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## **The Aesthetics and Academics of Graphic Novels and Comics**

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*[Revision of a paper presented at the ARLIS/NA Annual Conference in Banff, May 2006.]*

If anything, the Danish cartoon controversy during the winter of 2006 proved that comics and sequential art hold important places in our lives. While photography and film often still bear the conviction that they are objective — even in this day of digital enhancement and manipulation — drawings show evidence of the human hand and point directly to the person who made them and who may believe in what was drawn. It is therefore important that librarians, and art librarians in particular, become informed about this medium which proves so significant to our patrons and, occasionally, the world.

### **A Brief Introduction to Sequential Art**

Many genres may be considered sequential art and can be viable collecting options for art libraries: comic books, graphic novels, storyboards, and more tangentially, graffiti and sticker art. Although patrons may not differentiate between graphic novels and comics, it is important for librarians, at least in collection-development terms, to make the distinction. Comics, in production, publication, and consumption, are essentially serials. They need to be collected with an awareness of their demands on space, their basic construction (staple-bound, possibly printed on newsprint or glossy magazine paper), and the possibility that they may be published indefinitely. Graphic novels act as monographs and serve as distinct volumes within a collection; anthologies of comics can serve the same function and offer libraries that option for collecting comics. Contrary to some common misconceptions, graphic novels and comics work within and exploit art historical precedent just as traditional art forms do. If librarians work at schools with more traditional faculty, they may find themselves acting as the first advocates for graphic novels and their place in the collection. It is in the reference encounter and during bibliographic instruction that a discussion of sequential art's art history can first take place.

### **Sequential Art in Art History**

A narrative within a meta-narrative has long been a topic for art, as exhibited by Egyptian models that were placed into tombs. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art's model of a granary from

1985 BCF, the rectangle of the outer walls is broken into four vignettes — or panels, if you will — each of which contains actions that combine to tell the meta-narrative of the operation of the granary. From the *Peanuts* comic strip to *Blanket*,<sup>1</sup> Craig Thompson's 600 - page graphic opus, the strip has been used to move the narrative forward in a sequence. A single page from *Blankets*, for example, uses individual narrative panels to develop the narrative as a whole.

Illuminated manuscripts, with the text and illustrations placed separately on the page and the illustration meant to explicate the text, have long served as models for illustrated books. Closer to the way a graphic novel is meant to be read are illustrations such as an *Annunciation* page from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, where the words that the Angel Gabriel is speaking actually break the textual space and become more than abstractions. The "Word" here is literally becoming flesh and acts identically to the pictorial representations of the Annunciation.

Graphic novels and comics push beyond the boundaries of illustrated books to the point where illustrations and text are equivalent, each driving the other, rather than the illustrations supporting or attempting to explain the text. For example, Art Spiegelman used lettering on the cover of *Maus*<sup>2</sup> that suggests the bloodshed that occurred during the Holocaust, thus allowing the word to appear both as the title and as a sign evocative of actions. His conflation of the swastika and a cat's head anthropomorphized into the face of Hitler hints at the novel's visual and narrative sophistication.<sup>3</sup>

Comics' and graphic novels' narrative complexity goes far beyond a straightforward linear explanation of the text. The fifteenth-century Italian artist Masaccio compresses and plays with chronology in the painting *The Tribute Money*, manipulating the narrative so that the action featuring Christ takes place in the center of the panel and the auxiliary information — including a miracle and the payment of the tribute money itself — occurs on the edges of the composition. It is Christ's speech that is illustrated in the center, permitting him to be the primary actor in the painting, and the words illustrated in that center become concrete and prompt the rest of the narrative. Several spreads from Chris Ware's graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*<sup>4</sup> ask the viewer to read back story simultaneously with present actions and foreshadowing. Unlike Masaccio, however, Ware helpfully provides narrative arrows to guide the viewer through the revelations of his character's birth and childhood.

Even the speech and thought bubbles of comics and graphic novels have art historical precedents. Images of pre-Columbian priests and kings depict figures talking, as evidenced by the speech scrolls issuing from their mouths. The figures on Greek vases, too, are seen furthering the narrative flow of their episodes on the vases' façades by being depicted with words literally falling from their lips. Along with many other comics, Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*<sup>5</sup> exhibits the same speech scrolls and thought bubbles to elucidate its story. It also features a strong graphic style, which will prove influential to stencil graffiti, a looser and more ephemeral form of sequential art.

Finally, Japanese comics, or *manga*, have direct antecedents in art history. The nineteenth-century artist Hokusai called his casual, often humorous, drawings in his sketchbooks *manga*. His style, as well as his terminology, continues in volumes of manga such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ranma 1/2*.<sup>6</sup>

## Graphic Novels and Their Authors

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was arguably the first graphic novel to reach a wide audience, including people who were not already comic book fans, when it was first published in 1986. Its mixture of aesthetic quality and narrative sophistication established an audience for practitioners of so-called "adult" graphic novels and also for autobiographical storytelling in a sequential art style. Its importance was further recognized when it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Along with Chris Ware, who is one of the most visible graphic novelists with a recent serialized publication in the *York Times Magazine*, artists such as Craig Thompson and Marjane Satrapi bring a highly personal style to their autobiographical works. Satrapi also holds the distinction of being one of the premiere female graphic novelists in a genre that is dominated by men in its mainstream manifestations. Neil Gaiman, a comic book writer, is possibly one of the only writers in this community who can get away with re-envisioning Marvel Comics super-heroes. In *Marvel 1602*,<sup>7</sup> he places the X-Men, the Fantastic 4, a pre-Spiderman Peter Parker, and others in the turbulent world of Elizabethan England at the time of the queen's death. Clothing and names are modified to match the era, but the characters' superpowers are not hidden; rather they can be seen to act as explanations for events that could not be explained scientifically, apt for a period when the monarch's own mother was suspected of — and punished for — bewitching her husband,

Joe Sacco brought a new dimension to reporting with his graphic novels concerning Palestine and the countries involved in the Balkan conflicts of the "1990s."<sup>8</sup> Because of the time required to produce a graphic novel, Sacco spends months in areas where other reporters may only spend days. His depictions of the residents of these areas struggling to maintain normalcy brings their plight vividly to the reader. His novels may introduce news stories and conflicts to readers who otherwise show little interest in current events. Sacco's books serve as excellent reminders of the appeal that graphic novels may hold for reluctant readers or visual learners, and they are important tools for achieving multiple literacies. Similarly, the graphic adaptation of the 9/11 Commission's report<sup>9</sup> offers the possibility of reaching a broad audience and vividly recreating the events of that day for visual learners and others who might be daunted by the print version of the report. In the foreword, Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, the chair and vice-chair respectively of the 9/11 Commission, note that they "felt strongly that one of the most important and tragic events in our nation's history needed to be accessible to all" and that they believe the graphic adaptation will bring the commission's work "to the attention of a new set of readers."<sup>10</sup>

## **Bibliographic Instruction and Beyond**

It is precisely that new set of readers we are reaching when called upon to conduct bibliographic instruction. When I do a bibliographic instruction session for graphic novels, I always fill one of our library tables with a display of our newest and most popular offerings. I have found that the visual reinforcement is particularly important here, as the students need to see the result of their catalog searching. I believe it is also important for their faculty to see the student responses to the graphic novel collection. The instruction session is valuable to show students how to find publications like Spiegelman's and Sacco's books, which are often cataloged in terms of history and geography and would not be found by browsing the graphic novel shelves of the literature section. It is also a good opportunity to introduce artists with whom the students and faculty may not be familiar. I find this particularly effective when talking about female graphic novelists such as Dame Darcy, who is working outside the Marvel and DC Comics mainstream, or

Ho Che Anderson, whose controversial Martin Luther King, Jr. biography<sup>11</sup> may interest students in terms of its subject, its approach, and its dynamic use of news images, stencils to suggest graffiti, and its graphic additions in the artist's hand. The best-selling tool, however, remains the display. The objects' availability often allows for on-the-spot critique between faculty and students, which further reinforces the library's role as an active participant in the learning and creative processes.

It is my hope that a familiarity with comics and graphic novels will open up possibilities for my patrons concerning contemporary art and artists in whom they might not have had an interest before, I see sequential art emerging in sticker art and working in a viral marketing model,<sup>12</sup> such as Shepard Fairey's *Obey Giant* sticker project and the stencil graffiti marketing of the movie *Pi*, or the Linux campaign that appeared in East Coast cities several years ago.<sup>13</sup> In projects such as these, the city's streets and sidewalks, lampposts, and vending machines become the panels that wait to be activated by the stickers and paint, and with each mark they become episodes of a larger sequence. Artists such as Ida Appelbroog, with her disaffected portrayals of suburban relationships told in panel format, and Barry McGee, who creates a chaotic narrative of irregular groupings of framed paintings, both rely on sequential art tropes. Sue Williams depends on viewers' knowledge of comic book gestures to reveal the nearly hidden images in her erotic paintings. And Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, give a great gift to a stock comics character (Annlee) about to be abandoned by her company.<sup>14</sup> After purchasing the rights to Annlee, they asked several artists to give her stories, and then gave Annlee back to herself, freeing her from the need to act in anyone's narrative other than her own.

I only see the popularity of comics and graphic novels growing. They are the reasons that many of our students came to art school, and for many students they served as their first art teachers. Their presence in libraries can serve as another step in proving our alliance with our patrons and can offer libraries an opportunity to lead the way in curating an art collection that also happens to be books.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. Craig Thompson, *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003).
2. Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
3. My reading of graphic novels' play with text and image has been informed by Meyer Schapiro's essay, "Script in Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language" in *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language*, 117-98 (New York: George Braziller, 1996).
4. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000).
5. Frank Miller, *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 1988).
6. Jeff Adams, "Of Mice and Manga: Comics and Graphic Novels in Art Education," *Journal of Art & Design Education* 18 (February 1.999): 70; Masamune Shirow, *Ghost in the Shell* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Manga, 2004).

7. Neil Gaiman et al., *Marvel 1602* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2004).
8. Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000).
9. Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
10. Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, foreword to *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon.
11. Ho Che Anderson, *King: A Comic Book Biography* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003).
12. "Viral marketing and viral advertising refer to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness, through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses. It can often be word-of-mouth delivered and enhanced online; it can harness the network effect of the Internet and can be very useful in reaching a large number of people rapidly." *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Viral Marketing," <http://www.wikipedia.com> (accessed January 2, 2007).
13. Shepard Fairey's abstracted Andre the Giant face has appeared on stickers adhered to buildings and public transportation throughout the world as a way to call attention to urban surroundings. The application of the stickers is subject to a fairly rigorous code, which promotes respect for other artists' work and instructs propagators of the work to bear in mind cities' laws about defacing property. More information about the project is available from its Web site <http://www.obeygiant.com>. The *Pi* and Linux campaigns featured stencils of the symbol for pi ( $\pi$ ) and the peace sign, a heart, and the Linux penguin, respectively. The stencils appeared in cities without other explanation and created a community in-the-know as word spread about what they intended to represent, all the while appearing as other graffiti did on sidewalks and buildings with little cost to the companies producing them. See Web sites such as <http://adsoftheworld.com> for images of these campaigns.
14. Even the title of Huyghe's and Parreno's project reveals its roots in manga and Japanese animation and its questions of identity, as it is a play on *Ghost In the Shell*, one of the first examples of manga to gain popularity outside of Japan. See the artists' monograph on the project, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, *No Ghost just a Shell* (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003).

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