

A Brief on Comics and Sequential Art-

By R. Perry.

Whether called comic strips, comic books, comix, graphic novels, funnies, or whatever other name they go by, the history of sequential art is as long as written word, longer in fact. Yet nowadays comics, comics as art and as literature, have been relegated to the realm of childish pursuit, to be left behind with the onset of puberty. Fortunately, some of this erroneous attitude towards one of man's most unique and oldest forms of communication has begun to soften, in some cases to the point that comic books have begun to be studied in detail and analyzed in our universities, taking their rightful place alongside the great literature of our day. But in order to fully appreciate where Sequential Art is, it is important to understand a bit about where it's been.

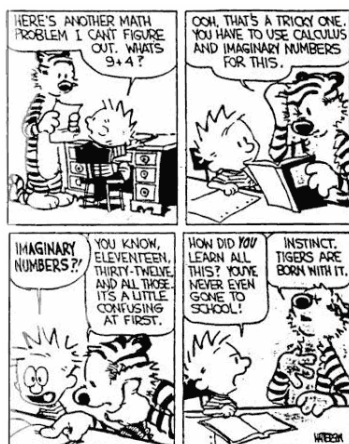
Pt1. Definitions.

To begin, we should settle on a couple of definitions. *Comics* or *comic books* refers to longer multi page publications such as Batman, while *comic strips* is a reference to the funnies in your newspaper. We will also often use the nomenclature of *sequential art*, which by our definition is a series of at least two images that tell a tale. To be a little more specific, what this means is a series of *at least* two images arranged next to each other in space and time to tell a story. This can refer to any of a number of different art forms, be it issues of *Superman*, the daily antics of *Calvin & Hobbes*, or the *Tortures of Saint Erasmus*, an illustrated guide to torture from the mid 15th century. There are absolutely no restrictions on subject matter, message, style or quality.

These ARE Sequential Art



Batman, Bob Kane

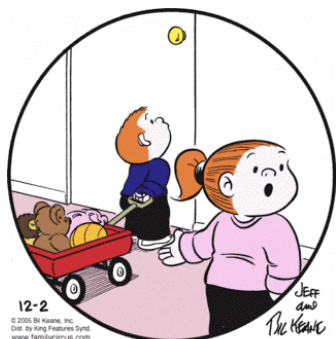


Calvin & Hobbes,
Bill Watterson



A Harlot's Progress
William Hogarth

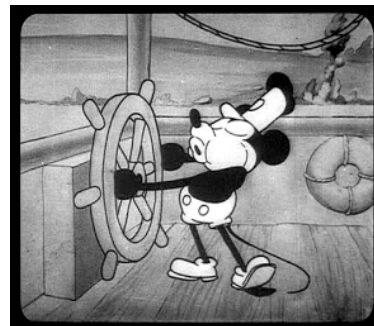
These ARE NOT Sequential Art



"WE SUCK AND
ARE ONLY ONE PANEL LONG."
Family Circus Redux,
B. Keane & Rick



Mona Lisa,
Leonardo daVinci



Steamboat Willie
Walt Disney

Multiple images arranged in sequence next to each other in time and space to form a story.
It's as simple as that!

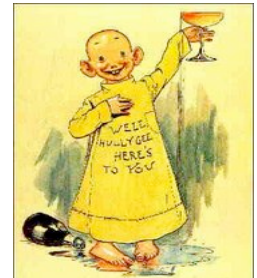
Pt2. history.

So now that we have a definition, let's talk history. Some of the very first examples of art and writing *ever* were sequences of pictures telling stories. In the case of the ancient Egyptians, what started as painted stories changed over time to where each image itself had meaning, becoming what we call today hieroglyphs. These symbols were later adapted and eventually morphed into the phonetic writing form we know and use today. The pre-Columbian Central Americans also had sequential pictures that were painted onto a 36ft long screenfold manuscript "discovered" by Cortés around 1519, making him one of the first comic book fan boys. These early comics didn't use panels to differentiate scenes the way we're used to today, but that certainly doesn't discriminate against them. From Greek paintings to Japanese scrolls, the world has had a lush history of Sequential Art, of comics. And, like most art, these pieces existed only for the elite until the wonder of the printing press.

Block printing was invented sometime in the 9th century in China and, more relevantly for our purposes here, used in Europe some 30 or so years before Gutenberg's famous movable type press brought books to the masses beginning in 1448. Block printing, the carving images onto a flat material (wood, metal, rubber, potatoes) to make an identical printed copy, meant that illustrations could be replicated time and time again until the block eroded. The ramifications for the printing and creation of comics, of sequential art, are obvious, and were quickly seized by the church as a means of printing *Bibliae pauperum*, or Pauper's Bibles, Bibles with the bulk of the text replaced by pictures depicting the tales of the Bible for the illiterate and the tragically hip. But, alas, as literacy flowed from Gutenberg's machine outwards into Europe, it became rarer and rarer to find instances of words intermingled with pictures. In fact, instances of sequential art at all became harder to find as mankind moved to words alone to tell his story and artists sought more and more to achieve only "realism" with their paintings. Comics seemed doomed to die.

In the early 1800s a Professor of Literature at the University of Geneva named Rodolphe Töpffer began to experiment with combining a couple of his hobbies. An occasional painter, caricaturist and short story writer, in 1827 Rodolphe wrote and drew the *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* (The story of Mr. Wooden Head), the 30 page story of a man's misadventures while he lamely attempts the romancing of a local woman. With between one and six panels per page and narration atop each panel. The modern comic was born. But that didn't mean that it caught on right away. No, for that, we have to cross over to America almost 75 years later.

The two titans of Journalism at the corner between the 19th and 20th centuries were Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Two men whose journalistic battles, whose desire for subscribers, brought about, in a very real way, the Spanish American War in fits of jingoistic reporting and yellow journalism that would 100 years later provide the basis for Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. Out of this crazed effort to gain readers came the comic strip *Hogan's Alley* and from the gross journalism the papers had descended into came cartoon's first superstar, the Yellow Kid. Leaping colors on the otherwise gray newsprint abounded around these huge (17"x23") inserts of what were basically full page editorial cartoons first published in 1895 in Pulitzer's *New York World*, and soon appearing concurrently (done by a different artist) in Hearst's *New York Journal*. Two years later, as the reading public grew tired of *Hogan's Alley* and it's star, Hearst introduced the *Katzenjammer Kids*. While these two comics didn't invent, per se, the basic aspects of comic language that are taken for granted these days, they did pull them all together regularly and introduced the modern comic lexicon to the world writ large. The speech balloons, motion lines and sweat drops all appeared in these early works, their popularity solidifying the foundation for sequential art in the 20th century. Comics as we know them were basically born. But something was missing. A certain *je ne sais pas*. The new medium needed its first master.



Five years into the new century, the cartoonist, designer, and vaudevillian, Winsor McCay, introduced his masterpiece, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. The tour de force of sequential art that would catapult comic strips and cartoons from the world of amusement and novelty and up to the forefront of the world of high Art. Visually stunning, elegantly written, and stretching the very notions of what art and design could offer, *Little Nemo* stands as a pinnacle of man's achievement in storytelling. The effects of McCay's masterpiece would be felt and everpresent through every form that sequential art, comics, was to take from then on into modernity. It influenced, in it's way, not only comics, but film, theatre, and literature. It is not an unreasonable statement to make that virtually every form of art in the 20th century, but especially those of film and comics can trace some part of their inspiration back to McCay's whimsical romps through the land of dreams. With *Little Nemo* as a guide, comic strips entered a renaissance that included such luminaries as E.C. Segar (*Popeye*), Bud Fisher (*Mutt and Jeff*), and George Herriman, whose surrealist strip *Krazy Kat* about a mouse throwing a brick at a cat served as one of many inspirations for James Joyce's *Finnigan's Wake*. Winsor McCay can also be credited, really, as the inventor of animation. While two other attempts had been made at animation, they were embryotic things to see if it was even possible to draw on film. McCay's cartoons had an understanding of motion from the onset that it would take 20 years and Walt Disney to recreate. McCay toured the country with his cartoons and quick-drawing vaudeville show as one of the most popular acts in America. His creations were what every other comic of the first half of the century would be compared to.

Pt.3 comic books.

Next came comic books. The first American comic books were actually collected reprints of popular comic strips. These were popular enough but comics as their own artform truly came into their own in the 1930s. Following an influx of comic books from Europe including the Belgian classic, *Tintin*, by Hergé, American cartoonists began creating comics of their own, falling away from the now youthful appeal of the comic strips and depending more on the adventure and mystery themes dominating the pulp magazines of the day. The ultimate culmination of these early American comics was National Publication's (later DC comics) *Superman*. Wildly successful, comic readership leapt in America, given a colossal boost as the nation entered World War II and the country found itself in need of unfaltering heroes, fighting evil in a world of black and white. Comics were a major form of escapism, both for the kids at home and the men at war, despite the erratic quality of art, story and printing. This era of caped crusaders and strict codes of right and wrong was known as the Golden Age of Comics.

After the War, the comic industry reimagined itself away from the gaudiness and the superheroes of the Golden Age, turning to those markets which were unrepresented by the superhero comics that were by then aimed mostly at young boys. Teen comics, westerns, romances, science fiction, crime, and the talking animals of Disney erupted onto the scene. While comics seemed bound and poised for popular appeal and acceptance, there was a cloud on the horizon. Spawned by a sudden, irrational fear by various parent groups for the sanctity and innocence of their children, combined with the McCarthyism and red witch hunts of the fifties, the comic industry became a pariah. Accused of everything from increased drug use among children to a secret homosexual agenda, the industry was burdened by the self imposed Comics Code, a set of guidelines which was intended to save the industry by imposing "the most stringent code in existence for any communications media." Indicated in the Comics Code were depictions of excessive violence, gore, sexuality and vampires. Authority figures were *always* respected and good must *always* win. Cut off from the best sellers and creative output that werewolves and true crime had afforded them, comic book companies either went out of business or again turned to the now watered down superheroes who had carried them so well before.

The Adam West *Batman* series, a cartoony live action television show from the 60s, is the most iconic example of what Sequential Art was like under the Comics Code. A campy lighthearted romp through a brightly colored Gotham city where the good guys always win and no one ever gets hurt. While in hindsight this certainly appears to have been the norm in the era, there was actually a lot more happening. Despite the massive regulatory burdens, and in some ways because of them, the 60s saw two huge leaps forward in the world of comics and sequential art. The first was in 1961 when, working for Marvel Comics, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee introduced the *Fantastic Four*: superheroes who were human. With origins and powers just as fantastical as their competitors, Marvel's heroes were also Joe Everyman. The *Fantastic Four* and the Marvel titles that followed had ushered in the imperfect hero, superheroes who argued and fought and worried about the rent. This new definition of fallible and flawed heroes was furthered with *Spiderman* and perfected in 1963 with *the X-men*, which was essentially a soap opera wearing bright tights. And while I remain glib about its origins, it can be justifiably said that, at it's best, the *X-men*, with its racial interplay and oppressed characters, would be used as a commentary on the oppression that the creators saw around them, be it through racial, religious or sexual discrimination and oppression.

The other significant outcome from the infliction of the Comics Code upon the industry was the rise of underground comics, or comix, in the late 60s. Created to appeal to an older audience and often taking it's themes from the very subjects that were forbidden under the Comics Code, the often self-published comix were essentially an outreach program from the 60s counterculture, angry and repressed by the authority they saw around them. While the X-men showed the way that was to come with their personal problems taking just as much of the stagemtime as saving the world, it was the Comix scene, with its gritty focus on realism and breaking the rules that would eventually most move sequential art back in the direction of art, that lofty perch from which it had fallen in the years since McCay.

The late 80s and early 90s brought with them arguably the two most important comics ever written. First, in 1986-87 came Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, the 12 issue superhero series that first proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that, in the right hands, comics could transcend the trappings of their origins, moving and nearly usurping the position of the novel as the acme of storytelling. Much as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* brought vaudeville across the gaping chasm of low art versus high Art, Moore's *Watchmen* elevated the American comic book, the superhero, up from the depths of immaturity and irrelevance to the self exploration and commentary of other great works of art. On the other hand we have Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. A surreal biography of the creator's life and the life of his parents, both holocaust survivors, *Maus* brought to the "low medium" of comics a high concept work of Art. Much as Brecht brought the theatre down to the vaudeville watching public, presenting them with visions of the world that they might not ever have otherwise seen. *Maus*'s combination of pull-no-punches biographical storytelling, mixed with storyland style characterization and visuals won the creator, Art Spiegelman a Special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, with the only question being not whether to award such prestige to a mere comic book, but whether the work should be considered fiction or biography.

Pt4. comic strips.

Of course, it was not just comic books that continually pushed the envelope throughout the century. The comic strip, those daily paper throwaways, also evolved into something important for a period. Where a person had to specifically grab a comic book, comic strips were available to any John Public who bought a newspaper. To be fair to the history, some of the huge growth in newspaper sales in the first half of the century and a general increase in the news-savvyness of Americans before the 40s was due to the comics. People just had to know what Popeye did next, and if they happened to read the front page on their way back to see about Little Orphan Annie, all the better. The daily form also brought us such political commentators as Walt Kelly (*Pogo*), Garry Trudeau, (*Doonesbury*), Al Capp (*Li'l Abner*), and Berke Breathed (*Bloom County*), beyond the luminaries like Charles Schultz (*Peanuts*) or Bill Watterson (*Calvin and Hobbes*) who worked more strictly for entertainment than to exercise a political agenda. However, in spite of the rank excellence of some comic strips, most of them have dumbed themselves down over the years to avoid being removed from syndication at newspapers they might offend or being moved to the editorial page. This dumbing down of the sequential art form viewed by more people than any other has led to the unfair accusation that all comics are for kids.

Pt5. just for kids.

Almost since its modern reinception at the beginning of the 20th century, the comic form, be it strip or comic book, has been tagged and hindered with the “childrens” label and has been branded as a degenerative artform, warping our kids minds, leading down the reefer madness path to drunken violence. The disapproval and naysaying, far from being based on any cumulative data, dates back to the appearance of the first American comic strips in the Sunday supplements of the New York papers. Sundays, being for bible study, were not to be marred by such devices and children were not to be tempted by the bright colors and colorful characters of the new artform. This brings us back, though, to the question of why comics have been viewed as a child’s artform at all. Far from being for children, the first comic, *Hogan’s Alley*, was intended as a way to gain a stronger readership amongst the immigrant community of New York. While starring kids, the comics tackled adult social and political issues and situations and it wasn’t until Winsor McCay spun the *Little Nemo* comics off from his wildly popular adult tales of *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend* that children had a comic strip devoted almost entirely to themselves. While there seems to be no good reasoning behind the “comics are for kids” argument beyond the self fulfilling prophecy of bad art and just-for-kids storylines that dominated after the relegation to kiddie section, it has certainly been true that in the last 20 or so years, comic books have seen a significant rise in both the seriousness with which they are created and taken. Nowadays it is, in fact, not too uncommon to find modern comics being discussed in great literature programs on college campuses all over the country. This trend towards adult themed literature with pictures and superheroes who are actually adults, which began with the underground and social movements of the 60s, seems to be on an unabated course towards eventual acceptance as a perfectly legitimate form of storytelling in all ranges of American society. At this point it is inertia within the country and industry that continue the “kiddie notion” of what comics are while the bulk of what’s actually being printed is no longer just for kids.

Pt6. the rest of the world.

A brief mention should be made here of sequential art in the rest of the world, most especially in Europe and Japan. In Europe, while residing in a vastly smaller market than they do on this continent, the comic has long been envisioned and presented as a means of presenting complex artistic and dramatic visions. Most European comics are published in a longer format much closer to what we would call a *graphic novel*. But where we should really be looking is westward to Japan. Comics in their current form arose in Japan shortly after WWII as American comics flowed into Japan and the country tried to “modernize” itself, using comics as a means of adapting some of America’s culture for its own purposes. The man who would be known as the father of *Manga* (Japanese for “random or whimsical pictures”) and in fact one of the undisputed masters of sequential art period, was a doctor named Osamu Tezuka. Tezuka borrowed liberally from the look and style of early Disney cartoons but combined them with a seriousness of tone and story that belied their look, resulting in both the massive success of these works as well as their stature as the foundation for the Manga artform. With an implicit understanding early on that comics could be an adult artform, the Japanese never pigeonholed the format the way it was in much of the Western world. This allowed the artform to evolve and, eventually, seemed to leap out of nowhere into the American mainstream in recent years.

Pt.7 wrap up.

Comics, like literature, film or fine art, is a living medium, evolving with the times and the technology. Updated printing technology allowed for darker, more subtle colors, allowing the medium to cast off the primary hues that had been the only printable color options for so many years. Shades in the printing meant shades of grey in the storytelling. Recent comics have been not only colored on computers, but in some cases constructed or entirely drawn on computers. And like books, music, and film, the internet has allowed entirely new means of distributing comics, be it through webcomics or simply the ability of a small creator to sell his material anywhere in the world.