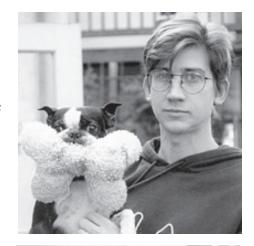# The Art of the Graphic Novel

Adapted from an address delivered at the 2004 ALAN Workshop. Mr. Shanower accompanied his talk with a beautiful slide show and refers to the slides in this address.

"**G**raphic novel" is an awkward term. The "graphic" part is okay, graphic novels always have graphics. It's the "novel" part that's a problem, because graphic novels aren't always novels told with drawings. They can be works of non-fiction or collections of short stories or, really, anything you can think of that consists of drawings that convey narrative between two substantial covers.

The term "graphic novel" isn't much better or more accurate a description than the term "comic book." But "comic book" has pejorative connotations, and many people seem either embarrassed or dismissive when confronted by it. Alternatives to the term graphic novel have been suggested—"drawn book," "sequential art," "graphic album." All these terms are just labels to describe different physical manifestations of one artform. But the term graphic novel is one that has caught on

and, for better or for worse, it seems we're stuck with it.

I'm here to speak to you about the art of the graphic novel. When you hear the phrase, the *art of the graphic novel,* you likely think of the drawings, rather than the story. But I bet most of you will agree that writing is an art just as drawing is. I'm going to talk about both.

Let's forget about graphic novels for a moment and think about what I call cartooning. Or you can call it "comic art" or "sequential art." Cartooning is the art of telling a story in pictures, often using written words as in integral part of the drawing. The history of cartooning starts a bit nebulously. Some comic art historians would include the paintings in ancient Egyptian tombs—which combined sequential drawings and hieroglyphic lettering—as comic art. Surely the Bayeux Tapestry—which shows the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066—is a form of comic art. There are plenty of similar

examples. But, in general, historians agree that the modern form of comic art began in 1895 in the pages of the newspaper. There are precursors, but R. F. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* in the *New York World* is generally accepted as the first comic strip. Newspaper comic strips became quite popular. Soon publishers began experimenting with formats, collecting newspaper strips, as well as original material, in stand-alone volumes. After much experimentation with formats, the modern comic book appeared in the mid-1930s and remained little changed for decades. In 1978 the first graphic novel that was specifically called a graphic novel—there were many precursors—appeared, *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner. In the early 1980s U.S. comic book publishers began to experiment with higher quality production values in paper stock, in reproduction, and in format. Graphic novels began to appear on every side—both original material and collections of material that had first appeared in serialized comic books. Today the tide of graphic novels shows no signs of retreating.

Now, don't think that the art of cartooning is solely an American phenomenon. The modern comic strip and comic book are certainly forms native to America, but comics are published around the world. In France they're known as bande dessinee, in Spain as historietta or tebeos, in Italy as fumetti, and in Japan as manga.

About fifteen or so years ago, manga began invading the USA and has become so popular that you've probably heard of it. But there's still confusion about what manga is, so I'd like to offer a short explanation. The word "manga" is simply the Japanese word for comics. Any comic art produced in Japan is manga. Manga's popularity in the USA—primarily among girls, a readership that American comics have for decades failed to reach—has prompted many U.S. publishers to produce comics drawn with the artistic conventions of manga. This U.S. material is called American Manga or Amerimanga.

But back to the art of graphic novels. For approximately the past twenty-five years, the level of artistry in US comics and graphic novels has risen. Where before the appearance of works worth preserving was arguably sporadic, today the number of works which are worth experiencing for their high level of artistry is growing rapidly and seems in no danger of stopping.

So if we have works worth preserving we must find a way to preserve them, and that's one reason the form called the graphic novel developed. They're not colorful but disposable supplements to the newspaper, not flimsy, ephemeral pamphlets, but substantial books meant to be placed on a bookshelf and preserved—preserved not as collectibles, preserved not as bridges to reading so-called "real" books, but preserved for their own worth—as tangible expressions of creators who have dug down into their hearts and souls and carefully arranged what they found there for the rest of the world to experience.

Now it's time to pull back the curtain on the art of the graphic novel and see how it's done.

There are probably as many methods of cartooning as there are cartoonists, but the only method I'm intimately familiar with is my own, so I'm mostly going to be using my current project, *Age of Bronze*, as an example. But in general my methods are pretty standard. So I think I'll be giving you a reasonable glimpse into the way graphic novels are created. *Age of Bronze* is my retelling of the story of the Trojan War in seven volumes. Two volumes have been published so far, *A Thousand Ships* and *Sacrifice*. I'm currently working on the third volume, *Betrayal.*

When I first thought of retelling the Trojan War legend in comic art, I assumed it was far too immense a project to seriously consider. I tried to shut it up in a back room of my mind, but I soon realized that the idea was not so much something I had hold of as much as it was something that had hold of me. So I stopped resisting and began work.

Easier said than done. *Age of Bronze* is not simply a graphic novel adaptation of Homer's *Iliad.* My goal is to retell the entire Trojan War story, which is at least

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2,800 years old and likely much older, so it's had a lot of time to generate material. I've gathered many of the different versions of the Trojan War—poems, plays, stories, paintings, opera—and I'm combining them all into one long story, while reconciling all the contradictions. And I'm not leaving anything out. So over the years I've made a lot of trips to libraries, and whenever I go into a bookstore, I always check the mythology and archaeology sections. No matter how familiar you may be with the Greek myth of the Trojan War or any of its literary or artistic descendants, I think you'll find some surprises in *Age of Bronze.*

Of course, retelling the story of the Trojan War is the most important aspect, but HOW it's retold is pretty important too. I decided to suppress the supernatural elements. I want to show what's happening on a human level—that if the Trojan War ever took place, what you see in *Age of Bronze* is what it might have looked like. In order to do that, I've set the story in the Aegean Late Bronze Age, the thirteenth century BCE, which is when the Trojan War would have occurred—if it really did occur—so I've had to do archaeological research as well as literary research.

So after being seized by the idea, deciding my approach, and gathering my research (which is actually ongoing), I sat down to work. One of the first things I did was to write an outline of the plot. Of course, the main outlines of the story were already there, but there were many details to shoehorn in. I now have three outlines of varying detail for different purposes. One is a list of the basic events of the story in order, one is a more detailed breakdown of scenes with notes on character motivation and questions I have still to find answers for, and the last is a very general outline dividing the story up into seven volumes. I conceived *Age of Bronze* as one complete story, though it's being published as seven volumes. My goal is to manage the material so that reading flows seamlessly. But because of the realities of the marketplace, the material is first serialized in comic book form. Each issue of the *Age of Bronze* comic book has twenty pages of story, so I'm finishing the project in twenty-page chunks.

For each issue I take enough of the story to provide a satisfying and well-paced chunk for the reader. I make notes from my story sources and divide the material into scenes. Then I write the script for twenty pages. Usually there are between five and eight panels per page. Each panel gets a description as well as dialog, if any. Dialog consists of the words that go in the balloons, plus captions, and sound effects. Descriptions usually indicate the characters present in the scene and their actions. If it's the first panel of a scene, I describe the background. Other pertinent details might include time of day and weather, facial expressions and moods of the characters, and important props. I often indicate the size of the panel and the angle the reader views the scene, whether it's a close-up or long shot, but sometimes I leave these decisions 'till I'm roughing out the page design, since they're subject to change.

Actually, everything is subject to change. My first draft of a script usually bears only passing resemblance to the final draft, and even then I often change things while I'm drawing the pages. Sometimes I'm changing dialog just before I send the pages to the publisher.

After I finish the script, I make three lists: characters, scenes, and props. And I design any of these things that I haven't already designed. For characters, I keep track of their ages, since I'm covering about fourteen years during the story, and their relative heights so that they stay in proportion to one another and the scenery. For each new scene and prop, I need to pull out some of my research and use it to design the new elements.

Then I'm ready to sketch a rough layout for each page. This gives me a chance to work out panel sizes, to stage each scene as effectively as possible, to make sure each page is visually interesting, and to keep the proper flow over each twenty-page section of story. I follow whatever directions I've indicated in the script, but what I draw is little more than stick figures.

When the rough layouts are finished, my framework is firmly in place, but not so rigid that I can't make changes, so it's time to start the final artwork. I cut sheets of Bristol board to size, mark the image area of each page, and draw everything in pencil, following the script and rough layouts.

Next I draw the panel borders in ink and add all the lettering and balloons in ink as well.

Then it's time to finish all the artwork in ink, scan the artwork into the computer, and send it all to the publisher.

Of course, I have to design and draw the covers for each issue, first the black and white artwork, then

I color the final cover on the computer.

Let me say a bit more about color. The interior pages of *Age of Bronze* are in black and white, but many comic books and graphic novels are in color. There are two main ways of coloring comics today. The first is to color the scanned black and white artwork by computer, and the other is to prepare the artwork itself in color before scanning that to print from. For my earlier graphic novel series, based on the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, I painted each page with watercolor.

Of course, with any graphic novel there's more to be done, designing covers and/or dust jackets, designing title pages and other fore-matter. And in *Age of Bronze*, I include maps, pronunciation guides, genealogical charts, bibliography, and so on.

I'd like to share with you how I use some of my research.

This [slide of Warrior Vase] is one of the better-known relics from Late Bronze Age Greece, known as the Warrior Vase. It gives the best artistic representation of armor, helmets, and shields of the time—how they were worn, how they were carried. Some of the details are open to interpretation, but when one has to draw characters wearing this kind of armor, one has to make choices. Here's [slide] Odysseus and Eurybates outfitted in gear similar to what we just saw on the Warrior Vase.

Archaeologists have found many large Mycenaean building foundations which they've labeled palaces. The palace at Pylos on the west coast of Greece, where in legend Nestor was king, is one of the best-pre-served. This artistic reconstruction of the throne room by Piet deJong [slide] was done for the archaeological expedition in the 1950s. Notice the painted floor, the frescoes on the walls, and the designs on the ceiling. In Age of Bronze, I used a lot of this information in my own reconstruction of Nestor's throne room. Notice the floor, the walls, and the ceiling.

The palace of Mycenae where Agamemnon ruled is still there, too, though now it's just a ruin. But enough was recovered for me to make a plausible reconstruction. It's an important setting in the story, so I built a model to help me draw it. The model is actually a couple of pieces. And this is what it looks like in the comic book [slide].

Travel by water was the major means of getting around a mountainous country like Greece, and

everyone's heard of the face that launched a thousand ships. So I've got plenty of ships to draw. Archaeologists have found a few Bronze Age ships on the bottom of the sea, but they're in pretty rough shape. Luckily we have pictures painted on pots. Here's my version of a ship [slide]. This one isn't a warship or merchant vessel—it's the ship of Achilles's mother, Thetis.

Speaking of Thetis, this is where I got her face from. This sculpture [slide] from the Mycenaean era is probably meant to represent a goddess. She seemed perfect to me as the basis for the priestess Thetis. No one knows if the red dots on the cheeks and chin represent make-up, tattoos, or simply a rosy complex-ion. I chose to make them tattoos.

A fresco is a painting on a plastered wall. Many brightly painted scenes still survive, but usually as a lot of little fragments at the bases of walls. This charming fresco of a Mycenaean woman [slide] seemed the perfect inspiration for Klytemnestra, wife of the High King of Mycenae.

For costumes and setting I stick to the Bronze Age, but for character design I'm not limited by time period. Artists have made representations of the Trojan War legend for thousands of years. This wall painting [slide] dates to the first century CE, from Herculaneum in Italy. It shows young Achilles on the right and his guardian the centaur Cheiron. The face of Cheiron so intrigued me that I used it for my own version of Cheiron. My version has wilder hair and beard, but the face is the same. I don't do this sort of thing for all the characters—many of their appearances I just make up myself—but once in a while a piece of artwork strikes me, and I incorporate it into my work.

Here's another example. This picture [slide] of Achilles binding Patroklus's wound was painted on a Greek cup in the fourth century BCE. This scene occurs after the first battle, and Achilles and Patroklus pledge always to stand by each other during the war. It's an intimate scene, and when I drew this part of the story, I used this painting as a model for this panel. Please note the helmet that Achilles is wearing. It's called a boar's tusk helmet.

For centuries the only record humanity had of a boar's tusk helmet was a description in Homer's *Iliad*. Through the years scholars assumed that Homer had just made up some fantasy helmet that never existed. But then archaeologists began to find artistic represen-

tations of boar's tusk helmets and even the remains of the helmets themselves. They were real after all.

This is the gold death mask [slide] found by the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in one of the royal shaft graves at Mycenae. It's one of the most famous objects of the Mycenaean civilization and is popularly called the Mask of Agamemnon, though it probably dates from centuries before the time Agammenon would have lived if he ever really existed. I didn't care. There was no way I was going to use anything but this as the face of my Agamemnon.

So that's how I put together *Age of Bronze*, from concept to the printer.

Now, I've made a list of some graphic novels that I think are worth your attention. I'm going to skip the works of Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Chris Ware, Art Spiegelman, and others whose works are absolutely worthy of attention, but which can easily be found on lists of good graphic novels. I'd like to bring to your attention graphic novels that I think are worthy and that are appropriate for young adults, but which you might otherwise overlook.

Finder
by Carla Speed McNeil, published by Light Speed Press
Multi-faceted science fiction featuring a fully imagined society as a backdrop to complicated personal relationships.

Berlin
by Jason Lutes, published by Drawn and Quarterly
Historical fiction set in Germany between the World Wars.

Castle Waiting
by Linda Medley, published by Cartoon Books
Completely engaging characterizations of a group of disparate characters all living and interacting in one castle.

Blueberry
written by Charlier, art by Moebius
A French masterpiece about the American Old West. Unfortunately, the English translation published by Marvel Comics is out of print. You can find volumes of Blueberry on the secondary market from vintage comics dealers or through Internet sources like ebay.

Stuck Rubber Baby
by Howard Cruse, published by DC/Paradox Press
During the Civil Rights movement in the American South, a young man comes to terms with being gay.

Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind
by Hayao Miyazaki, published by Viz
In the future one girl is destined to save the world. This is an example of Manga.

Table for One
by Bosch Fawstin, published by Mainspring Comics
One evening, behind the scenes at an upscale restaurant, tensions go out of control.

Courageous Princess
by Rod Espinosa, published by Antarctic Press
Beautifully drawn fantasy adventures, an example of Amerimanga.

Gotham Central
written by Greg Rucka and Ed Brubaker, art by Michael Lark, published by DC Comics
This is a Batman related series, but Batman rarely appears. Instead, the story focuses on the day-to-day challenges of the policemen and -women of Gotham City.

ERIC SHANOWER lived in a number of places as he was growing up, including Key West, Florida; the islands of Hawaii, Monterey, California; Laurel, Maryland; Norfolk, Virginia; Port Angeles, Washington; and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; before graduating from Novato High School in Novato, California. As a youngster he began his own efforts at continuing the Oz series as originated by Frank Baum with his own illustrated manuscripts. Eric began with First Comics immediately following his graduation from the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art. Eric's first volume (but not his last) in a series of graphic novels continuing the Oz saga was published by First comics in 1986. His current project, Age of Bronze, *won the Will Eisner Comics Industry Award for Best Writer/ Artist in both 2001 and 2003. The series has been nominated for several other awards, including an Ignatz (Small Press Expo) and a National Cartoonists Society Division Award. Eric founded Hungry Tiger Press with his partner David Maxine, which has been nominated for two Eisner Awards. Eric is also a swimmer, ballet dancer and actor and continues to perform in major roles in such productions as* The Nutcracker, A Man for All Seasons, Saint Joan *and* The Hobbit.