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The Brandywine School and Comic Art

The only distinctly American art is to be found in the art of illustration.

Howard Pyle

William Randolph Hearst surrounded himself with visual art. Whether in his lavish personal life, where his residences were filled with paintings and tapestries from his buying trips to Europe, or in his journalistic life, where he followed the lead of Joseph Pulitzer and filled his newspapers with drawings, cartoons and illustrations, or later, in his romantic life, where he placed his mistress Marion Davies in elaborate costume drama films that displayed her personal beauty while burying her very real acting talent, Hearst reveled in, understood the power of, and manipulated art and imagery throughout his life and his careers. Perhaps ironically, the pictures that he patronized that were ultimately the most important and most influential were those that would, by most observers, be accorded the lowest social status. His art collection is today all but forgotten, and the motion pictures he produced are unknown to all but scholars of the history of film. However, the illustrations for his newspaper's journalistic pages played an immediate political and historical role and continue to be reproduced. And the comic strips for the Sunday funnies that appeared in his own newspapers were also widely syndicated to many others across the United States and around the world through his King Features Syndicate. Many of them continue to be reprinted in books and deeply influence the growing fields of comic art and graphic novels.

N. C. Christopher Couch, « The Brandywine School and Comic Art », Jean-François Chassay et Bertrand Gervais [éds], *Paroles, textes et images. Formes et pouvoirs de l'imaginaire*, Université du Québec à Montréal, Figura, Centre de recherche sur le texte et l'imaginaire, coll. « Figura », n° 19, vol. 1, p. 193-217.

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Hearst was well aware of the power of the journalistic images he placed in his newspapers. In 1897, he sent the artist Frederick Remington to Cuba to accompany the reporters that he had assigned to cover what were said to be the revolutionary activities of Cuban insurgents who were fighting against the Spanish imperial government. In a story that is probably apocryphal, but indicative of the power of images, Remington was reported to have informed Hearst by telegram that there was no military activity in opposition to the Spanish government or its soldiers. In Hearst's supposed reply, also by telegram, he instructed the artist to depict the subjects he had been sent to find, whether or not they existed: "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war."¹ Remington's drawings were in fact satirized by one of Hearst's own cartoonists. Several months before the war began, in a comic strip series called *The Huckleberry Volunteers*, Richard F. Outcault showed a group of children establishing a volunteer military group and going off to fight in Cuba; the group included Outcault's own famous cartoon character, the Yellow Kid. In one of their first military engagements, they ride as cavalry on wooden carousel horses. One of the horses wears a tag that reads By F. Remington.²

Whether or not the story of Hearst and Remington is apocryphal, its imbrication in the literature of Yellow Journalism and the development of ideals of objectivity in American journalism, and the satire of Remington's work by one of the most famous cartoonists of the day, helps establish the rarely-linked but significant and revealing connections between journalistic illustration, American art and magazine and book illustration, and cartoons and comics strips which, like

¹ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 127; Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Frederic Remington, a Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1982), 248-249.

² Bill Blackbeard, "The Yellow Kid, The Yellow Decade," in Richard F. Outcault, *The Yellow Kid* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995), 123.

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illustrations, were indispensable components of newspapers, magazines and books.

The Brandywine School of Illustration

The turn of the twentieth century is often referred to as the Golden Age of American Illustration.³ Increasingly sophisticated printing technology, a larger and better educated population, and the growth of cities and industry led to economic and social conditions that supported an ever-increasing variety of illustrated magazines as well as the publication of a wide variety of illustrated books. Among the best-known publishers were the Harper and Brothers Company, publisher of the magazines *Harper's Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly*, as well as a wide variety of books by American and European authors, and Scribner's publishers, which also published an eponymous monthly magazine and books of fiction and nonfiction, in close competition with *Harper's*. The most widely-circulated illustrated magazine not associated with a book publisher was *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, which covered American and international news, as well as cultural and social topics and events.

With rare exceptions, like Remington, the artists who drew illustrations for the news and features of the newspapers and the weekly magazines focused on news like *Frank Leslie's* (which at times identified itself as a weekly illustrated newspaper) were anonymous journeymen. However, the monthly magazines featured artists who were encouraged to draw in distinctive, individual styles and whose names were prominently displayed on their works. Among the artists who achieved fame in the magazines were Winslow Homer, Edward Austin Abbey, Arthur B. Frost, Charles Stanley Reinhart, and many others.

³ Lucien L. Agosta, *Howard Pyle* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 23.

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In the late 1870s, a new artist joined the ranks of the *Harper's* regulars. Howard Pyle was an artist from Wilmington, Delaware, who had studied in Philadelphia before moving to New York to pursue his artistic career. Although Pyle launched his career and began to develop his mature style in New York City, after returning to Delaware he became an influential teacher and an artist whose work influenced other illustrators. He created studio space at his home, and offered intensive instruction in the techniques and ideals of illustration that he had perfected for his own work to small groups of highly select students. Pyle also taught a number of summer school sessions in an old grist mill in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, on the Brandywine River.⁴ Pyle's students became some of the most famous illustrators in America, including Jessie Wilcox Smith, Frank Schoonover, Maxfield Parrish, Harvey Dunn and many others.⁵ The most famous and successful of them was N. C. Wyeth, whose Scribner's illustrated classics series have been continuously in print since their original publication, and who launched a dynasty of American artists, including Andrew and Jamie Wyeth.⁶ The close association of Pyle and the Wyeths with the Brandywine River Valley eventually led to the group of artists of which they were the most prominent being named the Brandywine School.⁷

Today, Pyle is best known as a children's book author and illustrator. Pyle brought to life in romantic text and extensive illustrations the stories of *Robin Hood* (1883) and *King Arthur* (1903-1910) and helped revive interest in folk tales through his illustrated collections of traditional tales and his own new

⁴ Agosta, 7-20; Douglas Allen and Douglas Allen, Jr. *N. C. Wyeth: The Collected Paintings, Illustrations and Murals* (New York: Crown 1972), 19-26.

⁵ Agosta, 20-21.

⁶ Allen and Allen, 79-118.

⁷ Robert McLanathan, *The Brandywine Heritage*, Brandywine River Museum with the New York Graphics Society, 1971, 8.

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stories in the folk tale idiom. During his lifetime, however, Pyle was equally well known for his illustrations for works of nonfiction, and also for historically-based fiction. These works appeared primarily in magazines, especially *Harper's*, but in other prominent magazines as well. *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, the *Atlantic*, *Century Magazine* and others published both fiction and nonfiction by the most prominent authors and journalists of the day. From Mark Twain to Theodore Roosevelt, they featured new fiction and historical and journalistic articles on a variety of topics.

Pyle began his career doing many different kinds of illustrations, and also was quickly able to move to the best children's magazine of the day, *St. Nicholas*, edited by Mary Mapes Dodge. But once he became an established artist, he began to specialize in certain types of illustrations. In his illustrations for nonfiction and historical fiction, he quickly followed his own passions, concentrating on the American Colonial Period, the American Revolution, and Caribbean pirates. Pyle devoted himself to research on these topics, investigating settings and landscape, weaponry and costumes, down to the smallest detail, and collecting costumes and props for reference and for use in posing models or creating reference photographs.⁸

In addition to illustrating historical fiction and nonfiction articles by other writers, Pyle soon began writing as well. Although his masterworks remain his books on Robin Hood, King Arthur, and other chivalric romances like *Otto of the Silver Hand*, he quickly became an author of nonfiction and historical fiction for magazines like *Harper's*. His articles and stories dealt primarily with Colonial New England and the topic that perhaps fascinated him most, pirates. Pyle's pirate articles were collected in his *Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates*.⁹

⁸ Elizabeth Nesbitt, *Howard Pyle* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), 59-60.

⁹ Howard Pyle, *Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates* (New York: Harper

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Thus Pyle's early career, both as a writer and as an illustrator, soon came to be dominated by nonfiction and historical fiction dealing with the periods and interests that he found most congenial. As an historical illustrator, Pyle found himself in demand by some of the finest writers of the time. He illustrated for Woodrow Wilson, for his book *George Washington*, and for many *Harper's* articles, for legal historian H. L. Carson, critic and historian Brander Matthews, and others. His obsession for research, detail and veracity informed both his writing and his illustrations. Although the high point of his career were his books on Robin Hood and King Arthur, usually considered legendary subjects, he applied the same standards of research to both his texts and illustrations in his works on these topics.¹⁰ His concern with accuracy—and with credibility—became a hallmark of his work, and of those artists whom he taught, the Brandywine School.

Pyle's most famous disciple was Newell Convers Wyeth. N. C. Wyeth began to study with Pyle in 1902, and shortly thereafter was successfully selling illustrations, including cover paintings, to many of the same magazines in which Pyle published. His first cover appeared on the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. Pyle then persuaded the *Post* and *Scribner's* to finance a trip to the American Southwest by Wyeth. From September to December 1904, Wyeth took the first of what would be many trips west during his career, traveling with cowboys and visiting trading posts serving the Navajo and Pueblo nations, sketching and drawing. Like Pyle, he quickly turned to nonfiction writing, turning his experiences into several articles. In 1907, shortly after getting married, Wyeth moved to Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, in the Brandywine River Valley. This move ultimately secured the appellation Brandywine School for Pyle and his followers, particularly the Wyeth family.¹¹

Brothers, 1921).

¹⁰ Nesbitt, 61-63; Agosta, 135-140.

¹¹ Allen and Allen, 33-71.

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Wyeth's long career included work not only in magazine illustration for *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Metropolitan* and many other magazines, but also extensive work in advertising and the painting of a variety of public murals, including a series on the history of New England for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, completed by his son Andrew after his death (1939-1945). His best-known work was a series of illustrated books called the *Scribner's Classics*, done for the publisher of that name, which included a variety of classics of adventure and historical fiction. The series included Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, *Kidnapped*, and perhaps the most famous of all his illustrated books, *Treasure Island*. Other publishers engaged Wyeth for similar books; of these, the most famous is a version of *Robin Hood* by Paul Creswick.¹² The Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, is dedicated to the work of the Wyeths and Howard Pyle, and the museum complex includes N. C. Wyeth's home and studio as well a gallery.¹³

Illustrated News Magazines and Newspapers

Howard Pyle and N. C. Wyeth worked for the most important illustrated magazines of their day, *Harper's* (founded 1850), *Scribner's* (1887), *Century* (1881) and others. These magazines featured both fiction and nonfiction, and were extensively illustrated. *Harper's* had offered journalistic and pictorial coverage of the American Civil War (1861-1865); among the journalistic artists who had covered the conflict for the magazine was Winslow Homer.¹⁴

¹² Allen and Allen, 79-121, 157-172.

¹³ Lisa Wurster, "Speaking of Art: Envisioning Wyeth: The Youngest Member of Dynasty Sheds Light on America's First Family of Art," *The Artist's Magazine*, June 2007, 24(5): 60-63.

¹⁴ Andrea G. Pearson, "Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly*: Innovation and Imitation in Nineteenth-Century American Pictorial Reporting," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1990, 23(4): 88-103.

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By the 1890s, the number of magazines published in the United States began an exponential increase that would continue through the 1930s. This golden age of American magazine publishing would bring an almost unbelievable diversity of types and titles. The number of general interest magazines increased as more publishers entered the field, including *Hearst's* and *Cosmopolitan* from Hearst, *McClure's*, *Munsey's* and others. The humour magazines *Life*, *Puck* and *Judge*, which would provide the models for the newspaper Sunday comics sections, published cartoons and humorous stories. National, regional, local and special interest magazines of all sorts appeared in ever-increasing variety, and all of them included more and more illustrations.¹⁵ Writing in 1891, an illustrator for the *New York World* estimated that “there are 5000 illustrated periodicals in this country... the artists at work in this field certainly exceed 1000 in number and supply on an average 10,000 drawings a week.”¹⁶

Engraved illustrations began to appear in newspapers in the mid-1880s. Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, which he purchased in 1883, led the way in the popularization of illustrated newspapers. Although at first the drawings were simpler than those that appeared in the weekly and monthly magazines—the speed of the presses and vastly larger print runs of a daily newspaper presented technical difficulties in creating the engravings—by the 1890s the quality of the illustrations was vastly improved. In 1895, William Randolph Hearst bought the *New York Journal*, and began a fierce competition with Pulitzer for greater circulation. The artists of the news pages

¹⁵ Michael Brown, “The Popular Art of American Magazine Illustration 1995-1917,” *Journalism History*, 1998, 24(3): 95-103; Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 337-348.

¹⁶ Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 237.

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of the illustrated newspapers were anonymous, just as those who had worked for the weeklies had been. The veracity of the news illustrations was secured by the accompanying stories, often bylined by the journalists of the newspaper.¹⁷

At the very end of the nineteenth century, newspapers began to include photographs as well. The technological hurdles of reproducing photographs fell more slowly for newspapers than for magazines, because of the high speed of the presses and the immense press runs, the same problems that plagued engraved illustrations. By the 1910s, photographs had almost completely replaced illustrations in newspapers, except of course in the comics sections.¹⁸

Adventure Comic Strips

After World War I, American newspapers continued to cover international events more thoroughly than they had before the war, and Americans were less parochial and more aware of their international economic and military power. A popular song of the time asked “How Ya Gonna Keep ’Em Down on the Farm after They’ve Seen Pore?” and, while the ditty referred primarily to migration from the countryside to the city, it also points to the increased interest in and awareness of world affairs by the American public. The military and economic strength of the European colonial powers was greatly reduced by the damages and losses of the war. American business flourished during the war, and overseas investment increased greatly afterwards.¹⁹ Eventually, this change in American journalism was reflected in the comics pages as a new genre joined the

¹⁷ Brown, 23.

¹⁸ Brown, 239-243; Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, “Civic Picturing vs. Realist Photojournalism: The Regime of Illustrated News, 1856-1901,” *Design Issues*, 2000, 16(1): 74-76; Harris, 304-317.

¹⁹ Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *America in Midpassage* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 18-21.

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family, humorous animal and kid strips in the Sunday funnies – the adventure strip.

Adventure comic strips first appeared in American newspaper Sunday comic sections at the end of the 1920s. Their heroes were always white and male, and usually adults, although sometimes the lead character was a teenage boy. The strips were always set in romantic, exotic and dangerous locations like the heart of Africa or the pirate – and smuggler – infested coasts of Asia. Sometimes the exotic setting could be the distant past or a science-fictional future. The adventure strips were different from anything that had previously appeared in the comic sections of newspapers.

American comic strips are the descendants of humour magazine cartoons. The publisher Joseph Pulitzer, who had remade American newspapers after his purchase of the *New York World* in 1883 by simplifying journalistic language, emphasizing headlines and more sensationalistic stories and adding numerous illustrations, had also pioneered adding supplements to newspapers. In 1893, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of his purchase of the newspaper, he added the first Sunday magazine to the *World*. Like the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, its direct descendant, the *World's* magazine included articles and features and was modeled on newsstand magazines like *Harper's Monthly* and *Scribner's*. The success of this Sunday magazine prompted Pulitzer's editors to follow with a second Sunday supplement, modeled after another type of newsstand magazine, a humour magazine of the sort exemplified by *Life*, *Puck* and *Judge*.²⁰ Within a short time, the popularity of one cartoon series, Richard F. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, made the section one of the most popular

²⁰ Blackbeard, 32-33; N. C. Christopher Couch, "The Yellow Kid and the Comics Page," in Robin Varnum, and Christina Gibbons (eds.), *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2001), 60-74.

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features in the newspaper.²¹ After the success of the *Yellow Kid*, first in the *World* and then in Hearst's *New York Journal*, the Sunday humour supplement was soon entirely filled with comic strips featuring continuing characters. Until the advent of the adventure strips, most of these comics were humorous, filled with slapstick and character-based gags. Many of the most successful strips revolved around children or families, including Outcault's *Buster Brown*, Sidney Smith's *The Gumps* and George McManus's highly influential *Bringing Up Father* (*Maggie and Jiggs*).²²

Adventure strips moved the comics from the domestic sphere to a wider world. International adventure, science fiction, and strips about aviators and airplanes were the most popular genres. One of the first, and certainly among the most influential of the adventure strips, was *Tarzan* by Hal Foster, which premiered in 1929. Already popular in pulp magazines, books and movies, the strip quickly succeeded as well. Foster soon had to share artistic duties with Rex Maxon as the strip added a daily version. Premiering simultaneously was the first science fiction adventure strip, *Buck Rogers*. Again based on a story that had premiered in a pulp magazine, the strip was written by Phil Nowlan and drawn in a cartoony, Art Deco style by Dick Calkins. Later, the Sunday strips were drawn by the far more talented Russell Keaton, who subsequently created his own adventure strip, *Flyin' Jenny*, about a woman aviator.²³ The first adventure strip set in Asia was Milton

²¹ Jerry Robinson, *The Comics, An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 11-13; Richard F. Outcault, *The Yellow Kid*, foreword by William Randolph Hearst III, introduction by Bill Blackbeard (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press 1995).

²² Robinson, 25-108; George McManus, *Bringing Up Father: Starring Maggie and Jiggs*, introduction by Herb Galewitz (New York: Scribners 1974).

²³ Russell Keaton, *The Aviation Art of Russell Keaton*, (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press 1995).

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Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*, which premiered in 1934, as did the most successful science fiction strip of all, Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*. The distant past or the far future could serve equally well as the exotic setting for an adventure strip, as demonstrated by the success of medieval romance in Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, begun in 1937, or the primeval lost world of caveman *Alley Oop* by V. T. Hamlin, begun in 1933.²⁴

The Brandywine School and the Adventure Strips

Adventure comic strips were a novel form when they appeared in the comic sections of newspapers at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. Their immediate success and acceptance by the public has obscured how novel they in fact were. Nothing like them had appeared before in comics. Some of the humorous strips that preceded them had featured extended narratives (called continuities), as when the Yellow Kid or Maggie and Jiggs (of George McManus's *Bringing Up Father*) traveled to Europe. Ongoing narratives appeared in some family strips, like *Gasoline Alley*, in which the family grew and the characters aged realistically. Adventure sequences had highlighted some of the family strips that filled the newspapers of the 1910s and 1920s, like the *Gumps*, in which a rich uncle would take Chester, Min and Andy on international trips. The child strip *Little Orphan Annie* regularly featured adventure and intrigue, and C. W. Kahles's *Hairbreadth Harry* satirized dime novels and film melodrama and serials. However, none of these strips were drawn in anything like the artistic styles that the adventure strips would adopt.²⁵

The comic sections of newspapers were the offspring of newsstand humour magazines, and for the first several

²⁴ Jim Steranko, *The Steranko History of Comics* (Reading: Supergraphics, 1970-1972) 1: 7-13; Robinson, 137-142.

²⁵ Robinson, 24-39, 68-77; Frank King, *Walt and Skeezix* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 2005-2007), vol. 1-3.

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decades, the types and styles of strips that appeared in the sections paralleled or were descended from humour magazine cartoons. Mischievous kids, poor and slum kids, husbands and wives, families and animals were the predominant characters in the strips. The styles were cartoony as well. The exaggerated features of characters engaged in humorous and slapstick activities and situations is often referred to as the bigfoot style; Rudolph Dirks's *Katzenjammer Kids* or Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff* are classic examples. Depth and recession were rarely emphasized: "Virtually all strips up to 1929 used an essentially 'flat' (i.e., two-dimensional) artistic style."²⁶ The colloquial names for the comics in newspapers – comic supplement, the comics, the Sunday funnies – were based on both substance and style of the comic strips of the first decades of newspaper comics, and these terms eventually gave birth to the English term for the entire medium of sequential art: the comics. Even the elegant and adventurous strip *Little Nemo* by Winsor McKay featured cartoony characters; McKay's work is universally regarded as among the best in comics, and an acknowledged influence on Maurice Sendak's work, but like a few other strips, such as Palmer Cox's *Brownies* or Walt McDougal's *Queer Visitors from the Land of Oz*, it is ultimately part of the world of children's magazine and book illustration.²⁷

Literary adventure fiction was the source of most of the plots and tropes, the heroes and villains, in the adventure strips when they began. Like the imperial romances that came to dominate English and American adventure books, from H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling to Edgar Rice Burroughs and Abraham Merritt, the adventure strips featured

²⁶ William H., Jr. Young, "The Serious Funnies: Adventure Comics During the Depression, 1929-1938," in Harry Russell Huebel (comp.), *Things in the Driver's Seat: Readings in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Rand McNally 1972), 81.

²⁷ Robinson, 24-39, 42-45.

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white, male heroes in exotic locations.²⁸ In fact, one of the first of the adventure strip was an adaptation of Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*, a series of novels that had begun in the pulp magazines in 1912 and been successfully adapted to the cinema several times before appearing in the Sunday funnies. English imperial adventure novels found many readers and great popularity in the United States; Rider Haggard's works were printed and reprinted many times, and are still in print from American publishers. But American adventure writers soon became more popular, or at least more prolific, at home. Beginning at the turn of the century, American all-fiction magazines grew and flourished. Usually called pulps, because of the low quality of paper used to print them, the number of titles grew exponentially through the 1930s. *Argosy*, *All-Story*, *Adventure* and many others featured colourful, poster-like covers that attracted readers, and American authors laboured to fill their many pages. In 1926, the genre of science fiction in the pulps received an exclusive home when European émigré Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*, the first all-science fiction pulp.²⁹ The pulps helped create properties that were adapted to the tastes of the readers who would consume the adventure strips, but their illustrations offered little inspiration for the artists who would create the adventure strips. The lively covers helped sell the issues, but the interior illustrations were limited in size and quality. The pulps were about words, page after page of densely-set type offering adventurous dreams to the readers, and not about pictures. These remained the domain of the finer newsstand magazines like *Harper's* and the illustrated books of adventure fiction that delighted the hearts and eyes of young and adult readers.

²⁸ Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (New York: Basic Books 1979).

²⁹ Frank Robinson and Lawrence Davidson, *Pulp Culture: The Art of Fiction Magazines* (Portland, OR: Collectors Press 1998).

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There were no visual models in preceding comic art for the adventure strips.³⁰ The readers of the Sunday comics had grown accustomed to the cartoony family drama and slapstick commotion of the comics. The artists who were charged with creating this new genre of sequential art had to look elsewhere for visual formulae that would make their works comprehensible to their audience. Such a visual language had to be both persuasive and exciting, adaptable to the tectonic format of a page of panels but also flexible enough to encompass the variety of effects needed for an adventure strip: active figures, landscapes, interior and exterior architectural settings, wild animals, machines and ships and cars and airplanes. Their drawings had to be able to convey a wide variety of figures, actions and settings in the limited, usually rectangular spaces of the panels of a Sunday comic strip.

The illustrations of adventure fiction and nonfiction in magazines and books by Howard Pyle and his students provided the model for the panels and pages of the adventure strip. At the moment when photographs were becoming more important in the illustration of magazines like *Harper's*, Pyle and others made their illustrations more dramatic, expressive and engaging by using a variety of formal and compositional means. It has been persuasively suggested that Pyle's student Wyeth adapted the space of the stage and posing of characters from the theatre, an approach entirely consistent with the drama of Pyle's works. These aesthetic innovations were ideal for adaptation into the format and subject matter of the adventure strip. They created images that were both clear and dramatic. Although usually created as grisaille or full colour paintings, their imagery was strikingly linear, and easily translated into the coloured line drawing of the adventure strips. The scenes they created were often focused on a few active figures, ideal both for the pages of the books and magazines in which they appeared and for the panels of the adventure strip. Their compositions included dramatic effects of depth in a small

³⁰ Young, 80.

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area, incorporating forced perspective, striking recession, and architectural designs and landscape elements that again were ideally adapted to the panels of sequential art.³¹

In a classic Howard Pyle illustration from *Harper's* for "The Wolf of Salem," the image captioned "Once it chased Dr. Wilkinson into the very town itself," features two, active, juxtaposed figures that, together with the landscape, create a clear and dramatic scene (Figure 1). Although fully painted, the image is strikingly linear, from the angular walking stick to the clearly outlined figures against the snow to the barren trees. Striking effects of depth in a limited space are created by the active, foreshortened figures merging with the deeply receding forest.



Figure 1. Howard Pyle, "Once It Chased Dr. Wilkinson into The Very Town Itself," from Howard Pyle, "The Salem Wolf," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, Dec. 1909, p. 11. Reproduced from *The Brandywine Heritage: Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, James Wyeth*. Chadds Ford, PA: the Brandywine River Museum (1971), fig. 34, 35.

Deep recession created with a small group of figures, often arranged in inventive juxtapositions or active and

³¹ Howard P. Brokaw, "Howard Pyle and the Art of Illustration," in Douglas K. S. Hyland, *Howard Pyle and the Wyeths: Four Generations of American Imagination* (Memphis: Memphis Brooks Museum of Art 1983), 13-37. Alexander Nemerov, "N. C. Wyeth's Theater of Illustration," *American Art* 1992, 6(2): 36-57.

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surprising postures, can also be seen in Wyeth's illustrations for books of classic adventure fiction such as "The Black Spot" from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (Figure 2). Tension is created by the sharply angular bending foreground figure, but the composition is stabilized when this figure merges with a tall, stable pyramid of pirate figures in the background. These devices create deep recession in a limited space, and the *chiaroscuro* emphasizes the basic linear qualities of the painting.³²

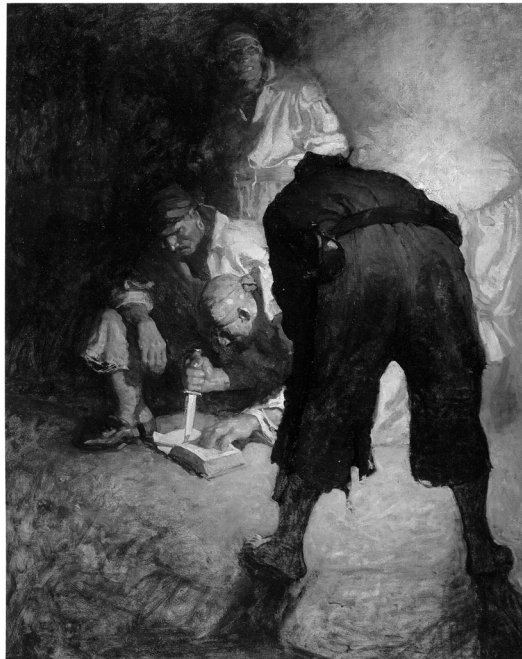


Figure 2. N. C. Wyeth, "The Black Spot," from Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911. Reproduced from *Wondrous Strange: The Wyeth Tradition – Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, James Wyeth*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Bullfinch Press (1998), p. 64.

³² Allen and Allen, 79-84.

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Hal Foster, the first artist to draw the *Tarzan* comic strip, was trained as an illustrator. The theatrical drama of compositions derived from Pyle and his school was perfect for the capture and rescue tropes of stories based on Burroughs's jungle adventure. In a panel captioned, "She leveled the revolver at the helpless ape-man," which appeared in the Sunday strip entitled "The Fallen Goddess" published on April 7, 1935, Foster used forced perspective to delineate the sharply cropped, forward-leaning figure of Tarzan in the foreground. The hero's sharply angled body creates deep space by echoing and leading the viewer's eye to the woman at the centre. Her proportionally smaller figure indicates distance, while the frieze of Africans behind her creates a dramatic, stage-like space, an effect often used by Wyeth.³³ A closely similar composition, also featuring a foreground male figure leaning toward a woman in the background, appears in a Wyeth illustration for an Elizabethan adventure novel (Figure 3).

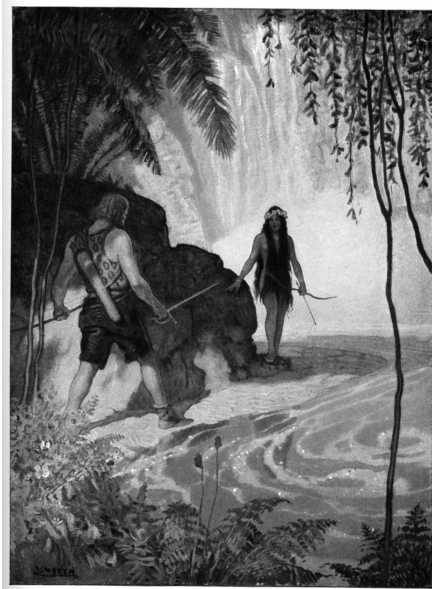


Figure 3. N. C. Wyeth, "The Daughter of the Forest," from Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho! or; the Voyages and Adventures of Sir Amyas Leigh, Knight, of Burrough, in the County of Devon. In the Reign of Her Most Glorious Majesty Queen Elizabeth*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1920 [1936]), facing p. 278.

³³ Bill Blackbeard, and Dale Crane, eds., *The Comic Strip Century, Celebrating 100 Years of an American Art Form* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press 1995), v. 2, 355.

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Wyeth's medieval illustrations had an important impact on the adventure strips, and later on the comic books. In an illustration from Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, Wyeth adds depth and drama to a relatively static illustration with striking contrasts of light and dark and forced recession of an interior set of steps (Figure 4). The juxtaposition of the two figures enhances the sense of depth, with the foreground figure's *contrapposto* creating potential movement, merging with the background figure to create deep recession. Pyle's and Wyeth's use of inventive clothing design and period costumes influenced the adventure strip artists.



Figure 4. N. C. Wyeth, “‘We must be in the dungeons,’ Dick remarked,” from Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Black Arrow*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons (1916 [1954]), facing p. 128.

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Alex Raymond's use of this deep recession in a small space, and pseudo-medieval costume design, can be seen in a *Flash Gordon* panel featuring the strip's best-known characters, captioned "Brought down in flames, Flash and his companions flee in the forest...", from the Sunday page entitled "Hunted Creatures," published November 1, 1936.³⁴ Depth is created by a combination of dramatic lighting and scale. The foreground figures of heroine Dale Arden and Flash are angled sharply against each other, both dressed in Medieval-style costumes, a romantic dress and a hauberk. Scientific genius Dr. Zarkov is shown parallel to Dale's body, angled away from Flash, but on a smaller scale to establish depth. Coiling tree branches unite the figures and establish the exotic setting of the action. A similar treatment of figures in a more open landscape appears in a brightly-lit littoral scene by Pyle (Figure 5), while a forest image from the cover of Wyeth's *Robin Hood* uses chiaroscuro to emphasize the recession (Figure 6).

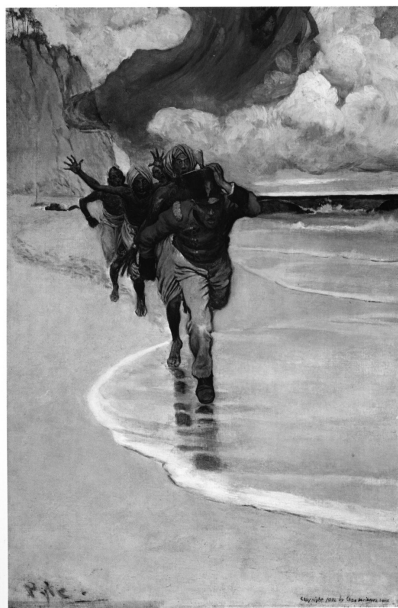


Figure 5. Howard Pyle, "We started to run back to the raft for our lives," from A. T. Quiller-Couch, "Sinbad on Burrator," *Scribner's Magazine*, Aug. 1902.

³⁴ Alex Raymond, *Flash Gordon* v. 2, *Three Against Ming*, Princeton, Kitchen Sink Press, 1990, p. 71.

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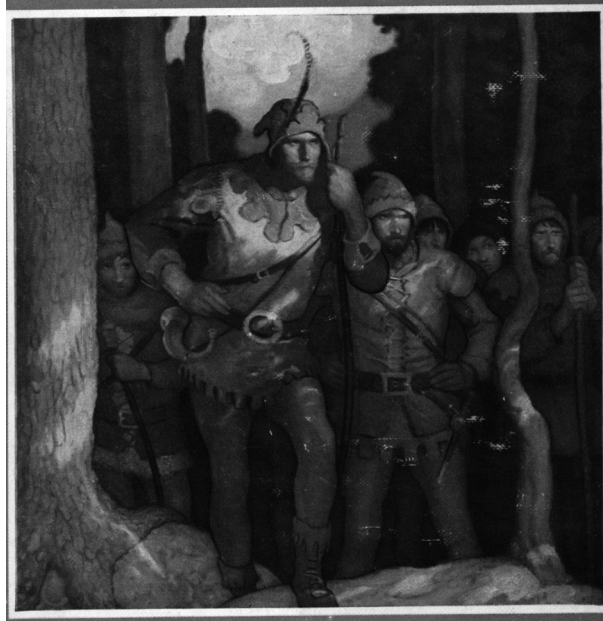


Figure 6. N. C. Wyeth, cover illustration from Paul Creswick, *Robin Hood*, Philadelphia: David McKay (1917 [1957]).

The innovations of the Brandywine School gave the artists of the adventure strip an exciting and persuasive visual vocabulary for their new genre of comic strips. In addition, they provided a variety of visual effects that could be deployed in, and make the most of, the limited space afforded the strips by the tectonic structure of a multipaneled comic strip. As the descendant of the humour magazines, the comics strips of the first few decades of the medium had only to adapt the language of single-panel humorous cartoons to the multiple panels of the Sunday pages. The dramatic effects of depth and active compositions of Pyle, Wyeth, and their followers provided the ideal visual language for the adventure strips, endlessly adaptable to the format and content of this new genre of comics.

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Conclusions

Fueled by the aesthetic innovations of the Brandywine School artists and other illustrators of magazines and books from American illustration's Golden Age, the adventure strips raced to huge popularity shortly after their first appearance in 1929. After the debuts of *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers*, more and more syndicates and hopeful artists and writers rushed to create more adventure properties for the Sunday newspapers. Hearst demanded that his King Features Syndicate create a rival for *Buck Rogers* and, when the syndicate asked its artists and writers to come up with a science fiction strip, artist Alex Raymond was the successful originator of *Flash Gordon* in 1934.³⁵

Another factor, one that opened the cultural and aesthetic space successfully occupied by the adventure strips in the Sunday funnies, was the disappearance of journalistic illustrations from the news pages of the newspapers. While the journalistic pages of the newspapers were filled with drawings that relied on their appearance to indicate the veracity of their contents, the comic section featured illustrations that were not related to the conventions of journalistic illustration. The exaggerated features and slapstick adventures of the major characters and strips of the comic section could never be confused with the illustrations of the other sections of the newspaper. The drawings of politicians and national and international events that filled the news pages were in an entirely different style from the cartoons in the comics section. The protagonists of the comics were different as well. Kids and animals, husbands and wives, the characters that populated the comics section were descended from the cartoons in the humour magazines and from the pages of children's books and magazines.

The triumph of the adventure strip can be seen as part of a series of structural changes in the newspaper. Journalistic

³⁵ Maurice Horn, ed., *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York: Chelsea House 1976), 254-255.

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illustrations began to disappear from the news pages of the newspapers as the halftone process made it possible to reproduce photographs on the rough paper and through the vast press runs that daily newspapers required. By the time of World War I, most newspapers had eliminated journalistic drawings, replacing them almost entirely with photographs. The images that appeared in the photographs that filled the newspapers featured more international subjects. Of course, World War I involved coverage of the war in France and Germany as the American Expeditionary Force joined in the conflict. But even after the war, as the economic and political power of the United States grew more dominant in the world, international news and events became more important parts of the journalistic sections of the paper.

As international coverage grew, the focus of the comic strips expanded from the domestic world of children, animals and families to embrace the world, from the mythological Africa of the *Tarzan* comics to the threatening Asia of Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*. And the aesthetic distinction that marked the "comics" from the "world" through the cartoony style of the strips was no longer needed. The comic strips could embrace a form of realism as it was abandoned by the news pages.

The adventure strips were part of the tradition of imperialist romance, and clearly the success and subtexts of these strips are related the international growth of American political and economic power and to race and racism within and beyond the United States. The generals and politicians, the soldiers, aviators and industrialists who appeared in photographs in the news sections were white men, like the protagonists of the adventure strips. Women adventure heroes were almost entirely limited to the aviation strips, like *Flyin' Jenny*, and people of colour were at best sidekicks, like Mandrake the Magician's assistant, the African chief Lothar.

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In 1937, Hal Foster, the artist who had created and ensured the success of the *Tarzan* comic strip, created a new strip. This new strip would be just as successful, and even longer lasting, than *Tarzan*; it is still running today. William Randolph Hearst's King Features Syndicate had fostered the creation of *Flash Gordon*, and they were happy to accept this new strip, even giving Foster the ownership of the copyright. *Prince Valiant* was set in the past, but it was as exotic and action-filled as any other strip. It would join *Tarzan* and *Flash Gordon* as the most influential of strips on a new creation that would soon change American popular culture forever – the comic book.³⁶

Comic books were the offspring of the newspaper strip in several ways. The first comic books, which appeared as giveaways in 1933, were filled with reprints of newspaper comic strips. Although it might seem as though yesterday's comic strips had no value, the chance to again read strips that one had enjoyed before proved immediately popular, especially with children. But comic books would probably have remained a marginal medium forever if not for a new innovation that powered these little booklets to immense sales and cross-media popularity—the superhero. In 1938, *Action* comics number one featured the first appearance of Superman. Created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, the ideas of the comic strip were derived equally from the fiction of the pulp magazines and the adventure strips of the newspapers. Siegel and Shuster loved *Tarzan*, *Flash Gordon* and the other exotic and heroic strips that had exploded in the Sunday funnies at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. In fact, *Superman* had begun as a series of sample strips that the young creators had hoped to sell to one of the syndicates that circulated comic strips to the newspapers. It had been rejected by all the newspaper comic strip syndicates, and finally accepted by the new and marginal medium of the comic book.³⁷

³⁶ Horn, 259-260.

³⁷ Les Daniels, *Comix, A History of Comic Book in America* (New York: Bonanza Books 1971), 9-13; Horn, 642-643; Gerard Jones,

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The visual language of the adventure strips was probably the single most important formative artistic influence on the superhero comic books. Joe Shuster learned drawing by copying Foster, Raymond, and his other heroes of the Sunday funnies, and their peers in the newly-burgeoning comic book industry were also deeply touched by the adventure strips. Comic books, and their multiple progeny in films, books, popular and fine art, and commercial and licensed products of every description, continue to be among the most financially successful and internationally popular works of art created within the United States. In late 2007, a billion-dollar theme park based on the superheroes from the Marvel comics was announced for one of the richest the countries of the Middle East. In a very real sense, the success of comic books can be traced to the innovations of Pyle, Wyeth, and the other masters of the golden age of American illustration.

Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book (New York: Basic Books 1994), 109-125.