



VULTURE



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The 100 Pages That Shaped Comics

From Mickey to *Maus*, tracing the evolution of the pictures, panels, and text that brought comic books to life.

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The origin story of comic books isn't flashy. No radioactive spider bite, atomic explosion, or shadowy experiment granted the medium the sort of ability that would have allowed it to arrive on early-20th-century drugstore racks as glossy, fully formed vehicles for sophisticated entertainment. Rather, it took a steady progression over the course of more than 75 years for the form to fully understand, and then harness, its powers. When the first comics arrived on newsstands in the early 1930s, they were a cynical attempt to put old wine in new bottles by reprinting popular newspaper comic strips. Cheaply printed and barely edited, those pamphlets were not what a critic at the time would have called high art.

Yet today, the medium is flourishing in ways its ancestors could never have imagined. From floppy single issues of superhero sagas to hefty graphic novels, harrowing comic-book memoirs to YA fare about queer adventurers, readers can tap into a dizzying array of what the great cartoonist Will Eisner famously termed “sequential art.” And, as evidenced by the sheer number of adaptations in film, television, and even on the Broadway stage, the rest of the entertainment industry has grown wise to what fans have long known: There’s a special alchemy that comes when you tell a story with pictures.

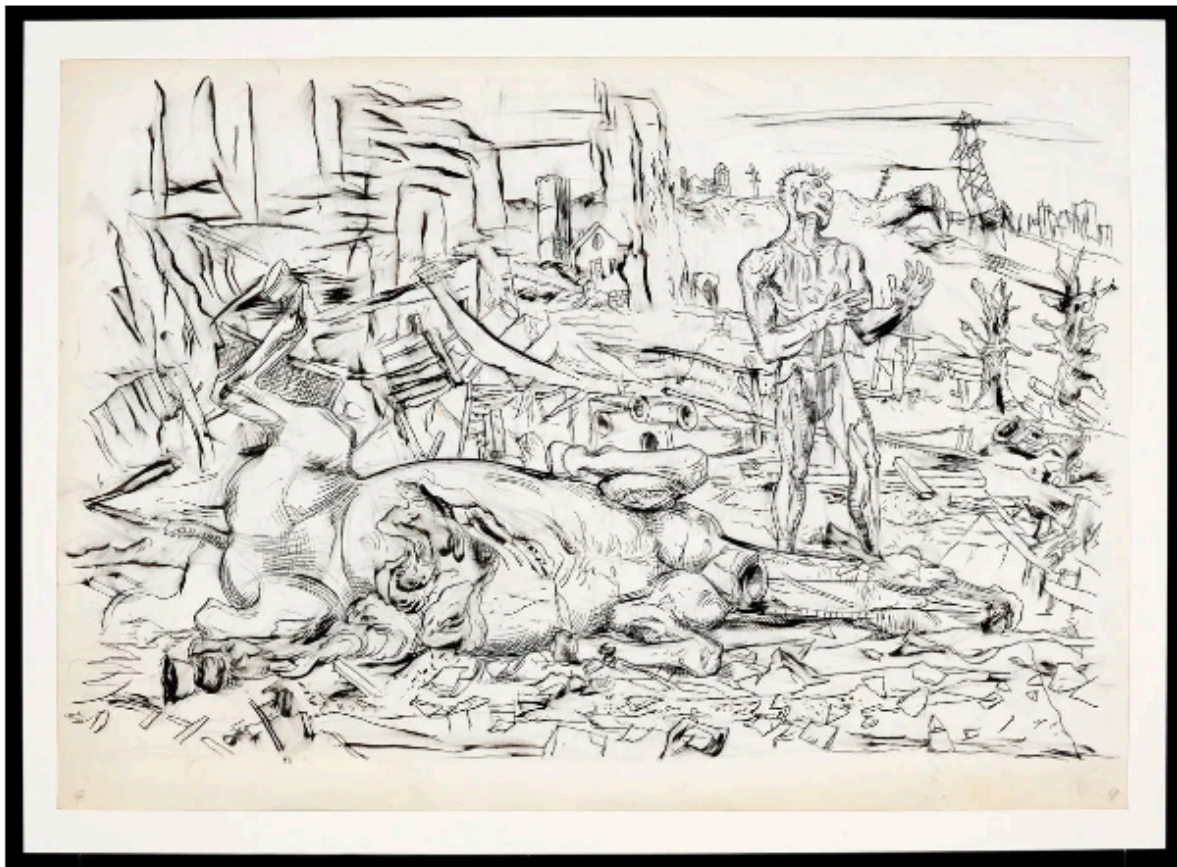
Printed images — and the comic book medium’s unique presentation of them — are at the heart of this feature. We have set out to trace the evolution of American comics by looking at 100 pages that altered the course of the field’s history. We chose to focus on individual pages rather than complete works, single panels, or specific narrative moments because the page is the fundamental unit of a comic book. It is where multiple images can allow your eye to play around in time and space simultaneously, or where a single, full-page image can instantly sear itself into your brain. If there are words, they become elements of the image itself, thanks to the carefully chosen economy of the writer and the thoughtful graphic design of the letterer. In the best pages, one is torn between staring endlessly at what’s in front of you or excitedly turning to the next one to see where the story is going. When comics have moved in new directions, the pivot points come in a page.

To assemble our list of 100, we assembled a brain trust of comics professionals, critics, historians, and journalists. Our criteria were as follows: A page had to have either changed the way creators approach making comics, or it had to expertly distill a change that had just begun. In some cases, there were multiple pages that could be used to represent a particular innovation; we’ve noted those instances. We didn’t necessarily pick the 100 *best* pages — there are many amazing specimens we didn’t include because they didn’t have a significant *influence* on the craft of comics. These are also not the *only* 100 pages that have shaped comic books, but each, in its own way, has had a profound impact on the form as we know it. And, this being comics, we had to get a little nitpicky: We’re only dealing with comics first published by North American publishing houses, and we’re not including newspaper comic strips, webcomics, or reprints thereof.

Some pages are notable for their written content — game-changing first appearances, brilliant narrative innovations, and so on. Some are significant because the artwork told a story in ways no one had thought to do before, and ended up being emulated — or, in some cases, outright aped. All are interesting on their own and integral parts of the tomes from which they were plucked. We conclude on what we think is a high note, with a few recent comics that have already made an impact and portend a richer and more diverse future. Strung together, these pages are a megacomic of their own, documenting the evolution of an art form in constant flux.

Raw No. 8 (1986)

Writer, penciler, inker, and letterer: Gary Panter



Jimbo Is Stepping Off the Edge of a Cliff. Photo: Raw Books & Graphics

Man flayed, horse slayed, landscape laid to waste — this slashing black-and-white page is the pitch of the punk apocalypse envisioned by Gary Panter. King of the ratty line, Panter is one of the great modern cartoonists. For sheer crazy inventiveness, he's been compared to Jackson Pollock and James Joyce. He's tackled not only Nancy and Sluggo, but also Dante's *Purgatory* and *Pee-wee's Playhouse* (he was their head designer — no, really). And Panter, along with Lynd Ward and Will Eisner, is one of the few in his field to deal directly with God, and godlessness. His drawings of the blasted-out post-nuclear zone called Dal Tokyo, first scrawled in the 1970s, marked the end of the hippie phase of underground comix. Panter's earliest comics were published as xeroxed and stapled zines, then appeared in the punk magazine *Slash*, and in Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *Raw*, and from there found their way to hardcover books and gallery walls. Panter's primal character is Jimbo, a spiky-haired, muscle-bound guy who, with various animals and semi-humans at his side, stumbles through a bombed-out, post-apocalyptic landscape, where the chaos and pain has a lot more to do with Picasso's *Guernica* than with traditional superheroics.

Take this page from the section “Jimbo is Stepping Off the Edge of a Cliff!” in which Jimbo and a horse go over a cliff in flames and Jimbo, himself rather charred, puts the damaged horse out of its misery by jamming a metal shard “into the horse's neck ... as if he was trying to cut its head off ... He sat down ... He decided he'd helped enough for once. It kept on raining ashes and the sun went ... ” The next frame, wordless and godless and colorless, decorated with entrails and burnt shards, shows Jimbo with his head cocked, maybe listening for something. It's an indelible sequence that reminds you why Panter is adored and imitated. But even though there are copiers aplenty, his work “remains in a stubbornly untamed school of its own,” as his friend and fan Matt Groening has said. In fact, Groening himself has “copped a thing or two from Gary,” as he admits: “Check out Jimbo's spiky hairline and then take a look at Bart Simpson's picket-fence-topped noggin. Eerie, isn't it?”