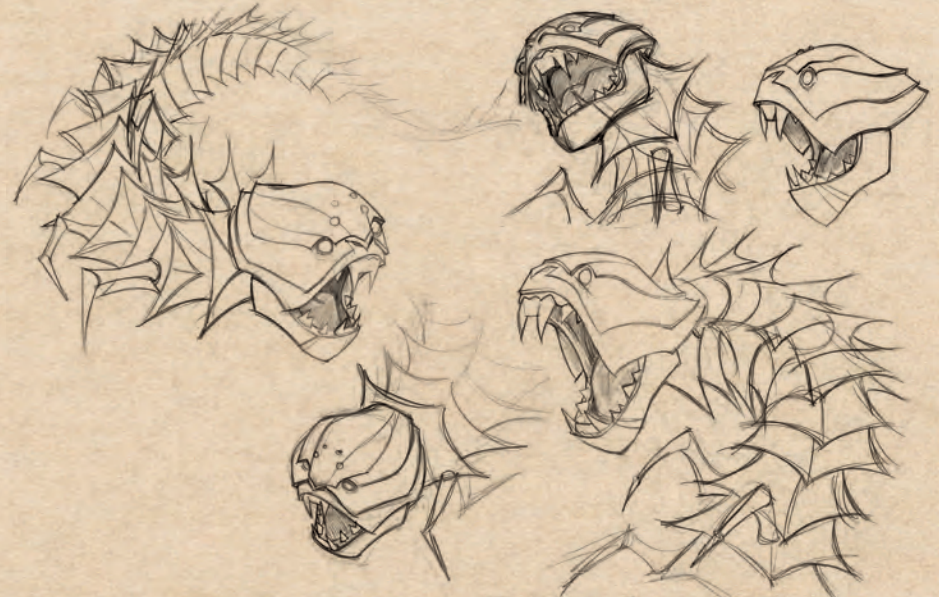
KUBO'S FINAL BATTLE is against the merciless Moon Beast. Huge, serpent-like, and glowing, it is a manifestation of the pure rage of a will denied.



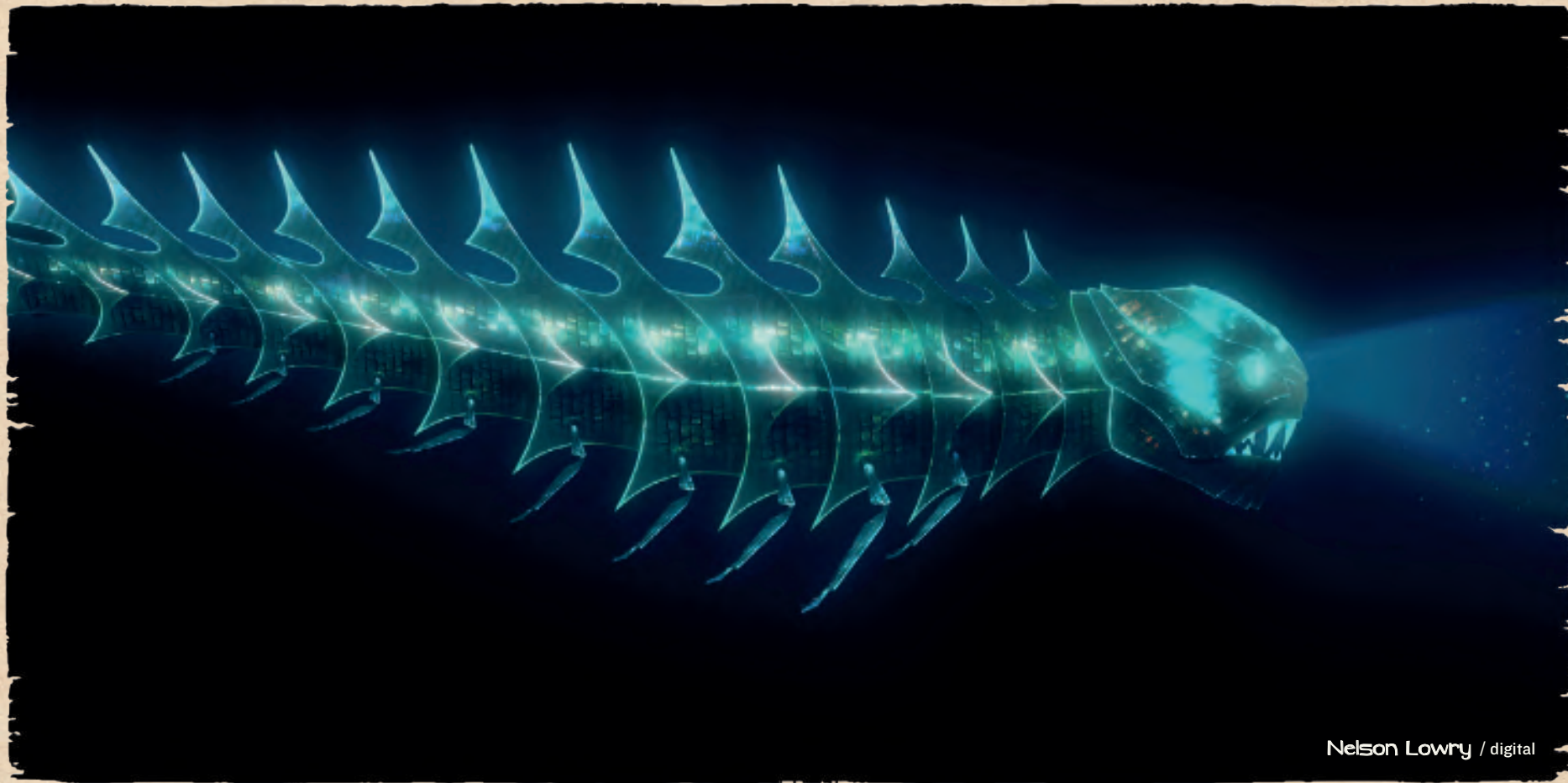
Trevor Dalmer / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



David Vandervoort / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



Some of the many Moon Beast mouths that were created



Kent Melton / clay



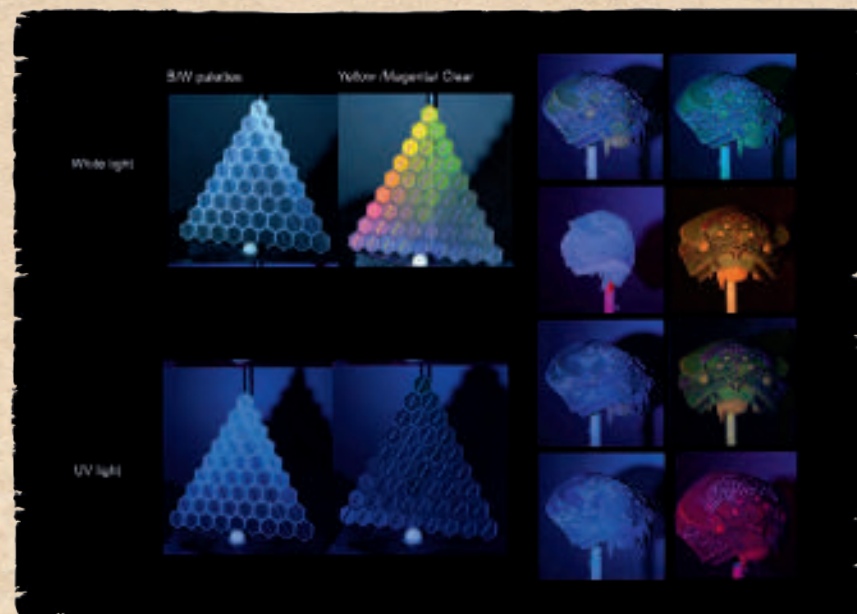
Nelson Lowry / digital



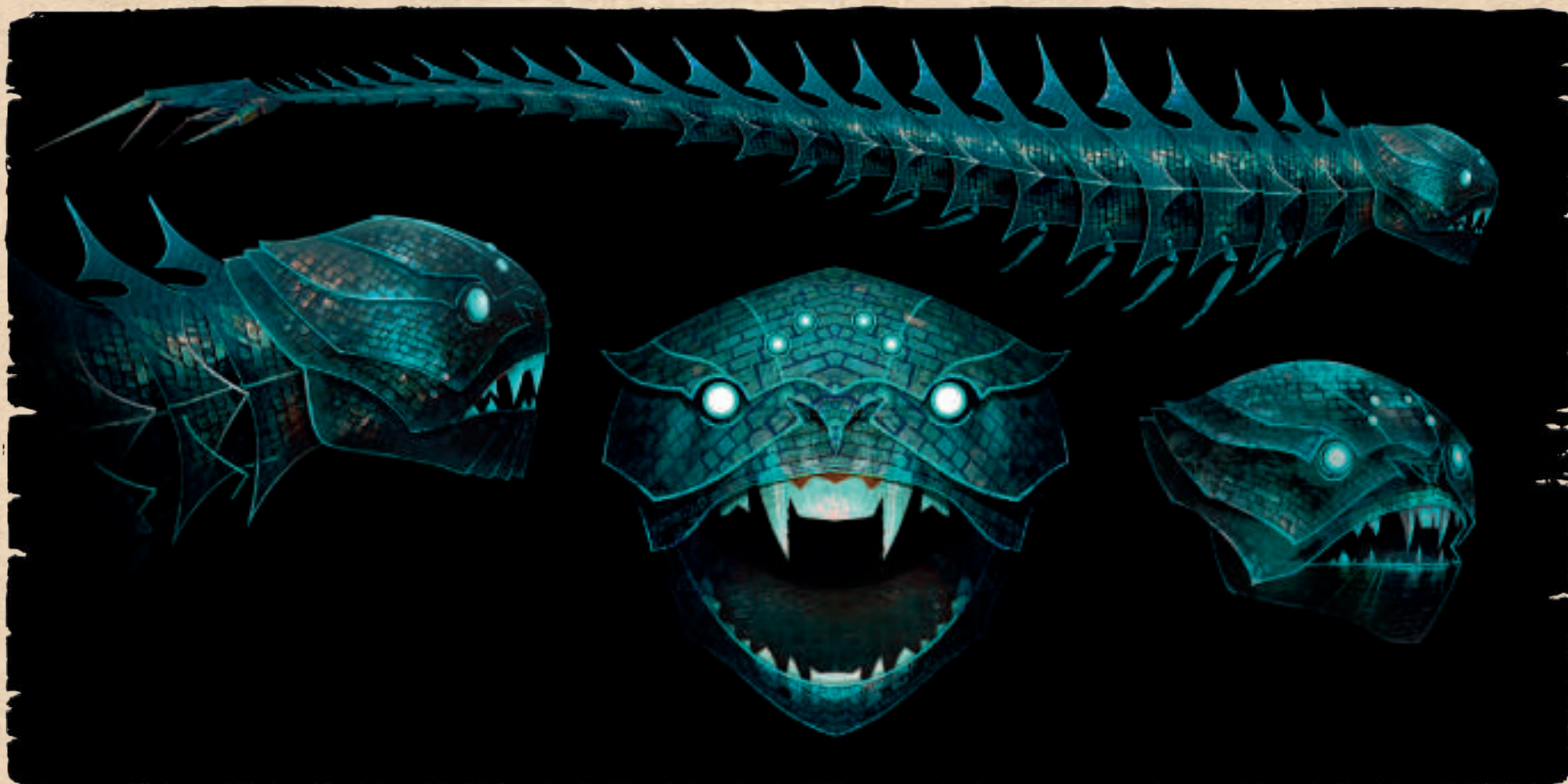
Adam Fisher posing the Moon Beast mid-shot

The Moon Beast needed to have this elaborate glowy sea creature feel to its design. Because of this, its construction ended up being a collaboration between the rapid prototype and rigging departments. The design was conceived in CG, then printed out as translucent shells, and then rigged.

-**BRIAN MCLEAN**, director of rapid prototype



Experimenting with the color palette for the Moon Beast's look



Nelson Lowry / digital

THE END

IN THE END, Kubo finds his own way to challenge his grandfather, drawing strength from the lessons he has learned on his journey.



Shannon Tindle / digital



Josh Holtsclaw / digital



Josh Holtsclaw / digital



Kubo's helmet is a synthesis of an early-neolithic Jomon-era Shinto bell with its rope markings.

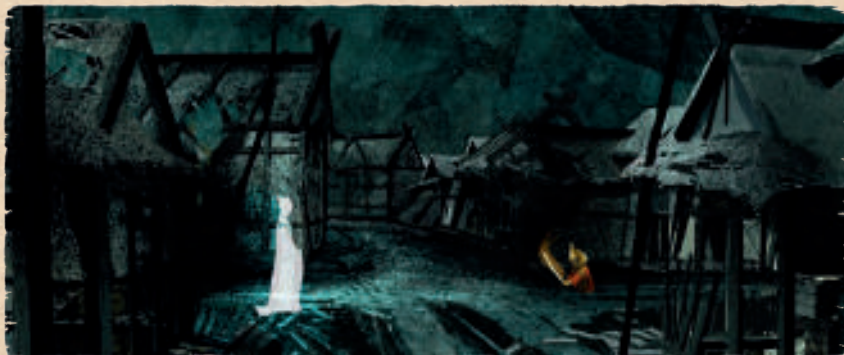
-**DEBORAH COOK**, costume designer



Josh Holtsclaw / digital



Nelson Lowry / digital



August Hall / digital



Film still

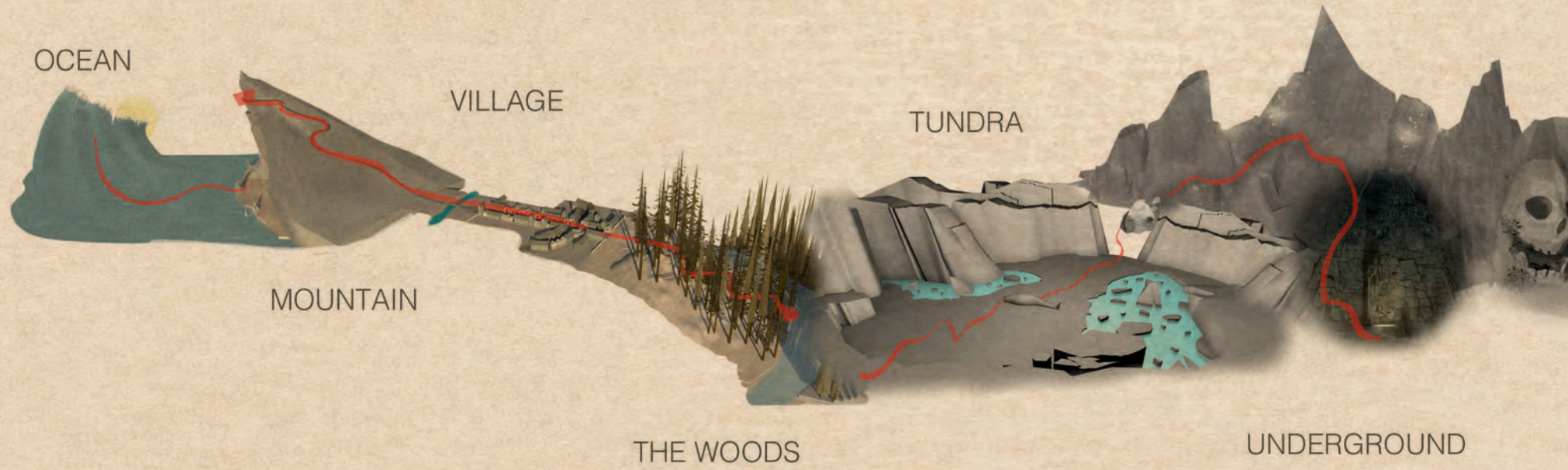


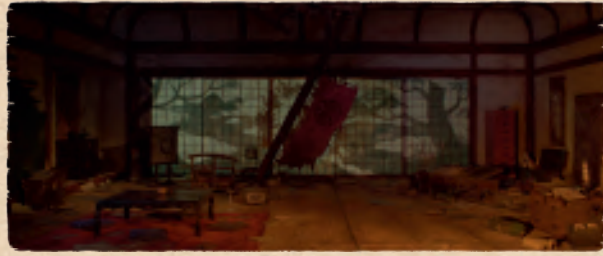
Kubo's story is fundamentally about loss, about understanding mortality and how that knowledge can give our lives meaning. This is a central part of growing up. And some of us have to deal with it way before we should.

-TRAVIS KNIGHT, director and producer



Film still





THE LONG LAKE

HANZO'S FORTRESS



VILLAGE

JOURNEY



Film stills (top and bottom)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was a pleasure to work on, from my first awe-struck walk-through of the sets and workshops at LAIKA to putting the finishing touches on the text in the final layout. A diverse village of talented and dedicated people assisted and inspired me along the way. Special thanks are due to Travis Knight, Arianne Sutner, and Martin Pelham at LAIKA, as well as the many concept artists, animators, story boarders, puppet creators, sets builders, and visual effects wizards that lent me their time and wisdom along the way. A big thank you to the tireless Beth Weber at Chronicle Books—I couldn't have put together the complex and often fluid pieces of the book without her guidance and advice. And finally, thanks to Cat Grishaver and Michael Morris for designing such a gorgeous volume.



@IranianAnimationHome

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

TRAVIS KNIGHT is LAIKA's president and CEO as well as lead animator on LAIKA's first feature, *Coraline*; producer and lead animator on both *ParaNorman* and *The Boxtrolls*; and producer and director on *Kubo and the Two Strings*. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

EMILY HAYNES is the co-founder of BluePen, an editorial development agency. She is the author of numerous books, including *Ganesha's Sweet Tooth* and *Designing With Pixar*. She lives and works in Oakland, California.





FROM LAIKA, the Academy Award®-nominated studio behind *Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, and *The Boxtrolls*, comes a new adventure set in a mythical ancient Japan. This in-depth look at *Kubo and the Two Strings* offers a behind-the-scenes view of the amazingly detailed artwork and unique stop-motion animation style involved in the film's creation.

خانه انیمیشن



@IranianAnimationHome



animation.ir