Art and Archaeology in the American Funny Pages Part IV

Murray C McClellan

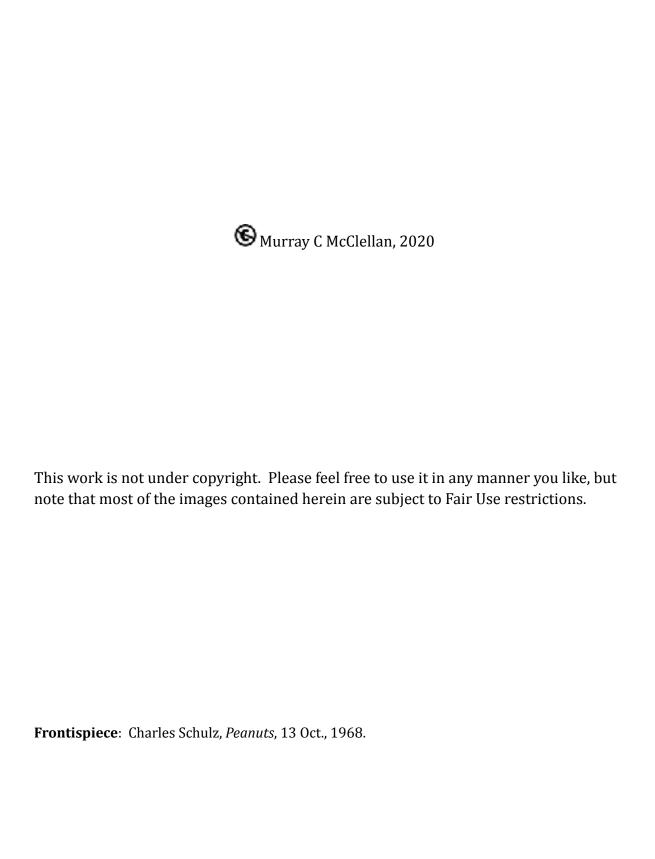


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Making Fun of Making Art



Fig. 240. Detail from Winsor McCay, Midsummer Day Dreams, 11 Nov., 1911 (cf. Fig. 283).



Fig. 241. Detail of Chris Ware, back cover to *Uninked: Paintings, Sculpture and Graphic Works By Five Cartoonists*, Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 2007 (cf. **Fig. 148**).

Imagine you are a cartoonist or a comic-strip artist. You are sitting at your drawing table, under a deadline for coming up with a gag for your next cartoon or strip. You think about all of the times you have faced a blank canvas, from your days as an art student at school to when you turned professional. Aha! You got it! You will make a cartoon/comic strip about making art!

In the following sections of this essay, we will examine the variety of ways cartoonists and comic-strip artists have mined this topic for humor, from poking fun at the cartooning craft itself to finding comedy in how artists—professional and amateur alike—go about their funny business.

We start with a quick look at a few comics about making art by those masters of early American comic strips, Winsor McCay and George Herriman.

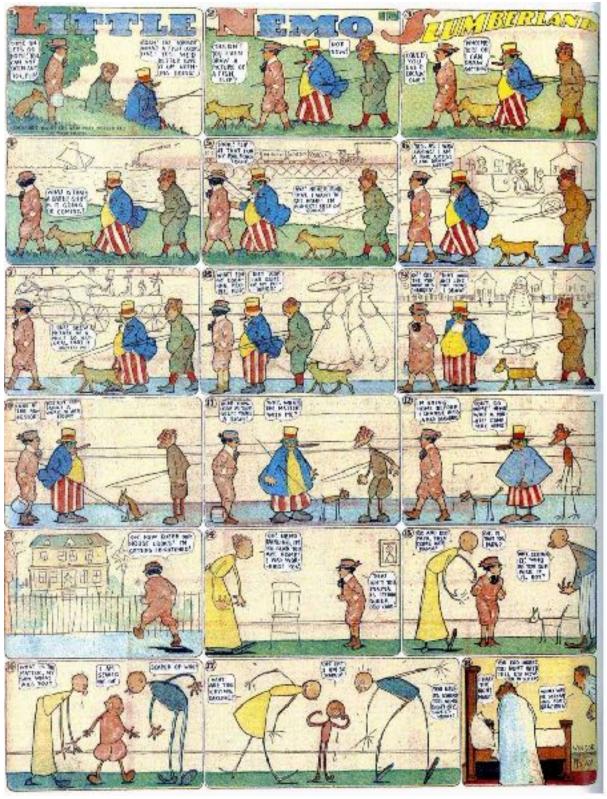


Fig. 242. Winsor McCay, Little Nemo in Dreamland, 2 May, 1909.

Winsor McCay went "back to the drawing board" for the subject of a 1909 *Little Nemo* comic (**Fig. 242**). In the top row of panels, Nemo comes upon Flip and the Professor having no luck in catching fish and asks his friend if he could at least draw a fish; in the following rows, the strip morphs into a nightmare where stick-like drawings

first appear in the background and then take over the foreground, transforming the dog, the Professor, Flip, Nemo's house, and finally Nemo and his parents into hideously simplified caricatures. From our perspective a century after McCay drew this Sunday comic, we are struck by how much his nightmarish simplified stick-figures resemble the flat drawing style now commonly employed by our contemporary cartoonists; we might wish that we too could wake up back in a world where our comic-strip artists took the art of drawing seriously.

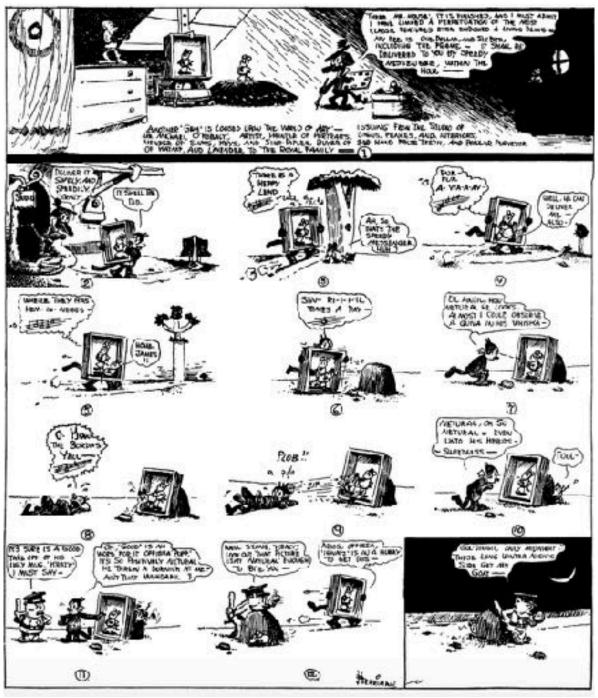


Fig. 243. George Herriman, Krazy Kat, 26 Nov., 1916.



Fig. 244. George Herriman, Krazy Kat, 24 May, 1936.

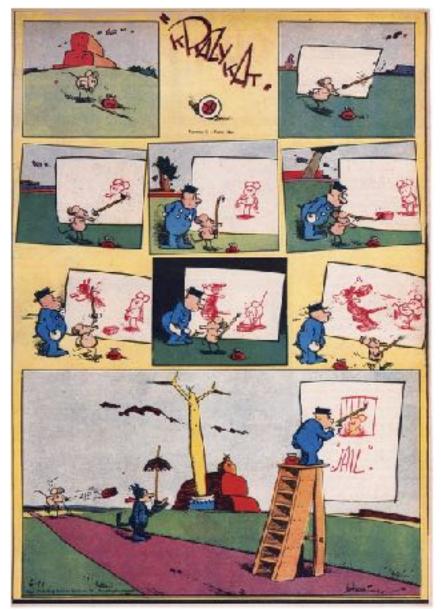


Fig. 245. George Herriman, Krazy Kat. 11 June, 1939.

George Herriman turned his humorous gaze to the making of art on several occasions. In a 1916 comic (**Fig. 243**), an artist named Michael O'Kobalt has painted a framed portrait of Ignatz Mouse that Ignatz jumps on when Krazy Kat was delivering it to him, using it as a disguise from which to throw a brick at Krazy. Herriman returned to this motif of confusing art with reality in a 1936 Sunday comic (**Fig. 244**), this time with Officer Bull Pupp as the artist. Officer Pupp—who loves Krazy Kat and is forever trying (mostly unsuccessfully) to prevent Ignatz Mouse from pelting her with a brick—has painted a picture of Ignatz behind bars which Krazy Kat steals because she is afraid that "Offissa" Pupp is going to "hang" it; Krazy's friend Mrs. Kwakk Wakk suggests that she put the painting in the barred window sill of the jail where it fools Officer Pupp—the

artist!—into thinking that it is the real Ignatz in lock-up. Herriman again used the "life imitating art" theme in a 1939 comic strip (**Fig. 245**) where Ignatz draws a blank piece of paper that mysteriously hangs in space and then, with Officer Pupp looking on, paints a cartoon that comes to life with a cartoon Ignatz throwing a cartoon brick at a cartoon Krazy Kat; when Pupp then draws his own cartoon of Ignatz in jail he is unaware that the "real" Ignatz is throwing a "real" brick at the "real" Krazy Kat. The humor in this 1939 gag is entirely visual—the single word "jail" not really adding anything to the joke —with the first rows of angled frames and scenes represented on the background plane giving a playful rhythm of the set-up to the large punch-line final panel.

Of course, McCay's and Herriman's humorous riffs on art and reality are themselves cartoons, adding another interpretative level to these examples of artwithin-art comics.

And this brings us to a short detour on the subject of metafictions in cartoons and comic strips.

Amusing Metafictional Mashups

Whenever a work of art breaks out of its own confines and refers to itself or to another work of art, it creates a metafictional reflexivity that requires us to read the work on multiple levels. A hallmark of contemporary postmodern literature and visual arts, this metafictional mode has been, as we have seen in the above McCay and Herriman examples, a feature of American comic strips since their very inception.

In his 2014 article, "Living in the Funnies: Metafiction in American Comic Strips," the Spanish scholar Jesús Ángel González López proposed a typology of metafictions in American comic strips, dividing them by two differing degrees: "Intertextuality," the "effective co-presence of two texts," whether though an inclusion of a direct or an indirect reference to another work; and "Metacomics," the term M. Thomas Inge invented to describe those comic strips that break the "realistic contract" between author and reader and call the reader's attention to the artificiality of the genre.

Perhaps the most metafictional of all American comic strips is *Sam's Strip*, the short-lived creation of Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas which ran from 1961 to 1963 while the creative pair were collaborating on the *Beetle Bailey* and the *Hi and Lois* strips. Well versed in the history of American comic strips—Mort Walker was to go on to found the Museum of Cartoon Art in 1974 (cf. **Fig. 163** above)—Walker and Dumas wanted to create a comic strip about comic strips. Their character Sam is a comic-strip owner and

operator who, with the help of an unnamed friend, is struggling to make a go of his strip. Characters from other comic strips frequently make guest appearances in *Sam's Strip*, and Sam often has humorous conversations with a cartoonist named Jerry Dumas, the name of the real cartoonist who drew the *Sam's Strip* comic in which the fictional Sam and Jerry appear. The American reading public of the 1960's was apparently not prepared for such metafictional complexity in a daily gag cartoon, and, mirroring the financial difficulties the fictional Sam had with his strip, *Sam's Strip* failed to be picked up by a sufficient number of newspapers to be viable.



Fig. 246. Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 1 Nov., 1961.

This Walker and Dumas 1961 strip (**Fig. 246**) is illustrative of one simple type of González López's metafictional "intertextuality": strips in which comic-strip characters are depicted reading comic strips. [Other examples include the Bill Watterson's strip where Calvin explains to Hobbes the differences between high and low art (**Fig. 136**) and the Bill Keene cartoon of the children reading the museum guard's comics (**Fig. 236**).] The joke in Walker's and Dumas' simple four-panel strip is set up by what Sam says to himself as he gets into bed, but the punch line is visual when we see that Sam is reading the comics rather than the serious subjects he imagines that President Kennedy or Adlai Stevenson were perusing. While Sam is the target of the gag, we the viewers are also hidden targets, being in his company by reading this strip.



Fig. 247. Richard Thompson, *Cul de Sac*, 25 Nov., 2007 (23 Sept., 2012).

Richard Thompson's *Cul de Sac* comic strip about reading comic strips is both hilarious and poignant (**Fig. 247**). When this funny narrative, about four-year-old Alice Otterloop wildly misunderstanding the basics of the comic-strip format her patient brother Petey is trying to explain to her, was first published, Thompson was at the height of his powers, with his syndicated *Cul de Sac* and *Richard's Poor Almanac* strips being widely distributed across the country. Two years later, Thompson announced that he had Parkinson's disease, and in 2012, when he was unable to complete a strip he had planned as his professional finale, Thompson chose to republish this one in its place. Thompson said that this strip was his favorite: "it's got drama, comedy and meta-ness, and it makes a point that's self-deprecating enough to be self-loathing." Thompson added: "I wouldn't take Petey's curtain line **too** seriously. He is a bit of a pessimist, after all." Richard Thompson died from complications of his disease in 2016 at the age of 58.

We don't know what comic strips Sam and Alice were reading in the two examples above. A George Herriman's 1922 comic (**Fig. 248**) adds another dimension to this type of reading-comic-strips-in-a-comic-strip metafiction by giving us a Krazy Kat reading a *Krazy Kat* comic strip. Bewildered by seeing herself and Ignatz in the comics of a newspaper that fell out of an airplane, Krazy asks Ignatz for an explanation, but the disinterested Ignatz gives a flippant, enigmatic reply. The metafictional joke then comes when what Krazy describes is happening in the comic strip she is reading happens in the "reality" of the comic strip we are reading. The simple-minded Krazy never really seems to be conscious of the fact that she is a cartoon character, but we suspect that

Ignatz Mouse might be aware of his fictional status as he turns to face the viewer in the thickly bordered central panel.

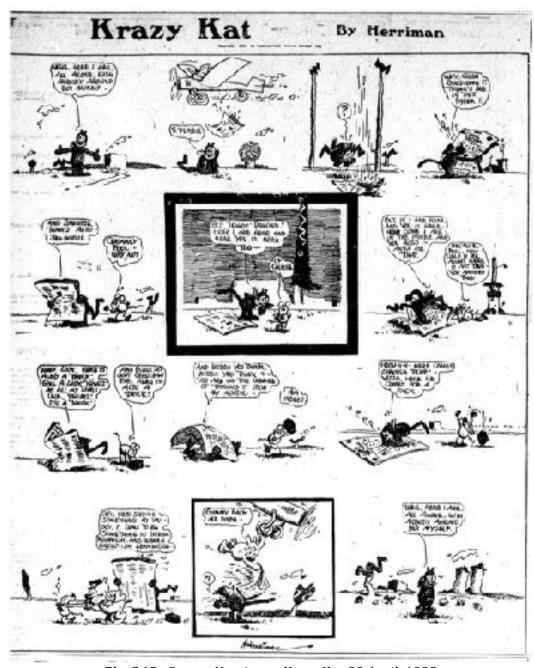


Fig. 248. George Herriman, Krazy Kat, 23 April, 1922.



Fig. 249. Bud Fisher (Al Smith), Mutt and Jeff, 1952.

If Krazy Kat was not conscious of her cartoon nature, the characters Mutt and Jeff certainly were aware of their fictional status in a 1952 strip by Al Smith (**Fig. 249**). Smith had taken over the *Mutt and Jeff* comic in 1932 from Bud Fisher, who, in 1907, had created what is generally recognized as the first American gag cartoon laid out in sequential panels; although Al Smith was the sole creator of *Mutt and Jeff* from 1932 until his retirement in 1980, Bud Fisher's name remained on the strip's byline until his death in 1954.

The simple gag Smith gives us in this cartoon—Mutt pounding Jeff for trying to calculate the next 45 years of the strip—is really beside the point. What strikes us is that neither Mutt nor Jeff seem particularly concerned by knowing that they are characters drawn by "the boss." They seem to have a metaphysical life that transcends our reality. We also don't know how this original odd couple even came to be aware of their cartoon status. Is the racetrack gambler Mutt reading a *Mutt and Jeff* strip instead of the daily racing form he usually turns to in the newspaper? Did "the boss" tell them that they were fictional, or have they always known?

Cartoon characters reading comic strips about themselves or being aware of their fictional status are examples of what González López calls "Metacomics"—those cartoons that break the "realistic contract" between author and reader. Other cartoons and comic strips create an analogous metafictional unease by "breaking the fourth wall."



Fig. 250. Winsor McCay, Little Sammy Sneeze, 24 Sept., 1905.



Fig. 251. Detail from Winsor McCay, Little Nemo in Dreamland, 8 Nov., 1908.

Some artists take "breaking the fourth wall" literally by collapsing the basic framework of the comic strip, the panel. Winsor McCay's1905 *Little Sammy Sneeze* strip (**Fig. 250**) has the title character sneeze against the border of the strip's panel, which then falls in on him. Three years later, McCay used a similar visual joke in a *Little Nemo in Dreamland* strip (**Fig. 251**) in which the title character dreams about a pie factory that slowly fades away into a plain yellow background, which then folds in on itself until Little Nemo wakes up in a heap on the floor.



Fig. 252. Ernie Bushmiller, Nancy, 7 May, 1949.

An Ernie Bushmiller's 1949 *Nancy* strip (**Fig. 252**) also reminds viewers of the artificiality of the cartoon world being portrayed, here with the title character using a pair of scissors to cut through the panel border.

After Ernie Bushmiller died in 1982, his *Nancy* strip was continued by a series of comic strip artists, including Guy Gilchrist, who penned the strip from 1995 until 2018. When Gilchrist stepped down, a female cartoonist working under the pseudonym of Olivia Jaimes took up the task of continuing this quintessentially American comic.

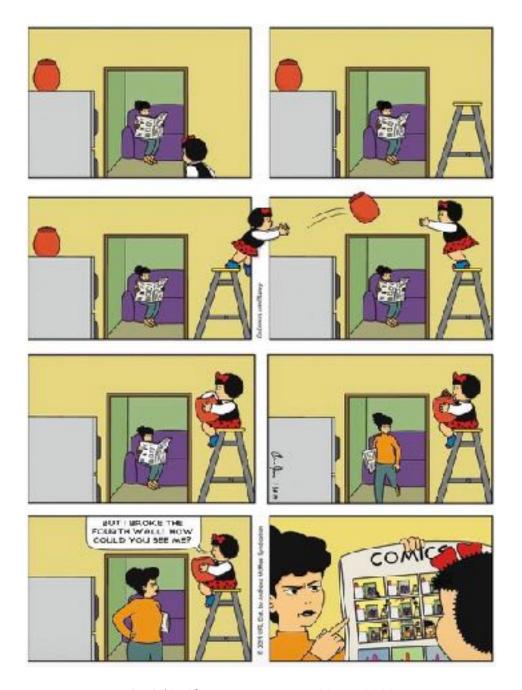


Fig. 253. Olivia Jaimes, Nancy, 20 Jan. 2019.

An Olivia Jaimes' 2019 *Nancy* strip (**Fig. 253**) breaks the fourth wall with what González López would call "metafictional overkill." Not only does Nancy knows that she has literally broken the fourth wall when she crossed over the panel gutter to throw the jar of cookies to herself, but her Aunt Fritzi is aware of her niece's misdeed by having read the very comic strip we are looking at. Curiously, the comic strip that Aunt Fritzi is holding in this *mise en abyme* is not laid out exactly like the one we are looking at.



Fig. 254. Ernie Bushmiller, Nancy, 1 Jan., 1949.

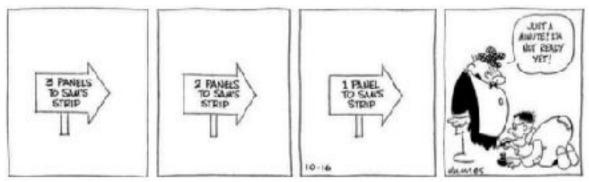


Fig. 255. Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 16 Oct., 1961.

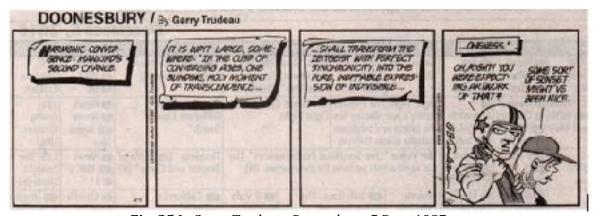


Fig. 256. Garry Trudeau, Doonesbury, 5 Dec., 1987.

Another way that cartoonists break the fourth wall is to have characters, like their theatrical counterparts, turn and directly address the audience. We can see this in this series of comic strips that utilize variants of the "lazy artist" gag, where the absence of images is part of the joke. In his 1949 New Years strip (Fig. 254), the cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller addresses us himself to apologize for the lameness of the first three panels. Mort Walker's and Jerry Dumas' strip (Fig. 255) has the character Sam talk to us while a cartoon rendition of the cartoonist is finishing inking him. In his parody of the New Age rhetoric of the Harmonic Convergence—an August 1987 globally synchronized meditation event—Garry Trudeau has his character B.D. cynically ask us how one could

illustrate such language (**Fig. 256**); Trudeau then twists his satirical penknife one more turn with the New-agey Boopsie wistfully wishing for some sort of sunset.

Another type of metafictional "intertextuality" arises in those comic strips that directly or indirectly refer to other comic strips. When a character from one comic strip appears in another comic strip, the "realistic contract" we have with that cartoon universe is broken and the artificiality of the genre is exposed.



Fig. 257. Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 30 April, 1962.

As we have noted, comic-strip cross-overs were a frequent feature of Mort Walker's and Jerry Dumas' *Sam's Strip*. Of course, for this type of comic to be metafictionally effective, the viewer must know that the cross-over cartoon character is an intruder—that is, the comics artist must assume that viewers have the requisite "contextually and culturally bound knowledge" we discussed in the first essay above. I doubt, for instance, that many people—either in 1962 or today—would consider the parade of cartoon characters invading Walker's and Dumas' strip (Fig. 257) as much more than a bunch of old-timey figures from antique cartoons. A few people might recognize the foregrounded Yellow Kid from Richard F. Outcault's 1895 Hogan's Alley cartoon, or George Herriman's Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and Officer Pupp, or Otto Soglow' Little King; more, probably, could identify Nancy or Mickey poking out from the crowd behind. I suspect, however, that even the most dedicated historian of American comic strips might have difficulties in putting names to each of the cartoon faces Walker and Dumas give us. And, as we have noted, the esoteric metafictional humor of Sam's Strip comics such as this one ultimately did not catch on with the American comic-stripreading public.



Fig. 258. Harry Bliss, The New Yorker, 22 Nov., 1999.

A 1999 Harry Bliss *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 258**) uses the same humorous incongruity as the 1962 Walker and Dumas strip with a parade of cross-over comic strip characters, this time with Charles Addams' Uncle Fester starting "The Cartoon Marathon" with a prank bang gun. Bliss has added a helpful "with apologies to" list of the cartoon artists whose black-and-white characters—all of which come from cartoons published in *The New Yorker*—stand out against the relatively realistic, colorized, Central Park starting-line setting.



Fig. 259. Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 31 Oct., 1961.

Not only did extraneous cartoon characters make guest appearances in *Sam's Strip*, but Walker and Dumas had Sam appear into other cartoon universes. In their 1961 Halloween strip (**Fig. 259**), Sam finds himself dropped into *Krazy Kat's* Coconino County, where Krazy and Ignatz ignore his request for directions. We might not agree with Sam that he is less strange than the talking cat and mouse, but we do find the incongruity of his situation amusingly strange. But the real pleasure we derive from this

strip comes from the care with which Jerry Dumas rendered this homage to his predecessor: in three short panels, Dumas has captured George Herriman's Arizona desert setting of *Krazy Kat*, with time shifting from a hatched moonlit sky, to a cloudless midday sun, to a black night with a Herriman-esque slanting cactus.



Fig. 260. Hank Ketcham, *Dennis the Menace*, 22 Dec., 1988.



Fig. 261. Marcus Hamilton, *Dennis the Menace*, 28 July, 2011.

To get the joke in his *Dennis the Menace* cartoon (**Fig. 260**), Hank Ketcham assumes that we will recognize the cartoons Dennis is drawing as he wonders if he should "be a cartoonist when I grow up or work for a living." The visual "intertexuality" Ketcham employs in this cross-over cartoon makes us realize that, rather than being just directed to all cartoonists, the joke is on Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, and Jim Davis, the creator of *Garfield*. That Dennis is apparently able to draw Snoopy and Garfield as well as their original creators would seem to make Ketchem's cartoon a variation of the "my six-year-old could do that" comic motif about modern art (cf. **Fig. 87**). [Okay, I know that technically Dennis is only "five anna half years old."]

After he took over the *Dennis the Menace* comic strip from Hank Ketcham, who retired in 1994, Marcus Hamilton returned to the same how-do-cartoonists-make-a-living joke in a 2011 cartoon (**Fig. 261**), where Dennis and his dad are at the San Diego Comic Con—the world's largest comic book convention. Here Hamilton is assuming that viewers would recognize the unshaven cartoonist wearing a backwards baseball cap as Stephan Pastis, the creator of *Pearls Before Swine*. Pastis, who attended the 2010 San Diego Comic Con the year before, frequently depicts himself as a cartoonist character in his *Pearl* strips—usually as the butt of the joke, as here in Hamilton's cross-over comic.

[For more on the metafiction of cartoonists appearing in cartoons, see the following section of this essay; for more on Stephan Pastis' penchant for inserting himself into his strips, cf. **Figs. 287–288**.]

A notable example of comic-strip cross-overs was the Comic Strip Switcheroo of 1997. In an audacious, nation-wide, April Fools joke that year, 46 different syndicated comic-strip artists swapped strips, each drawing in the style of the other, but adding their own sense of humor and, in most cases, putting their own cartoon characters into each other's strips.



Fig. 262. Lynn Johnston (of *For Better or Worse*), *Mother Goose and Grimm* (Mike Peters), 1 April, 1997.



Fig. 263. Mike Peters (of *Mother Goose and Grimm*), *For Better or Worse* (Lynn Johnston), 1 April, 1997.

Lynn Johnston's April Fools parody of Mike Peters' *Mother Goose and Grimm* (**Fig. 262**), for instance, begins as if it were one of her normal *For Better or Worse* strips, with John letting the family sheepdog Farley out for the night; the "switcheroo" comes in the elongated last panel drawn in Peters' style, with Grimm, Mother Goose, and the cat Attila sitting in a bar listening to Farley complain that he isn't allowed to do the things that Grimm does. The humor in Mike Peters' return pastiche of Johnston' *For Better or Worse* (**Fig. 263**), drawn in a not entirely successful imitation of her style, also centers on incongruous toilet drinking and cat chasing, but in his punch line Peters adds an extra

metafictional twist by having the characters being aware that their dialogue is represented by speech bubbles.

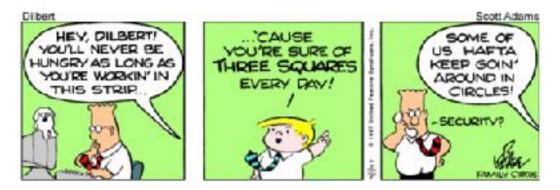


Fig. 264. Bill Keene (of The Family Circus), Dilbert (Scott Adams), 1 April, 1997.



Fig. 265. Scott Adams (of *Dilbert*), *The Family Circus* (Bill Keene), 1 April, 1997.



Fig. 266. Bill Keene, *The Family Circus*, 2 April, 1997.

In his pastiche of Scott Adams' *Dilbert* (**Fig. 264**), Bill Keene pokes fun at Adams' simple three-panel format, adding an extra zing by having his Billy being aware that he exists within a comic-strip panel. For his reciprocal take on Keene's cartoon (**Fig. 265**), Scott Adams transforms *The Family Circus* mother Thelma into *Dilbert's* Pointy-hair Boss, with the joke being the transplantation of the world of Adams' corporate humor into Keene's domestic one; Adams did not use Keene's normal format of putting the dialogue underneath the panel so he could give a thought balloon to Dolly, who sits next to an empty chair that presumably belonged to her now fired brother Jeffy. In the

following, 2 April newspapers, Bill Keene cleverly continued the comic-strip cross-over by referring back to Adams' parody (**Fig. 266**).

Obviously, any viewer who hadn't read the funny pages on April Fools Day would have been confused by the Keene's cartoon published the next day. But the comic-strip artists who participated in the Comic Strip Switcheroo of 1997 could reasonably expect that their viewers had the "contextually and culturally bound knowledge" needed to appreciate the humor in their comic-strip cross-overs. These nationally syndicated comics, after all, appeared together every day on the funny pages of their audience's newspapers, and a viewer only needed to have a general familiarity with the strips to be able to recognize an intruding cartoon character or to get a joke about a given strip's standard format.



Fig. 267. Alex Norris et alia, April Fools Day 2016 webcomics (after Lee, 2016).

Now that Americans are increasingly reading cartoons and comic strips online, where they are often presented individually and not as part of a larger layout in the funny-pages, comics artists can no longer assume that their audiences are familiar with

the work of other contemporary comics artists. In order to accommodate this new reality of comic-strip consumption, the webcomic artist Alex Norris, creator of *Doris McComics*, came up with a plan for a 2016 comic-strip April Fools Day joke that did not involve cartoon cross-overs. Norris shared a draft four-paneled strip about an April Fools cliché—a bucket of water balanced on the top of a door, ready to drop on whoever opened the door—with a closed Facebook group of webcomic artists and invited them to create their own versions of the joke (**Fig. 267**). The result was that dozens of 2016 April Fools Day webcomics came out with identical strips, each drawn in a different style. For those who were checking their feeds for webcomics that day, what appeared at first to be a particularly lame comic became funny when, after seeing numerous iterations of the same strip, it slowly dawned on them that they were the target of the joke. Norris' stunt, which depended on the viewer's gradual realization of the gag, would simply not have worked had the strips been presented all at once on the funny pages of a newspaper.

As Leah Misemer observed in her 2019 article, "A Historical Approach to Webcomics: Digital Authorship in the Early 2000s," the "attention economy" of webpages—"where 'eyeballs' are a form of currency"—has led to another form of "intertextuality," wherein a given webcomics artist posts links to the webpage of another webcomics artist. Misemer noted that the economic incentive to share internet viewers has also given rise to reciprocal guest authorship of webcomics and even, in the case of Jeph Jacques's comic *Questionable Content* and Sam Logan's *Sam and Fuzzy*, a made-up "rivalry."



Fig. 268. "Bill Watterson" (Berkeley Breathed), "Calvin and Hobbes 2016," 1 April, 2016.

The comic-strip artist Berkeley Breathed took a different approach for an April Fools Day joke in 2016 when he published on his Facebook page what appeared to be a

throw-back Bill Watterson cross-over of Watterson's Calvin and Hobbes comic strip and Breathed's Bloom County (Fig. 268). Breathed also announced that Watterson had signed over his Calvin and Hobbes franchise to Breathed's "administration," adding that Watterson was "in great shape —out of the Arizona facility, continent and looking forward to some well-earned financial security." Viewers naturally assumed that this was all a hoax because, after retiring his *Calvin and Hobbes* strip on 31 Dec., 1995, the reclusive Watterson had almost completely disappeared from the comics scene. And Berkeley Breathed himself had only begun to post new *Bloom County* strips on his Facebook page the year before, having stopped publishing the strip in 1989 and its offshoot strip *Opus* in 2008. In the previous few years, however, Bill Watterson had apparently been emerging out of his seclusion: in 2008 he wrote the forward to a collection of Richard Thompson's Cul de Sac comic strips and in 2011 submitted an oil painting for the Team Cul de Sac auction held in honor of Thompson; in 2013 a documentary about him, Dear Mr. Watterson, aired with interviews by, among others, Berkeley Breathed and Stephan Pastis; in 2014, Watterson himself gave a rare interview for the documentary *Stripped*, for which he also produced the poster (**Fig. 15** above); and in that same year he had surreptitiously collaborated with Stephan Pastis on Pastis' Pearls Before Swine strip (see Fig. 287 below). Still, the absurdity of Breathed's accompanying announcement, together with Opus' comment in the final panel of the 2016 April Fools Day strip that the cross-over wasn't "particularly legal," made it seem that Breathed was pulling our leg with this mash-up. This suspicion was heightened when Breathed later updated his Facebook page with the claim that it was the "new home of *Calvin and Hobbes*," and that it would be offering "new merch"—a preposterous suggestion because, unlike all of his fellow syndicated cartoonists, Watterson had famously refused to license spin-off *Calvin and Hobbes* merchandise.

On each April Fools Day of the following three years (2017–2019), Berkeley Breathed has posted a *Calvin County* mash-up signed by him and Bill Watterson, and the mystery of whether Watterson is collaborating with Breathed, or at least condoning his expropriation, continues. In any case, for as long as Breathed carries on with his April Fools Day postings, these cross-overs of two of the most popular American comic strips of the late 1980's provide us with a poignantly nostalgic pleasure. The premise of Breathed's 2018 April Fools Day offering (**Fig. 269**), for instance, is ostensibly that Calvin's imaginary time-machine has thrown him back into a dinosaur-ladened

Mesozoic Age, rather than into the "Beatles Era" he wanted to visit. The final, off-set, panel of the strip, however, jumps us back to a "reality" where Calvin's explanation for why he wasn't "pee-in-the-pants" scared by Opus' "penguinosaurus" is also a commentary about our contemporary world: "Must be the times." But what times are those? 1988 or 2018? Breathed's comic strip is itself a time machine, throwing us, like Calvin, into an era we did not expect to visit. Why isn't Calvin scared by the penguinosaurus? What has transpired in the decades since we last said goodbye to the quintessentially innocent, wildly imaginative Calvin and his stuffed tiger as they tobogganed off to explore our magical world? "Must be the times" forces us to confront our own loss of innocence in the years between when we last enjoyed reading *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Bloom County* in the 20th century and now as they have reappeared in a much more brutal and politically divided 21st century.



Fig. 269. "Bill Watterson" and Berkeley Breathed, Calvin County, 1 April, 2018.

Berkeley Breathed's April Fools Day cross-overs demonstrate that, although we are living in a transitional period of comic-strip consumption, even those who exclusively encounter cartoons and comic strips online can still be expected to recognize classic cartoon characters that originally appeared in print. For the time being, therefore, metafictional comic-strip cross-overs remain possible.

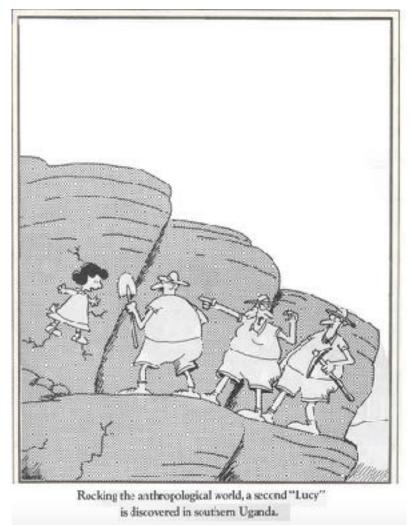


Fig. 270. Gary Larson, *The Far Side*, 3 Feb., 1987.

And few other American comic strips have been used for such cross-overs more than Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*. [The "Peanuts Wiki" on the fandom.com webpage lists 135 cartoonists who have paid tribute to Schultz's strip.] A 1987 Gary Larson *The Far Side* cartoon (**Fig. 270**), for example, assumes that, in addition to knowing that the famous australopithecus uncovered in 1974 was named Lucy, the viewer would also recognize Schulz's character.



Fig. 271. Patrick McDonnell, Mutts, 1994.

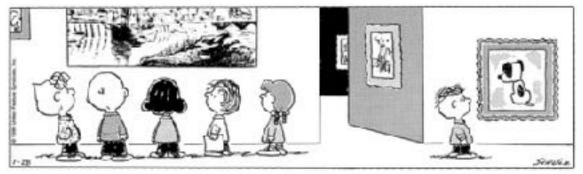


Fig. 272. Charles Schulz, Peanuts, 28 Jan., 1999.

When Patrick O'Donnell began his *Mutts* strip in 1994, he drew an homage to the doyen of American comic strips, placing a replica of Charles Schulz's initial 1952 strip into his title panel (**Fig. 271**). O'Donnell modified Schulz's original by inserting his own characters Earl and Mooch into the strip and changing the final dialogue from "How I hate him" to "How we love him." Five years later, Charles Schulz returned the favor in the fourth strip of his January 1999 series about the *Peanuts* gang going on a school trip to an art museum (see **Fig. 231** above for the first three strips). This single wide panel (**Fig. 272**) is remarkable for being a rare instance of a Charles Schulz cartoon that doesn't contain a gag. Here, while the other children are staring at a what appears to be a Venetian landscape by Turner—indistinctly rendered but still evoking an "associative inversion" in its contrast to the rest of the cartoon—little Rerun is off by himself looking at a portrait of the *Mutts* dog Earl; oddly depicted from behind, Shultz's version of O'Donnell's Earl, a Jack Russell terrier, looks a little more like a Snoopy beagle.



Fig. 273. Patrick O'Donnell, San Diego Comic Con, 2015.

Patrick O'Donnell is undoubtedly the master of comic-strip cross-overs, having produced dozens of take-offs of classic American cartoons, including several about Charles Schulz's Snoopy sitting on his dog house and a whole series of riffs on Schulz's adage "A cartoonist is someone who has to draw the same thing day after day without

repeating himself." Several of O'Donnell's cartoon cross-overs take the form of Bip and Bop—the mischievous squirrels who like to throw nuts at passersby—bopping a comicstrip character below and then adding an appropriate punch line. O'Donnell collected a sample of these for the 2015 San Diego Comics Con (**Fig. 273**), to which he added a spoof of the 1938 issue of *Action Comics* which featured the first appearance of Superman. [A pristine copy of this *Action Comics 1* issue sold for over \$3 million in 2014.]



Fig. 274. Patrick O'Donnell, #DrawSnoopy. Poster. 2015.

Another O'Donnell homage to *Peanuts* is the poster he drew in 2015 (**Fig. 274**). Although the incongruity of Earl sitting for a portrait that the cat Mooch turns into a Snoopy is funny enough, our appreciation of this visual joke is deepened by realizing that it is a poignant echo of the portrait of Earl that Charles Schultz drew shortly before his death fifteen years earlier (**Fig. 272**). [For more on cartoon animals painting portraits of other animals, cf. **Figs. 343** and **346** below.]



Fig. 275. Stephan Pastis, "Alice Traps the Family Circus Kids," Team Cul de Sac, 2012.

The most notable recent example of cross-over American cartoons is Team Cul de Sac, created to honor Richard Thompson by raising money for the Michael J. Fox Foundation in support of research on Parkinson's disease. Organized by Chris Sparks, Thompson's former web-designer, Team Cul de Sac published in 2012 a book of original comic art with contributions by over 150 comics artists—a veritable who's-who of contemporary American cartoonists. Stephan Pastis' contribution to this book (**Fig. 275**) involves a double cross-over, with his *Pearls Before Swine* cartoon characters Rat and Pig talking to *Cul de Sac*'s Alice who has trapped the kids from Bill Keene's *Family Circus*. Pastis assumes that, to understand the humorous incongruity here, viewers know that Thompson's Alice normally used a manhole cover as a stage to dance on; by transforming the innocent Alice into a grawlix-swearing brat who bad-mouths the *Family Circus*'s Jeffy, Pastis is not only poking fun at Thompson's art, but he is also taking an oblique shot at Keene's cartoon, much as Scott Adams had in his 1997 Comic Strip Switcheroo (**Fig. 265**).



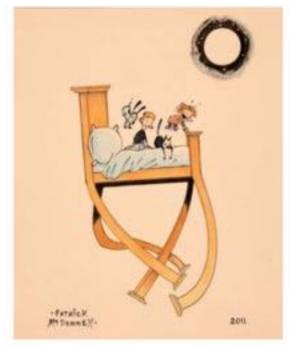


Fig. 276. Patrick O'Donnell. Original artwork created for the Team Cul de Sac auction held on 8-10 June, 2012.

In addition to its book, Team Cul de Sac also sponsored an auction in 2012 that included an original oil painting by Bill Watterson and two original drawings by Patrick O'Donnell (**Fig. 276**). One of O'Donnell's homage cross-over cartoons was of Thompson's Alice on her manhole cover balancing his *Mutts* animals; the other was a

drawing of Alice and Petey together with Earl and Mooch in Winsor McCay's walking bed (cf. **Fig. 90** above).



Fig. 277. Robert Sikoryak. Original artwork created for the Team Cul de Sac auction held on 8 - 10 June, 2012.



Fig. 278. Pablo Picasso, *Three Musicians*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 201 x 223 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Another work submitted for the Team Cul de Sac auction was the comic book artist Robert Sikoryak's pastiche (**Figs. 277**) of Picasso's *Three Musicians* (**Fig. 278**). Sikoryak, who specializes in making mash-ups of comics and literary classics, presented a Cubist, but still recognizable, rendition of Petey, Alice, and littlest brother Dill taking the place of Picasso's even more abstract musicians.

Sikoryak's imitation of Picasso raises the issue of the metafictional "intertexuality" of comics that incorporate works of art into their cartoon universes—what has been called "vertical" references as opposed to the "horizontal" references of comics that quote other comics. When works of fine art appear in comics as parodies (quotations that differ in style, tone or setting from their originals) or as pastiches (quotations meant to mimic the graphic styles of their originals), they require us to read the comic on several levels. As we noted in the first essay of this collection, Nancy Pedri describes these quotations in the academic jargon of "re-presentations" that "instate complex multimodal reading practices." But, as we observed in the second essay, established comics art- and archaeology-themed stereotypes need not be decoded afresh each time a viewer encounters them; cartoon and comic-strip parodies and pastiches of famous works of art or of well known archaeological artifacts are part of the

visual vocabulary with which viewers are expected to be conversant. And, as we will examine in the essays below, these comic stereotypes can be used for a wide variety of humorous purposes.

But, like many comic-strip cross-overs, not all comic parodies and pastiches of artworks are meant to be humorous. Some merely serve as homages.



Fig. 279. Jimmy Johnson, Arlo and Janis, 15 Feb., 2009.

The panels in Jimmy Johnson's February 2009 *Arlo and Janis* strip (**Fig. 279**), for instance, are pastiches meant to convey a wistful sadness as we reflected on the passing of the American artist Andrew Wyeth, who died the month before. Viewers are expected to know that they are looking at versions of Wyeth's temperas and watercolors, even if they could not specifically identify *Winter* (1946), *Turkey Pond* (1941), *Trodden Weed* (1951), *Cat in a Window* (n.d.), or *Up in the Studio* (1965). It would seem that Johnson chose these particular works, into which he inserted Arlo, Janis, their son Gene, and the family cat Ludwig, in order to highlight the melancholy mood of his metafictional "intertextuality." Curiously, Johnson chose not to makes a pastiche of Wyeth's most famous painting, *Cristina's World* (1948), which has become the emblem of Wyeth's realistic style and a comic-strip stereotype of the artist's *oeuvre* (cf. **Figs. 642–643** below).

The American master of comic-strip cross-overs, Patrick O'Donnell, is also the most prolific producer of metafictional cartoon shout-outs to art. Using his *Mutts* Sunday title panels—those "throw-away" introductory panels often removed by

newspaper editors—O'Donnell has created a plethora of pastiche tributes to other comics or works of art he admires. **Fig. 269** is a selection of the title page art homages and their artistic inspirations that O'Donnell has posted on his website:



This stillo originally len on Oct 12, 1997



Propaganda Manifesto Aleksardi Rodchenio, 1924



This strip originally ran on Aug 02, 1998



Jersey Joe Jean-Michel Basquiat 1993



this stip originally ran on Oct II, 1998



Kiesler and Wife wie sames 1963-65



Fig. 280. Patrick O'Donnell. Selection of *Mutts* Sunday title-page homages to art and their artistic inspirations (after https://mutts.com/title-panel-inspiration/).

At the risk of flogging readers already bored to death by this extended discussion of cartoon metafiction, I close here with the banal observation that every comic which quotes another cartoon or another work of art exhibits "intertextuality," and thus must be interpreted on multiple levels. That interpretation can include an assessment of the original context of the quotation and its humorous "re-presentation," or it can take the form of an assessment of how the quotation functions as a humorous stereotype, like the set-up to an common verbal joke trope. And I also should reiterate that, in all of these essays, we are decoding "contextually bound" metafictional humor in art- and archaeology-themed cartoons and comic strips in part to uncover something of interest about American cultural values.

Cartooning Cartoonists





Fig. 281. Mid-20th-century Illustrated advertisements for correspondence cartoon courses.



Fig. 282. Dan A. Runyan, Cartoonist Exchange Laugh Finder, 1937.

So you want to be a cartoonist? Although many professional cartoonists and comic-strip artists say that the "cartooning bug" hit them when they were bored children doodling in the back of the classroom instead of paying attention to their lessons, few ever came to earn their livelihood by taking the sort of cartooning correspondence course advertised in the back of pulp magazines in the 1930's through 1960's (Fig. 281). Instead—a few notable exceptions aside—the vast majority of today's professional cartoonists and comic-strip artists began by studying art and design in college, with many coming up through the ranks drawing for the op-ed pages in the newspapers.

So, say you have joined the elite corps of syndicated cartoonists or successful webcomic artists. Now what? How do you come up with the gags? The cartoonist, teacher, and graphic novelist Paul Kasarik recently yearned for a personalized modern version of Dan Runyan's 1937 "Laugh Finder" (**Fig. 282**), which, by simply spinning a spinner, would generate ideas for humorous combinations of characters, settings, and accessories; with such a device Kasarik says he could avoid spending "a lot of time staring, staring, staring at blank sheets of white paper."

One easy solution for Kasarik and other comic-strip artists staring at those blank pieces of paper on their drawing boards: make a joke about a comic-strip artist staring at a drawing board. It is little wonder, then, that one finds this sort of metafictional reflectivity in so many cartoons.

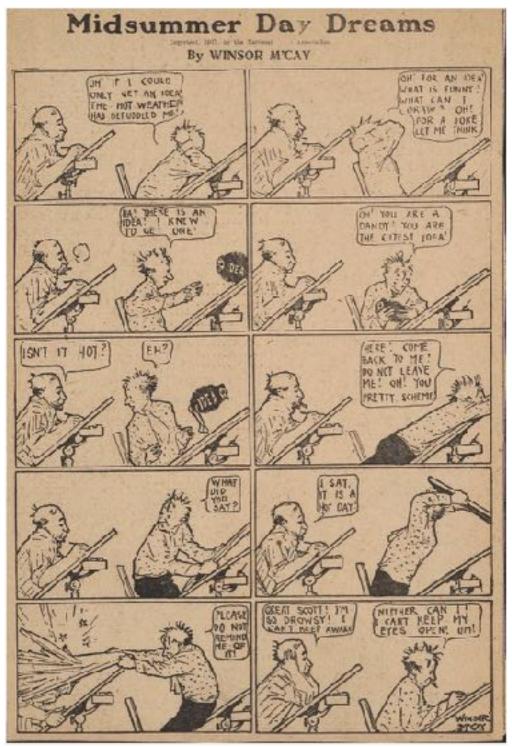


Fig. 283. Winsor McCay, Midsummer Day Dreams, 11 Nov., 1911.

Winsor McCay, for example, gives us a comic narrative of two newspaper cartoonists at work on a hot summer day (**Fig. 283**). The joke is that the strip begins with one of the cartoonists being befuddled and ends with both being befuddled; the real humor, however, is in McCay's incongruous depiction of the first cartoonist's idea as a cute, hedgehog-like animal which the cartoonist cuddles before it scampers away when he is interrupted by his fellow cartoonist.



Fig. 284. Thomas E. Powers, "Krazy Kat Herriman Loves his Kittens," 1922.

If McCay's cartoonist-at-the-drawing-board comic strip has an autobiographical feel, Thomas Powers' "Krazy Kat Herriman Loves his Kitten" (Fig. 284) is an explicit biography, giving us a humorous hypothetical story of how George Herriman began his famous *Krazy Kat* comic. Powers was, like Herriman, one of William Randolph Hearst's favorite cartoonists (cf. Fig. 98 above for the parody of the Armory Show Powers drew for Hearst's *New York American*), and he made this spoof when his younger colleague Herriman had received a lifetime contract for his popular syndicated strip that allowed him to move to from New York to California. Powers' "How George Started Drawing Cats" pokes fun at Herriman—whom he depicts as a dandy with a fancy checkered suit, straw boater, and spectator shoes—by making him seem to really care for the stray kitten he has rescued; the punch line, however, comes in the final panel when the grown cat tells us that it is being used by Herriman to wipe off his drawing pens. Powers visually augments the humor of this last panel with the sketches of Ignatz Mouse and

Officer Bull Pupp on the wall and with the ink splotches on the back of the incongruously talking cat.

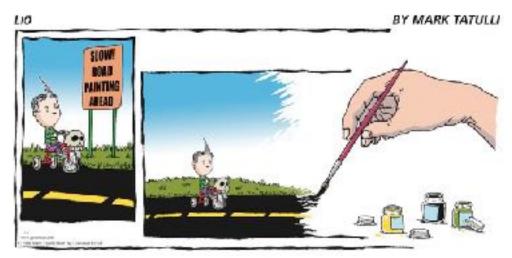


Fig. 285. Mark Tatulli, *Liō*, 4 Dec., 2016.

The gag in a Mark Tatuli's 2016 *Liō* strip (**Fig. 285**) similarly involves the metafictional incongruity of the cartoonist appearing in the cartoon—in this case, as just a hand. Like the Walker and Dumas strip where Jerry is finishing drawing Sam (**Fig. 255**), Tatuli's *in media res* strip breaks the "realistic contract" between author and reader. The visual joke here is on us for thinking that the road Liō rides on in the first panel is a "real" road.





Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 23 Oct., 1961.



Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 30 Oct., 1961.



Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 9 Nov., 1961.



Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 18 Dec., 1961.

Fig. 286. Selection of Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip.

Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas' *Sam's Strip*, their short-lived comic strip about comic strips, adds an extra metafictional twist to the cartoonist-at-the-drawing-board theme by including the strip's actual cartoonist as a cartoon character in the comic strip. Walker and Dumas use the metafictional head-scratching interactions between the character Sam and the cartoon cartoonist Jerry Dumas for a variety of gags in which, not surprisingly, the cartoonist comes off on top (**Fig. 286**). We laugh at Sam when he misunderstands Jerry's reference to Michelangelo, when he is reduced in size, when he tries to draw himself, and when he is an unwitting subject for a lesson in how to draw a cartoon.



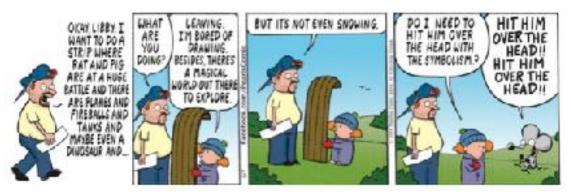


Fig. 287. Stephan Pastis, Pearls Before Swine, 2-7 June, 2014.

No contemporary American comic-strip artist inserts themselves into their strips as a cartoon character more frequently than Stephan Pastis. As we have noted in the previous section, Pastis often depicts himself as a cartoonist at his table, drawing his *Pearls Before Swine* strip and interacting with his cartoon creations. In June, 2014, Pastis published a week-long series of *Pearl* strips (**Fig. 287**) about a second-grader named Libby who "owns" the cartoon cartoonist Pastis by drawing comics that are much more sophisticated than the real Pastis' normal, flat, two-dimensional, offerings. Among the notable features of this *Pearls* series are the formal departures from the rigid threepanel format Pastis normally uses: the second strip has a radically narrow, wordless, panel showing Libby trying to come up with her grawlix-laced constructive criticism of Pastis' drawing and writing styles; Libby's comics in the third, fourth, and fifth strips are contained in extra-wide central panels; and the final strip begins with the cartoon cartoonist Pastis entering from a borderless, white panel. This final strip of the series is particularly remarkable for its "intertextual" reference to Bill Watterson's famous last *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, which came out on 31 Dec., 1995; in that Watterson strip, Calvin and Hobbes are on their toboggan at the top of a snow-covered hill and, after saying "It's a magical world Hobbes, ol' buddy," Calvin adds "... Let's go exploring" as the pair slides down a vast white expanse into retirement. Just after his 2014 *Pearls* series appeared, Stephan Pastis shared on his blog site that he and the reclusive Bill Watterson had in fact collaborated on the series and that, as a way of elaborating on Pastis' penchant for making fun of his own drawing abilities, Watterson had actually provided the art work portrayed as Libby's in the central three strips.

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE

BY STEPHAN PASTIS



Fig. 288. Stephan Pastis, "The Sad, Lonely Journey of a 'Pearls' Comic Strip," *Pearls Before Swine*, 11 July, 2004.

Stephan Pastis' *Pearls Before Swine* is one of those "edgy" comic strips syndicated in the first decade of the 21st century, at a time when newspapers were struggling to create funny pages that appealed to younger readers while at the same time not alienating older viewers accustomed to "legacy" comics. Pastis addresses this tension in a "metafictional overkill" 2004 strip (**Fig. 288**) that reveals the entire mode of production of a modern comic strip, from artist's conception, to feedback by syndication and newspaper editors, to consumption by viewers. The comic strip in Pastis' "The Sad, Lonely Journey of a 'Pearls' Comic Strip" is itself a cartoon character, being animated in the title panel and, after its modifications by the wife and editors, presented as a comic-strip-within-a-comic in the off-set, shadowed penultimate panel. The target of Pastis' joke is not the older couple in the final panel who mistakenly attribute the strip-within-a-strip's lameness to the cartoonist, but is rather the market forces that require Pastis to dumb down his strips.

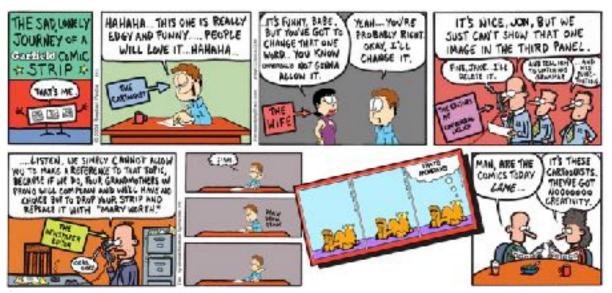


Fig. 289. Midnight Strike, "No. 1209. The Sad, Lonely Journey of a Garfield Comic Strip," *Square Root of Minus Garfield*, 9 Sept., 2012.

As our consumption of cartoons and comic strips has increasingly shifted from newspapers to the internet, new forms of interactive comics have emerged, as we discussed above. Jim Davis' Garfield has become a particularly favor target for amateur non-cartoonists to manipulate in creating parodies of a strip that younger viewers generally consider "lame" (cf., also, Wizardskull's quotation, Fig. 161). Among the nearly two dozen websites hosting fan-produced parodies of Garfield, the Square Root of Minus Garfield webcomic site has a Pearls Before Swine/Garfield mash-up based on Pastis' 2004 "The Sad, Lonely Journey" (Fig. 289). Created by a self-described "teenager on the autistic spectrum" who goes by the name "Midnight Strike," the target of this mash-up is Jim Davis himself; as Midnight Strike says: "I decided to make fun of Garfield's declining quality by stating that the creator made failed attempts to get crap past the radar." In addition to the simple replacement of Pastis' cartoonist and wife with Davis' Jon Arbuckle and his girlfriend, Midnight Strike has substituted a Garfield comic for Pastis' strip-within-a-strip. The zing in Midnight Strike's mash-up comes when we realize that, unlike Pastis' original strip-within-a strip which was intentionally unfunny, the substituted strip quoting Garfield's oft-used "I hate Mondays" tagline is lame because the humor in Davis' Garfield itself is lame. [If I were Midnight Strike's editor, in the teenager's statement of purpose I would correct "made failed attempts" to "failed" and change "past the radar" to "under the radar."]



Fig. 290. Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas, Sam's Strip, 20 Dec., 1961.

Yet one more level of metafictional complexity arises when cartoon cartoonists in a comic strip are depicted creating "intertextual" take-offs of other comic strips. A Mort Walker and Jerry Dumas 1961 comic strip (Fig. 290), for instance, gives us the absurd situation of Sam suggesting that the cartoon cartoonist Jerry rip off Harold Gray's longrunning *Little Orphan Annie* strip. While the humor of the strip is presented in a rather straight-forward manner through the dialogue and through the visual metafiction of Jerry and Sam reading the comic pages, the presence of Sam's ersatz Annie and dog raises several metaphysical questions. They are presented as "real" within the universe of the comic strip and the fact that the dog gives a Sandy-like "Arf" in the first panel suggests that they are as animate as are Jerry and Sam. Yet, as they stand passively immobile like poster-board cut-outs in the next two panels, the ersatz Annie and dog seem to exist on a less "real" plane than Sam and Jerry. Are they just manifestations of Sam's idea, and if so, how did they get here? Did Sam draw them? We might also question why they bear only a tangential resemblance to the real cartoon Annie and Sandy. Were Walker and Dumas worried about copyright infringements—something that they clearly were not concerned about in their other comic-strip cross-overs such as the cavalcade of cartoon figures in **Fig. 257** (in which, curiously, Little Orphan Annie does not appear)?

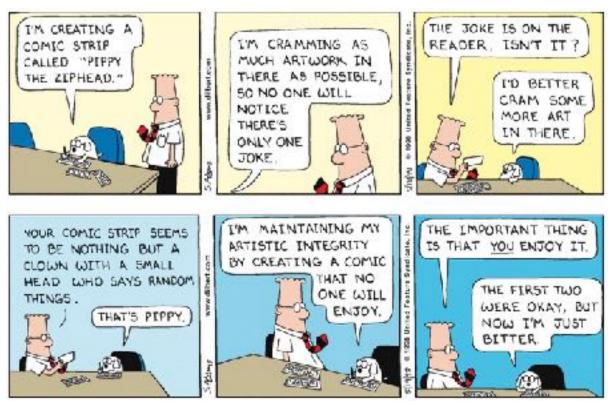


Fig. 291. Scott Adams, Dilbert, 18–19 May, 1998.

Following his participation in the Comic Strip Switcheroo of 1997 (cf. **Figs. 264–265** above), Scott Adams used the cartoon-cartoonist-creating-a-takeoff-cartoon motif to poke fun at Bill Griffith's *Zippy the Pinhead* comic strip. In two of his *Dilbert* strips (**Fig. 291**), Adams' maliciously cruel Dogbert character is shown as a cartoonist drawing a rip-off of Griffith's *Zippy*, the widely syndicated surreal comic strip Griffith originally created when he had been one of the leading figures in San Francisco's underground comix movement in the 1970s. We the viewers are never shown Dogbert's "Pippy," but Dilbert archly describes it as "nothing but a clown with a small head who says random things." Unlike the the playful jabs cartoonists threw at each other in the Comic Strip Switcheroo, Adams' critique of *Zippy* seems downright nasty; it turns into an implied *ad hominem* attack on Griffith himself when Dogbert says "I'm maintaining my artistic integrity by creating a comic strip no one will enjoy."

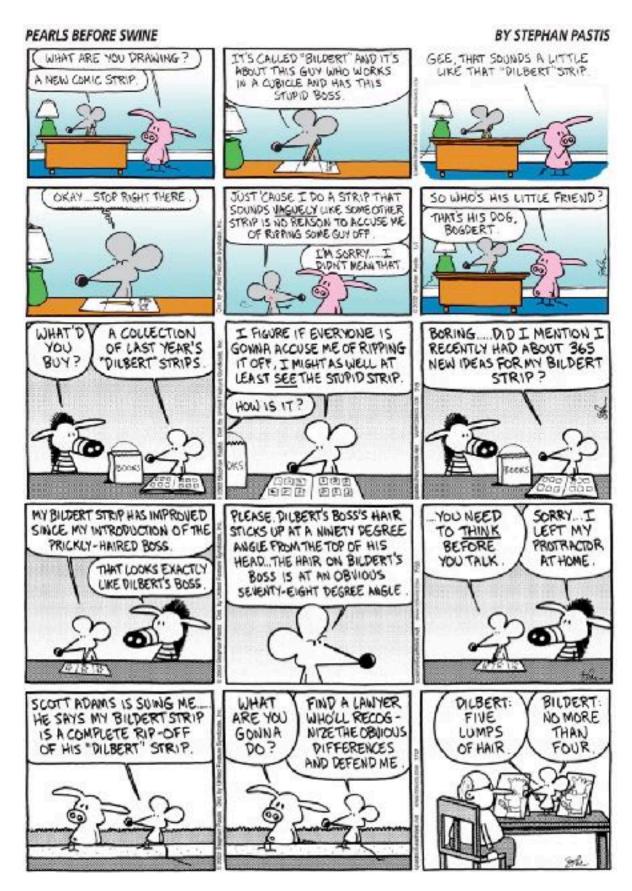


Fig. 292. Selection of Stephan Pastis, *Pearls Before Swine*, 7–12 July, 2002.

If *Zippy* and Griffith were the targets of Adams' 1998 rather harsh humor, Stephan Pastis' 2002 cartoon-cartoonist-creating-a-takeoff-cartoon comic strips (**Fig. 292**) are much friendlier to Scott Adams' *Dilbert*—something that makes sense knowing that Adams' support in 2000 was a crucial factor in Pastis' becoming a syndicated cartoonist. The ostensible target of Pastis' week-long *Pearls Before Swine* series is not *Dilbert* or Adams, but the cartoon cartoonist Rat, with his ridiculously picayune changes made to avoid copyright infringement. And, beyond encouraging us to laugh at Rat's ripping off *Dilbert* for gags ideas and drawing style, Pastis is, by extension, also asking us to laugh at himself as a comic-strip artist—an endearing self-deprecating trait that Pastis continued a decade later in his collaboration with Bill Watterson (**Fig. 287**).

Silly Art Supplies

For our hypothetical cartoonists, going cross-eyed from staring at those blank pieces of paper while struggling to come up with a gag for the next strip, the very pens and brushes sitting on the drawing table may seem to be laughing them. Aha! Another idea for a joke!





Fig. 293. John Bell, *The Bell Curve Cartoons*.

Fig. 294. John Deering, 16 June, 2011.

Animating the inanimate art supply is an incongruity that has in recent years come to be a humorous cartoon cliché used for a variety of gags. The graphic designer/cartoonist John Bell, for example, created a cartoon with talking paint brushes (**Fig. 293**). In addition to using this incongruity to make silly double entendres on "brush"

and "stroke," Bell has cleverly personalized the two "living" paint brushes by giving each a different "hair style." With his cartoon of talking pencils having dinner (**Fig. 294**), John Deering, the editorial cartoonist for the *Arkansas Democratic-Gazette*, gives us a humorous take on the two sides of the coin in the life of any comics artist: constant drawing and erasing. The webcomic artist Nicolas Gurewitch has extended this gag in a 2020 *The Perry Bible Fellowship* comic strip (**Fig. 295**) where the Eraser inadvertently transforms the Pencil's sentimental valentine into a profanity—a joke that could only appear on a webpage as it would not have gotten "past the radar" of a newspaper editor.



Fig. 295. Nicholas Gurewitch, "Rubbed," The Perry Bible Fellowship, 2020.



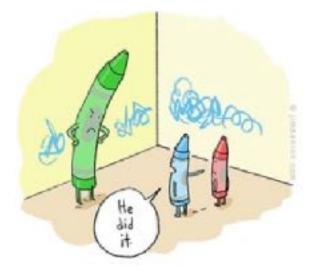


Fig. 296. Scott Hilburn, *The Argyle Sweater*, 8 Dec., 2011.

Fig. 297. Jim Benton, 26 March, 2012.

Both Scott Hilburn and Jim Benton used the animated-art-supply motif to create crayon cartoon gags, the punch lines in both of which depend on our visual recognition of the crayons' colors (Figs. 296 and 297). Hilbrun's example is set in a cartoon universe peopled by human doctors and unfaithful crayons, one in which the real-world laws of color mixing applies; Benton's crayons would seem to be living in a crayon-only world, and one in which a green mother is capable of having a blue and a red child. But both cartoons are representative of contemporary American cultural values: in the case of Hilbrun's cartoon, the unacceptability of extra-martial sexual relations; in the case of Benton's, the role of the hands-on-hip mother in teaching her children socially acceptable behavior. [We have already seen hand-on-hips scolding mothers in cartoons about Michelangelo and Dalí as children, Figs. 17 and 21.]



Fig. 298. LOL Zombie, 19 May, 2010.

Another animated-art-supply scolding mother cartoon was posted on the LOL Zombie web site in 2010 (**Fig. 298**). This LOL Zombie cartoon was dedicated "to all you graphic designers who love your geeky color jokes." But any bourgeois American who ever selected colors for repainting their living room walls would be familiar with color-chip fan decks and get this pun.

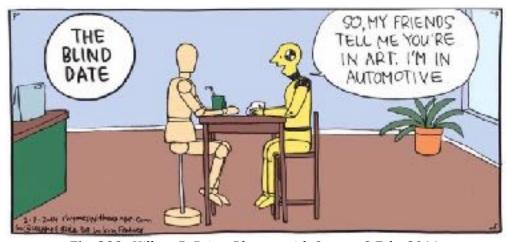


Fig. 299. Hillary B. Price, Rhymes with Orange, 9 Feb., 2014.

Hillary B. Price jumped onto the animated-art-supply-cartoon bandwagon in 2014 with her dating comic (**Fig. 299**). In addition to the humorous anomaly of animated dummies going out on a date, there would seem to be a hidden double entendre in this cartoon: unlike the crash dummy, the eyeless art mannequin really is a blind date!

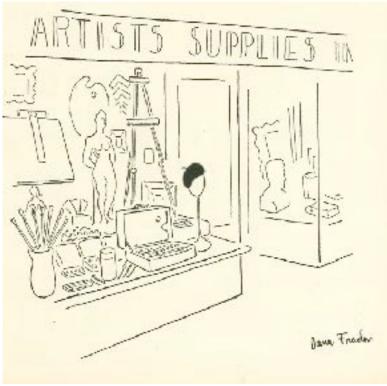


Fig. 300. Dana Fradon, The New Yorker, 1 May, 1948.

Dana Fradon's 1948 *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 300**) does not have an animated art supply, but rather pokes fun at the stereotype of the beret-wearing artist. In this first cartoon he published in the magazine where his work would appear for the next fifty years, Fradon gives us a wordless gag which assumes we know that wearing a beret is an amusing affectation.



Fig. 301. Mike Peters, Mother Goose & Grimm, 2 April, 2017.

Mike Peters has also found humor in a non-animated art supply in his 2017 Mother Goose & Grimm comic strip (**Fig. 301**), adding an extra zing to his atrocious pun by labeling the store"Office Cheapo" instead of the expected "Office Depot." The medieval manuscript illuminator provides a metafictional echo of the comic stereotype of the cartoonist at the drawing table which we identified in the previous section of this essay.





Fig. 302. Lou Brooks, The Museum of Forgotten Art Supplies. 2019. Web.

The illustrator Lou Brooks took a different humorous approach to the topic when he created in 2009 an online "Museum of Forgotten Art Supplies" (**Fig. 302**). Unlike the cartoon imaginary museum motif we examined in the "Mocking Museums" section of the previous essay, Brooks' "museum" is a collection of tongue-in-cheek blogs about actual art supplies no longer used by those in the illustration and cartoon business.

Poking Fun at Painters



Fig. 303. Garrett Price, "All right then, what is <u>your</u> conception of the Awakening of Intelligence through Literature and Music?" *The New Yorker*, 1934.

When cartoonists draw cartoons of famous artists shown in the act of creating works of art, they are not making fun of making art *per se*. The subjects of the gags of such cartoons are, rather, the artists themselves, as we have seen in the examples of Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel (**Figs. 4**, **5**, **7**, **11**, and **13**) and as we shall see in many of the cartoons and comic strips in the "Amusing Art" essay below. In contrast, the cartoon gags we will explore in the next sections of this essay find humor in the *process* of making art.

The joke in Garrett Price's double-paged 1934 *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 303**), for example, is directed towards the tensions that can arise between professional artists and those who commission their services. Here, dwarfed by the monumental masterpiece he is painting, we have a gesticulating, beret-wearing, muralist at work, responding to the implied criticism of a bald, cigar-smoking, patron. Unlike Garry Trudeau's gag about the impossibility of creating artwork to illustrate absurdly flowery New Age rhetoric (cf. **Fig. 256**), Price's artist has painted a Neo-Classical mural that

seems an honest attempt to fulfill a commission to create a work of art representing the absurdly grandiose topic "The Awakening of Intelligence through Literature and Music."



Fig. 304. Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934. Mural, 160 x 43 cm. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. A smaller version of the 1933 *Man at the Crossroads* mural Rivera painted in the RCA Building, New York City.

If a 21st-century viewer might not be able to decode the "contextually and culturally bound" humor in Price's cartoon, anyone who saw this two-page spread in 1934 would immediately have recognized it as a parody of the controversy surrounding Diego Rivera's Man at the Crossroads (Fig. 304), which John D. Rockefeller had commissioned the year before for the lobby of the newly constructed RCA Building in Rockefeller Plaza (now called 30 Rockefeller Plaza). The Rockefellers were great supporters of Rivera—John D.'s wife Abby had purchased several of his works shown at MoMA in 1932. Nevertheless, the approach Rivera took to fulfill his commission—to create a mural about "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future"—ended up with the director of Rockefeller Center, John D.'s grandson Nelson, ordering that Rivera's incomplete mural be covered up and removed. Rivera had flanked his central Man at the Crossroads mural with two panels, The Frontier of Material Development and The Frontier of Ethical Evolution, representing, respectively, the capitalist and the communist worlds. Although Nelson Rockefeller had no objections to Rivera's depicting communism next to capitalism, he balked at Rivera's juxtaposing an image of Lenin clasping the hands of workers opposite a vignette of high-society Americans at a cafe where they are playing cards, dancing, drinking, and smoking. When Rivera refused to remove his portrait of Lenin, offering instead to include a picture of Abraham Lincoln on the other side, Nelson Rockefeller closed down the project.

By making the short, cigar-smoking patron the target of his cartoon gag, Garrett Price was siding with those who were outraged by the censoring of Rivera's art. His cartoon, thus, was the visual equivalent of the snarky poem, "I Paint What I See: A Ballad of Artistic Integrity," that E.B. White had published in the 20 May, 1933 edition of *The New Yorker*. White's poem starts out:

'What do you paint, when you paint on a wall?' Said John D.'s grandson Nelson.
'Do you paint just anything there at all?
'Will there be any doves, or a tree in fall?
'Or a hunting scene, like an English hall?'

A later stanza, gives us Rivera's reply:

'I paint what I paint, I paint what I see,
'I paint what I think,' said Rivera,
'And the thing that is dearest in life to me
'In a bourgeois hall is Integrity;
'However...
'I'll take out a couple of people drinkin'
'And put in a picture of Abraham Lincoln;
'I could even give you McCormick's reaper
'And still not make my art much cheaper.
'But the head of Lenin has got to stay...

And the poem concludes:

'It's not good taste in a man like me,' Said John D.'s grandson Nelson, 'To question an artist's integrity 'Or mention a practical thing like a fee, 'But I know what I like to a large degree, 'Though art I hate to hamper; 'For twenty-one thousand conservative bucks 'You painted a radical. I say shucks, 'I never could rent the offices----'The capitalistic offices. 'For this, as you know, is a public hall 'And people want doves, or a tree in fall 'And though your art I dislike to hamper, 'I owe a little to God and Gramper, 'And after all, 'It's my wall...'

'We'll see if it is,' said Rivera.



Fig. 305. Maurice Ketten, "Why Not?", The New York Evening World, 27 April, 1916.

If Garrett Price's 1934 cartoon was sympathetic to the artist, like Anatol Kovarsky's 1957 *New Yorker* cover was kind to abstract expressionist art (cf. **Fig. 171**), almost all other cartoons and comic strips about professional artists treat them as figures of ridicule.

Following the pattern he established in a 1913 cartoon mocking Cubist painters (cf. **Fig. 115**), Maurice Ketten's 1916 comic strip (**Fig. 305**) presents us with an absurd "famous artist" who creates fatuous "masterpieces"—here wild ensembles of painted umbrellas, dresses, and women's faces. While we chuckle at the artist's pomposity, the real targets of Ketten's joke are the women who, like those in Harvey Peake's and J.F. Griswold's 1913 cartoons (**Figs. 131** and **132**), think that transforming themselves into *avant-garde* art is the height of fashion.



Fig. 306. Detail of Fig. 243, George Herriman, Krazy Kat, 26 Nov., 1916.

George Herriman took a similar jab at the pompous artist in the 1916 comic strip we examined at the beginning of this essay (**Fig. 306**). The artist Michael O'Kobalt, who painted "another 'gem' loosed upon the world of art" is described by Herriman as "painter of portraits, signs, fences, and interiors, mender of sinks, keys, and shot-rifles, buyer of 2nd hand false teeth, and popular purveyor of katnip, and lavender, to the royal family." Naturally, this jack-of-all-trades O'Kobalt wears a beret and works in a garret—cartoon stereotypes of the starving artist that have endured to this day.

Just as the motif of the cartoonist at his drawing board can be used for a wide variety of cartoon gags, so too can the trope of the painter in front of his canvas. [And, no, I haven't slipped back into an archaic use of "his" as a gender-neutral singular possessive pronoun! Up until quite recently, professional cartoonists or professional artists depicted in American cartoons and comic strips were invariably male. And, in line with the general dearth of cartoon characters of color in American comics, those cartoonists or artists were almost all white.]

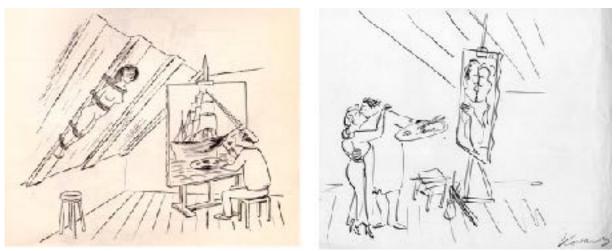


Fig. 307. Two cartoons by Anatol Kovarsky, The New Yorker.

The purpose of the essays in this collection is not to provide a comprehensive historical survey of cultural attitudes represented in American cartoons and comic strips, but we do need to note here that, as much as many earlier comics are remarkable for being able to retain their humor down the generations, others fall flat in the face of changing social sensibilities, especially when their subjects involve sexual harassment or racism. For example, two wordless Anatol Kovarsky *New Yorker* cartoons about artists at work in their garrets (**Fig. 307**) might have been amusing to some mid-20thcentury viewers; today, the abuse of a female model by a male painter—whether lashing her naked to a roof beam to be a model for a ship's figurehead, or kissing her while making a painting of her being kissed—just doesn't seem funny to us now.



Fig. 308. Anatol Kovarsky, The New Yorker, 3 May, 1952.

Another Kovarsky cartoon, with soft-porn nudes stacked along the walls of an impoverished artist's garret, also embodies an out-dated sexism, albeit one not quite so offensive to our contemporary tastes (**Fig. 308**). Kovarsky's visual gag—the artist painting a painting of money when these nudes weren't selling—would have seemed ludicrous to a mid-century American audience; ironically, if Kovarsky himself had actually painted such a painting in 1952, he might have become famous for being one of the innovators of Pop Art a decade before Andy Warhol appeared on the scene!

The association of the male artist with what we would now call toxic masculinity has a long history and can still be used for a joke today. Wulff and Morgenthaler's 2015 cartoon gag (**Fig. 309**), for instance, is based on the incongruous difference in how the

two artists describe their motivations for making art. We suspect that the bespectacled, beret-wearing, dude will not have much luck getting "action."



Fig. 309. Mikael Wulff & Anders Morgenthaler, Wumo, 8 Aug., 2015.



Fig. 310. Charles Saxon, Cover art, The New Yorker, 5 Aug., 1961.

The visual gags in the three Anatol Kovarsky artist-at-his-easel cartoons we examined above depended on our being able to view the artist's canvas; in contrast, Wulff and Morgenthaler only showed us the back of the easel, as seeing the artwork would detract from their text-delivered joke. To get the humor in Charles Saxon's 1961 New Yorker cover (Fig. 310) we do need to see the colorful abstract paintings that the be-sandaled beatnik artist is selling: what the two women might be saying about these paintings is suggested by the contrasting, staid, New England town scene visible in the large picture-window behind them; one suspects that Saxon is showing off a bit here, equally at home with watercolor landscapes as well as with with color-field abstracts.



Fig. 311. John McPherson, Close to Home, 25 Oct., 1999.



Fig. 312. Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 2 May, 2014.

Similarly, we would be distracted from the pun in John McPherson's cartoon (**Fig. 311**) if we were able to see what his beret-topped artist was painting under the

encouragement of a coxswain coach. Wiley Miller also gives us a back-of-the-easel view in his cartoon about an out-of-place book-keeper/artist (**Fig. 312**), although in this case we might like to have seen what sort of creative book-keeping the balding, pony-tailed, artist had come up with. In two other Miller cartoons about his pony-tailed artist, we do need to see the canvases. A 2013 cartoon (**Figs. 313**), transformed into a comic strip by the three inset panels of the artist switching the larger blank canvas for the smaller one, shows us both the front and back of the easel; the visual humor of this cartoon about a creativity-blocked artist is accentuated by the difference in the sizes of his sighs. The pony-tailed artist in Miller's single-panel 2017 cartoon (**Fig. 314**) has apparently finally come up with an idea for a painting, but remains frustrated by the inexplicable failure of the hammered paint to reach the blank canvas; Miller frames this incongruity with the unresolved incongruous appearance of Edna and her endowment for the arts.

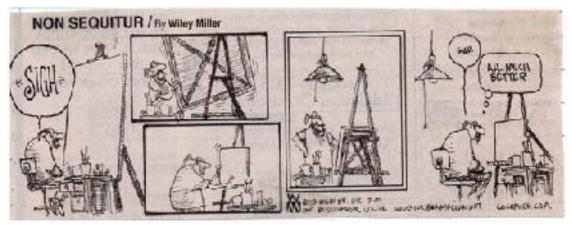


Fig. 313. Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 10 July, 2013.



Fig. 314. Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 5 April, 2017.



"I said the National Endowment for the Arts is offering you a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to lie fallow for a year."

Fig. 315. Lee Lorenz, The New Yorker, 26 Jan., 1987.

A Lee Lorenz *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 315**) also involves an art endowment, with the incongruous humor coming from the idea that the NEA would pay an artist *not* to paint. The Neo-Expressionist paintings in Lorenz' gag are clearly meant to evoke the graffiti-inspired art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who in 1987 was just beginning to become a commercially successful artist before he died of a heroin overdose in the following year. It would seem that Lorentz expects his viewers to be shocked by the Basquiatesque art of the spiked-haired grunge artist on the scaffolding; curiously the artist is not rendered as a person of color!

There is something ironic about a painter working *en plein air*. Like a fish out of water, artists outside of the studio are in a hostile environment, contending with the forces of nature while mixing colors to capture the nature that lies before their eyes. And then, once a painting is painted out-of-doors, it is destined to spend the rest of its life indoors. There is also something mysterious about an artist working in the same spaces that we occupy in our daily lives. By pulling art out of thin air in front of us, the *en plein air* painter creates a sort of sacred zone we feel compelled to approach and, if brave enough, to talk to the artist in hushed tones.

LOLA BY TODD CLARK



Fig. 316. Todd Clark, Lola, 25 July, 2010.

Naturally, iconoclast gag cartoonists have found the *plein-air* artist an irresistible subject for a joke. Todd Clark (**Fig. 316**), for instance, has humorously played with the tensions of *en-plein-air* art, with his scruffy-bearded artist painting a "Norman Rockwell type" portrait of a family picnic and having "captured the essence of potato salad" to such a degree that his painting has attracted a host of flies. Given that the flies obscure the canvas in the second-row punchline, we are not able to determine whether the artist had been able to create an insect-fooling rendition of the food, or, indeed, how he was able to paint at all while wearing rose-colored glasses.

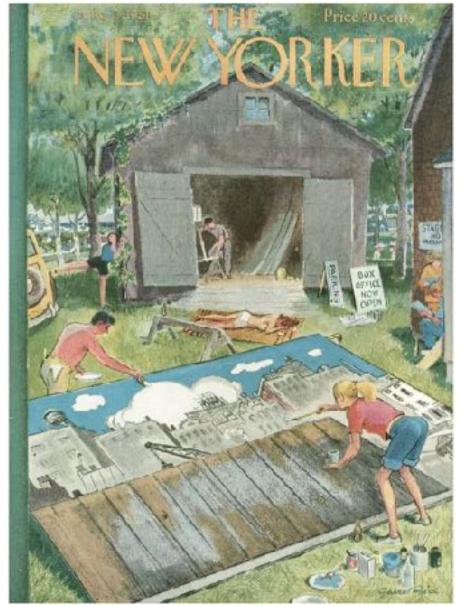


Fig. 317. Garrett Price, Cover art, The New Yorker, 2 July, 1951.

In the half century he was associated with *The New Yorker*, the cartoonist and illustrator Garrett Price drew over one hundred covers for the magazine, one of which (**Fig. 317**), presents dual inside/outside, rural/urban incongruities of *en-plein-air* painting that makes us smile. The stagehands are outdoors painting a scenery flat to be used in an indoor theatrical production; moreover, the play that this summer stock group is producing in their converted rural barn is apparently set in the city.



Fig. 318. Robert J. Day, The New Yorker, 5 Jan., 1952.

The humor in Robert Day's wordless 1952 *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 318**) comes from the same incongruous opposition of inside/outside spaces Garrett Price used in his cover art the year before. In order to fully appreciate that this is a joke about an *enplein-air* painter painting à *l'intérieur*, we need to be able to see the canvas that the artist is working on, snug inside his mobile studio.



Fig. 319. Hilary B. Price, Rhymes with Orange, 5 April, 2014.

Hilary Price's cartoon (**Fig. 319**) presents a domesticated/wild variation of the inside/outside *en-plein-air* cartoon motif. The joke in Price's visual punch line depends on her American viewers recognizing lawn-mowing as a quintessential suburban activity, here incongruously imposed on a rural setting.



Fig. 320. Jim Meddick, Monty, 27 Sept., 2015.

Monty Montahue, the title character in Jim Meddick's comic strip, is a nerdy inventor unable to hold down a steady job. In recent years, Meddick's Monty has tried his hand at being a painter, only to encounter a number of humorous stumbling blocks. In one of Monty's attempts at painting *en plein air* (**Fig. 320**), a flowery-talking admirer breaks the artist's sacred space and incongruously turns thief, a punch line that Meddick rushes us to by eliminating the gutter between the last two panels in his strip. In this strip, Meddick does not allow us to see Monty's canvas, and we are thus unable to judge for ourselves whether Monty's painting was worth stealing.



Fig. 321. Harry Bliss, 18 Aug., 2018.

Harry Bliss's *en-plein-air* painter has also encountered a man with a gun, this time a hunter who has killed the deer he was painting (**Fig. 321**). Bliss's wordless visual joke depends on our seeing the painter's canvas, but it leaves unresolved the mystery of

how the painter was able to get so close to the deer and have it stay motionless while he painted it.



Fig. 322. Jim Meddick, Monty, 7 June, 2015.

Another Jim Meddick humorous Monty-as-en-plein-air-painter comic strip (**Fig. 322**) also has the artist painting an animal, albeit one that an outdoor painter might more reasonably be able to capture on a canvas. The grawlix-laced punchline of Meddick's gag raises the real issue of how an artist can capture a static image of an everchanging natural world. To narrate his joke about Monty painting exactly what he sees, the first three panels of Meddick's strip pan in on the scene from behind the easel, and then the elongated final punch-line panel switches perspective to let us see what the beret-wearing Monty and the sympathetic back-packers had been looking at.

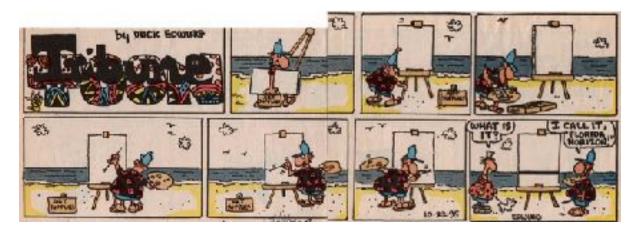


Fig. 323. Donald "Duck" Edwing, Tribune Toon, 22 Oct., 1995.

After he moved to Florida toward the end of his career, the long-time *Mad* magazine writer and cartoonist Duck Edwing drew an *en-plein-air* comic strip for the *Tampa Tribune* that uses a visual double entendre to similarly address the paint-what-you-see issue (**Fig. 323**). Here, by presenting an unvarying, razor-sharp, horizon line across the panels of his strip, Edwing creates an optical illusion: rather than seeing each panel of the strip as being an individual view of the stretch of beach where the painter is painting his razor-sharp horizontal line, taken all together the panels can be seen to form a single image of a more extensive flat "Florida Horizon"—a visual joke reminiscent of René Magritte's 1935 version of his Surrealist painting *the Human Condition*.



Fig. 324. Harry Bliss, The New Yorker, 3 July, 2017.

A wordless Harry Bliss cartoon (**Fig. 324**) also makes a joke about an *en-plein-air* beach painter, albeit one whose macabre humor is more suitable to Charles Addams than to the Meddick and Edwing cartoons we have just looked at. In the unresolved incongruity of this cartoon gag, we, unlike the couple passing by, do not know whether this fully clothed artist is unconcernedly painting what is presumably her husband in the process of drowning, or whether what we see on her canvas is merely a sick fantasy she harbors.



Fig. 325. Chip Dunham, Overboard, 30 Oct., 2002.

On its surface, Chip Dunham's beach-painter comic strip (**Fig. 325**) would seem to be another gag about the distractions one can face while working *en plein air*, as the gentle giant pirate Nate is patiently waiting for the beach to clear so that he can finish his "'deserted beach' landscape." But the real joke, which Dunham times with the pause of the smaller borderless second panel that focuses in on Nate's fellow crew member Charley looking at the (off screen) bikinied women, is really a male-gaze gag.



Fig. 326. Isabella Bannerman, Six Chix, 27 May, 2018.

The visual joke in Isabella Bannerman's clever *en-plein-air* cartoon (**Fig. 326**) was clearly intended for an audience that follows the syndicated *Six Chix* comics online.

One wonders if any old-fogey who saw a black-and-white version in a printed newspaper version could have appreciated the ironic contrast between Bannerman's strikingly painterly cartoon and the painter's boorishly cartoonish abstract painting.



Fig. 327. Mark Parisi, Off the Mark, 7 July, 2003.

Mark Parisi's cartoon (**Fig. 327**) is not really an *en-plein-air* gag, although the outdoor setting of the landscape painters does set up his silly joke about Oscar Wilde's 1890 Gothic novel. Because Parisi allows us to see the canvases, we can surmise that Basil Hallward—the painter in Wilde's novel—is a more accomplished artist than is his companion.

Wiley Miller's "Art Appreciation" *Non Sequitur* comic strip humorously reverses the inside/outside dynamic of *plein-air* art (**Fig. 328**). Utilizing the vertical format of his Sunday strip, Miller gives us four short rows of panels showing a man taking a portrait painting *outside* of the art gallery, discarding the painting, and then, in the extra-tall final panel, using just the frame to "paint" a picture as "lovely as a tree." Like Nina Paley's clever "The frame is the art" comic strip (**Fig. 170** above), the target of Miller's visual joke is the hoity-toity art establishment that tries to regulate what is "art." That Miller is using the same metafictional pun extensively exploited by Paley—the comic frame as an art frame—is suggested by the single panel in the fourth row of his strip, where the man looking through the empty frame is seen through its own off-set frame.



Fig. 328. Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur, 11 March, 2012.

Dan Piraro's cartoon (**Fig. 329**), while not a joke about an *en-plein-air* painter, does involve out-of-doors painting. Piraro's visual gag is about the mural itself, and he has chosen not to show the muralist at work, as doing so would have detracted from our initial perplexity—a perplexity which is resolved when we notice that the water in the dam stream is calm, belying our first impression of impending disaster. It is only after we realize that what we are looking at is only a mural do we begin to think about how in the world the muralist managed to paint that scene on the dam.



Fig. 329. Dan Piraro, Bizzaro, 1 Jan., 2017.



Fig. 330. Grant Snider, Incidental Comics, 13 Oct., 2011.

Artists are dangerous. Just ask the cartoonist Grant Snider, whose warning (**Fig. 330**) about the effects of exposure to the art of the surrealist Joan Miró is a tongue-in-cheek echo of mid-20th-century concerns that the excessively violent and sexual content of American comic books were contributing to juvenile delinquency. [Snider himself, by the way, has a safe back-up day-job as an orthodontist in Wichita, Kansas.]



Fig. 331. Mikael Wulff & Anders Morgenthaler, Wumo, 5 March, 2016.

A Wulff and Morgenthaler cartoon (**Fig. 331**) also builds on the stereotype of the artist as something dangerous. The mother's warning about choosing the incongruously bespectacled puppy smoking in the corner of the pen presages what she might say when her daughter grows up and wants to date a "bohemian artist."

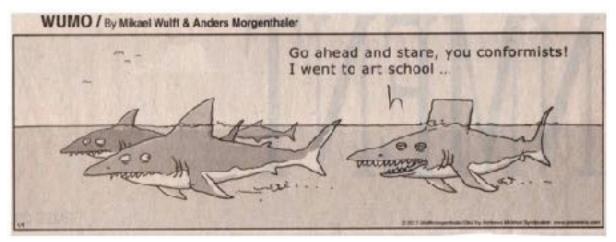


Fig. 332. Mikael Wulff & Anders Morgenthaler, Wumo, 6 Jan., 2017.

In the following year, the Danish writer/artist duo Wulff and Morgenthaler again used cartoon animals acting as humans to poke fun at the danger of becoming a non-conformist artist (**Fig. 332**). In the comic universe of this strip, we are not expected to be shocked that sharks can talk or go to art schools; the gag comes when we see the incongruous physical transformation that results from becoming an artist.



Fig. 333. Jeff Berry, 8 Nov., 2011.

A Jeff Berry cartoon (**Fig. 333**) makes a similar case that art can be harmful. The visual punch line to the joke does not make it clear if David's incongruous transformation into a Cubist abstracted figure was because he had become an artist or was just "into modern art." In any case, this Berry cartoon harkens back to the trope of an artist breaking the norms of naturalistic representation because he himself is an abstraction—a trope that Rea Irvin used in his 1913 Cubist Artist cartoon (cf. **Fig. 123** above). [For a variation of this motif, cf. Harry Bliss' cartoon **Fig. 461** below.]

A Jim Meddick *Monty* comic strip turns the tables on the dangerous artist theme, with the title character only pretending to be unstable so he can charge his clients more (**Fig. 334**). By bandaging his ear and tacking a sunflower painting on the wall, Monty tries to pull off his ploy by mimicking the cartoon archetype of the unhinged artist, Vincent Van Gogh. [For more jokes about Van Gogh cutting off his ear, see the "Miming the Masters" section of the next essay.] To the primary humorous opposition of sane/insane artist given in the dialogue, Meddick adds a secondary visual gag by allowing us to see the canvas in the final punch-line panel: one wonders if the matron will pay Monty anything for the cartoonish portrait he has painted, even if she thinks that he is a brilliant, unstable, artist!

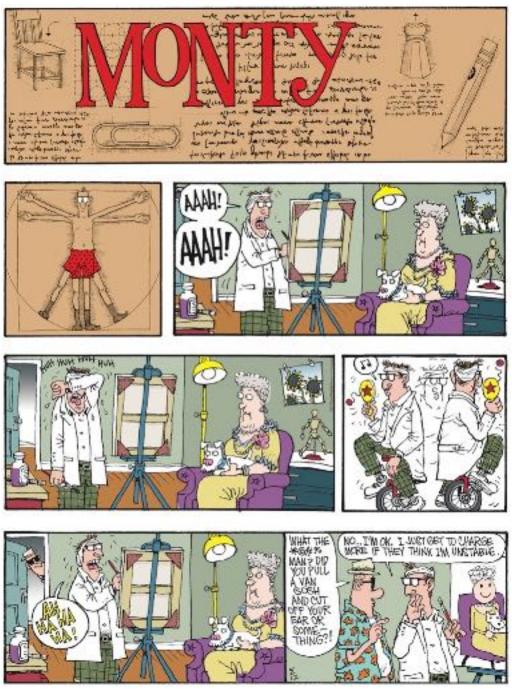


Fig. 334. Jim Meddick, *Monty*, 12 May, 2019.

Like *en-plein-air* painters, portraitists negotiate the tension of creating a static image from what they actually see before their eyes, hopefully painting something pleasing to the client. Cartoonists and comic-strip artists have naturally found humor in this tension.



Fig. 335. Russell Myers, Broom-Hilda, 6 Jan., 2014.

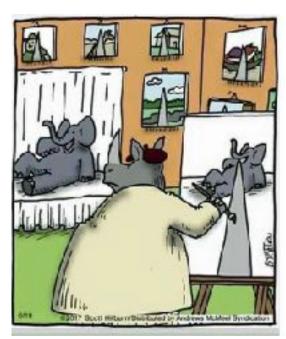


Fig. 336. Scott Hilburn, The Argyle Sweater, 19 June, 2017.

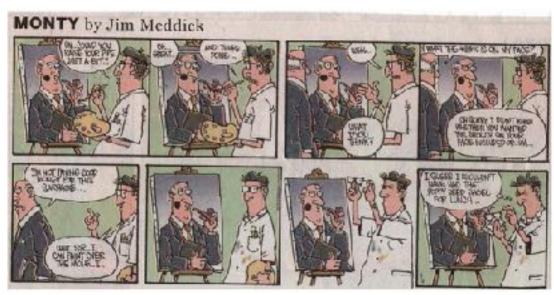


Fig. 337. Jim Meddick, *Monty*, 10 April, 2016.

To get the visual gag of a beret-wearing portraitist painting exactly what he sees, we the viewers of Russell Myers, Scott Hilburn, and Jim Meddick have to be able to see the artist's canvas. Russell Myers' two-panel *Broom-Hilda* strip (Fig. 335) employs an alternating front/back canvas view for the set-up and the punch line of Gaylord Buzard using his thumb to obscure Broom Hilda's visage. A Scott Hilburn's single-panel *Argyle Sweater* cartoon (Fig. 336) gives us the absurdity of a rhinoceros artist including its horn in every picture it paints; to this incongruity Hilburn adds a secondary incongruity of an elephant posing as a female nude. For his joke, Jim Meddick (Fig. 337) begins with us seeing the "mole" on the man's portrait, which we realize is a mistake when the subject walks up in the third panel of the first row; Meddick makes us wait until the very end for the punch line, which is emphasized by the borderless penultimate panel where Monty takes off his glasses.



Fig. 338. Scott Hilburn, The Argyle Sweater, 22 April, 2012.

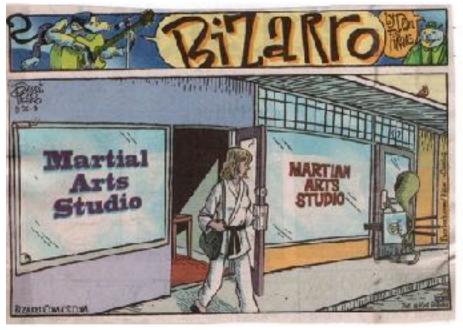


Fig. 339. Dan Piraro, Bizarro, 25 Aug., 2013.

The portraitist in Scott Hilburn's 2012 *Argyle Sweater* cartoon (**Fig. 338**) seems to be competent, and we the viewer don't get the joke until we have taken the time to decipher the pun in the backwards-painted sign in the window. Dan Piraro's 2013 *Bizarro* cartoon (**Fig. 339**) makes us groan at a similar pun on "martial arts," this time more easily read in the painted store-fronts. As is his wont, Piraro has snuck in an extra joke into his cartoon: in addition to sticking one of his trademark pies in the corner of the cartoon, Piraro appropriately puts another of his secret symbols, "The Flying Saucer of Possibility," in the painting that the Martian carries into the studio.



Fig. 340. Dave Coverly, Speed Bump, 12 Nov., 2014.

The incongruous "humorous ucronía" temporal anomaly gag in Dave Coverly's cartoon of a beret-topped artist bent over a tiny canvas painting miniature portraits of Colonial children (**Fig. 340**) depends on viewers having the necessary "culturally bound background knowledge" of the American custom of photographers taking pictures of school children and selling wallet-sized copies of them. We are, presumably, not to be concerned at how the artist can paint miniatures with such a thick paintbrushes and limited palette, or whether the miniature in the hands of the bug-eyed boy is dry enough to be handled.

If cartoon portrait painting can be funny, and cartoon dogs and cats can be funny, why not combine the two?

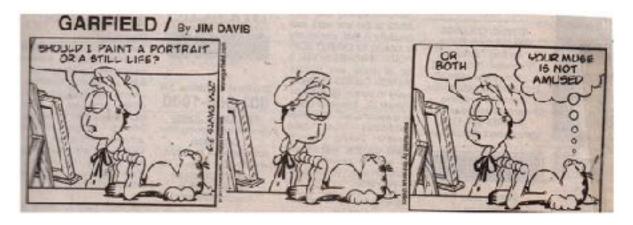
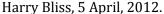


Fig. 341. Jim Davis, *Garfield*, May 3, 2011.







Harry Bliss, 12 Dec., 2012.

Fig. 342. Two Harry Bliss cartoons.

As so often is the case, the joke in Jim Davis' *Garfield* comic strip (**Fig. 341**) is on the laziness of the title-character cat; here, the wordless, borderless central panel showing a beret-wearing Jon Arbuckle looking down at a supine Garfield imparts a slight pause in the rhythm of the gag before the *bah-boom* of the punch-line dialogue. Both of Harry Bliss's wordless 2012 cartoons about a man painting portraits of his pets (**Fig. 342**) depend on the viewer being able to see the canvas; while the dog in the 5 April cartoon is behaving like a human, standing up and snickering at the cat's funny portrait, the tables are turned in the 12 Dec. cartoon, where he has dropped his heroic pose to scratch like a dog. The gags in these two Bliss cartoons are highlighted by the man's face, mischievously grinning in the first, and—now with the painter sporting a goatee and working in a garret—frowning in the second.

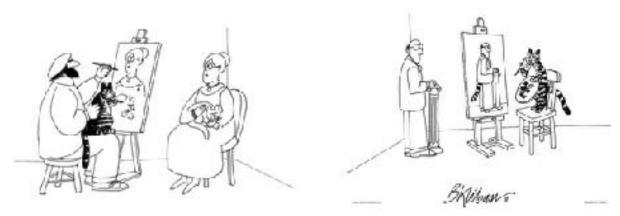


Fig. 343. Two cartoons by Bernard "Hap" Kliban.

Another way to create humor in a pet-painting cartoon is to put the dog or cat on the other side of the canvas—something we have seen in Patrick O'Donnell's poster of the cat Mooch painting a Snoopy-like portrait of the dog Earl (cf. **Fig. 274** above). In two of his cat cartoons (**Fig. 343**), the quirky *Playboy* cartoonist B. Kliban (who died in 1990) has his trademark tabby cat picking up a paintbrush to paint a portrait. In one, the actual joke is the incongruity of the cat artist painting the portrait of the sleeping cat in the sitter's lap while its beret-wearing owner is painting the portrait of the woman; in the other, the visual joke comes from the tail that the cat artist added to the portrait it was painting of the man standing next to an Ionic column.



"All of my work deals with the theme of exclusion."

Fig. 344. Mike Twohy, The New Yorker, 11 Aug., 2014.

The incongruous humor in Mike Twohy's dog-artist cartoon (**Fig. 344**) is not just that the dog is talking about having marred the door, but rather that he is doing so in terms of how a pompous contemporary artist might describe his "work."



Fig. 345. Mike Peters, Mother Goose & Grimm, 16 March, 2013.



Fig. 346. Mike Peters, Mother Goose & Grimm, 1 Sept., 2015.

Mike Peters gives us two pet-painting *Mother Goose & Grimm* comic strips, both of which also depend upon our seeing the canvases. The lame puns in **Fig. 345** are set up by the subject matter the cruel, beret-attired, cat Attila has chosen for its painting, and viewers are expected to know that dogs hate vacuum cleaners. In the single panel cartoon, **Fig. 346**, the dog Grimmy has now picked up the palette and donned the beret for a dog butt-sniffing joke.

Dog-cat interactions also feature in another Harry Bliss cartoon (**Fig. 347**), this time with the dog in the role of the art-school instructor giving an incongruously canine bit of advice to the feline student.



"I wonder what would happen if you replaced one of the flowers with a bone."

Fig. 347. Harry Bliss, 13 Nov., 2012.



Fig. 348. Lv Guo-hong, Self-portrait, 1 Dec., 2011.



Fig. 349. Jim Tweedy, *Self Portrait, Tiger*, 7 Dec., 2016.



Fig. 350. Norman Rockwell, *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 113 x 88 cm. Cover illustration for The *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 Feb., 1960. Norman Rockwell Museum.

In 2011, the Chinese cartoonist Lv Guo-hong posted on the international cartoonhosting website Toon Pool a clever cartoon of a cat looking in a mirror while incongruously painting itself as a tiger (Fig. 348). It is not clear if Guo-hong was consciously mimicking Norman Rockwell's famous 1960 *Triple Self-portrait* cover (Fig. 350); it is also not clear if the New Orleans sports painter and cartoonist Jim Tweedy was aware of Guo-hong's cartoon when he used the exact same visual gag to make a more explicit "intertextual" connection to Rockwell's painting (Fig. 349). Issues of plagiarism aside, the Guo-hong and Tweedy joke about a cat imagining itself as a ferocious beast may be funny—especially to the huge online LOLcat community—but its humor pales in comparison to Norman Rockwell's self-deprecating original, with its subtle metafictional references to the history of self-portraits by great artists of the past.

As caricaturists themselves, cartoonists and comic-strip artists have naturally turned their humorous gaze towards the outdoor caricaturist-for-hire.

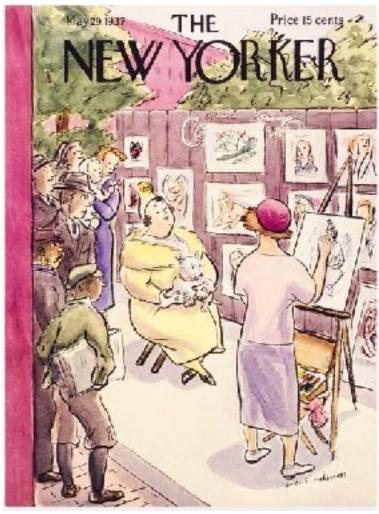


Fig. 351. Helen E. Hokinson, Cover art, The New Yorker, 29 May 1937.

The humor in Helen Hokinson's 1937 *New Yorker* cover (**Fig. 351**) comes from the incongruity of a plump society matron, with her fur coat, matching hat, and her lapdog, sitting for a portrait by an outdoor, beret-topped, street artist. Judging by the artist's sketches posted on the fence, she seems competent enough, although the crowd gathered around watching does not seem perturbed that the artist is also hawking landscapes and nude life studies.



Fig. 352. Dean Young & John Marshall, Blondie, 21 March, 2011.



Fig. 353. Dan Piraro, Bizzaro, 13 Jan., 2017.

Dean Young's and John Marshall's *Blondie* comic strip (**Fig. 352**) targets the street portraitist in a simple visual gag that depends on our seeing the mustachioed artist in the first panel before his silly paintings are revealed in the elongated release

panel. Dan Piraro's visual gag about the same subject (**Fig. 353**) is more subtle, and it is not until one notices the miniature mustachioed artist and then goes back to look at the absurd perspectives of the paintings that one gets the joke—a scale-confusion gag very similar to the one Dave Coverly made about a portraitist replacing a school photographer (**Fig. 340**). Piraro's inclusion of his trademark secret pie symbol in the foreground is actually distracting because it confuses our appreciation of the scale of the artist. More successful is Piraro's inclusion of a second secret symbol, the "Eyeball of Observation," on the wall in the background; on his web site Piraro gives a wonderfully metafictional description of this secret symbol:

In each cartoon, the eye is watching the action in the cartoon, and it is watching you read the cartoon. It also watches you watching it watch you and the cartoon. When you watch the eye watching you watch it, you are both the watcher and the watched.



Fig. 354. Dave Coverly, Speed Bump, 24 Jan., 2018.

The gag in Dave Coverly's cartoon (**Fig. 354**) also hinges on the incongruous perspective the portrait artist has taken in her paintings. Here, however, the targets of the joke are the cellphone users, all of whom are bent over their mobile devices, affording us a view of only the tops of their heads. The light-blue wash of the cartoon emphasizes the joke by making the more colorful over-life-sized paintings stand out on the gallery walls; although the paintings are no more realistically rendered than the rest

of the cartoon, this coloring creates an "associative inversion" effect that supports the comment that the brochure-carrying man makes to the artist.



Fig. 355. Mike Lester, Mike du Jour, 14 Jan., 2018.

In contrast to the *Blondie* and *Bizzaro* comics that make fun of the outdoor portraitist, Mike Lester's strip gives us a noble, beret-wearing, African-American caricaturist who quotes Martin Luther King, Jr. on Martin Luther King day to shame his unappreciative client (**Fig. 355**). Lester uses colored speech bubbles to emphasize the allusion to King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech in the middle panel of the second row, the only panel not to have a solid background color. Just in case one didn't get the point of his strip, Lester also lets us see, in the final punch-line panel, that the caricaturist is drawing a portrait of Martin Luther King.



Fig. 356. Harry Bliss.

A wordless Harry Bliss cartoon (**Fig. 356**) takes up the related street-fare activity of face painting, with Bliss assuming that the viewer will recognize the quoted art styles

in order to appreciate the cartoon's surreal absurdity. While we can see that the mother of the child transformed into a Mondrian by the beret-wearing face painter is shocked, we can only imagine what the parents of the other children will think when they see them transformed into a Cubist Picasso or a Jackson Pollack.



Fig. 357. Lalo Alcaraz, La Cucaracha, 6 May, 2005.

Lalo Alcarz's cartoon (**Fig. 357**) similarly employs the same humorous incongruity of children being given inappropriate face painting by a street-fair painter. The target of Alcarz's visual gag is the commercialization of modern society, here represented by the absurdity of the Cinco de Mayo clown painting corporate logos on the children's faces.



As we have noted, the vast majority of professional American cartoonists and comic-strip artists have received at least some degree of formal art training. It is not surprising, then, that art classes figure in so many of their comics.

And no other art-class subject is more titillating for American cartoonists and comic-strip artists than the live, nude, modeling class.



Fig. 358. Anatol Kovarsky, The New Yorker, 21 June, 1952.

The visual gag in Anatol Kovarsky's 1952 *New Yorker* art-class cartoon (**Fig. 358**) comes from our noticing that each of the budding artists in the mixed-gendered class is painting an identical abstraction of the nude model—a joke directed at the conformity of the post-WW II New York art scene. Even though Kovarsky's cartoon was published in a relatively sophisticated magazine not read by children, it is still remarkable that the nude female model is shown in a full frontal view. We have seen that the emigre artist Kovarsky, trained in Europe as well as at the Arts Student League in New York, was not shy in depicting nude females in his cartoons, even in a manner that may be offensive to modern sensibilities (cf. **Fig. 307**). However, in contrast to Kovarsky's 1952 live modeling cartoon, today's syndicated cartoonists and comic-strip artists shy away from any depictions of breasts or genitalia that might offend their mainstream American audience—a phenomenon we have seen in cartoon parodies of Michelangelo's *Creation of Man* fresco. This modern cartoon prudery, ironically, comes at a time when explicit sexual content is regularly featured in alternative comics and graphic narratives.



Fig. 359. Garry Trudeau, Doonesbury, 4 June, 1985 (republished 29 Sept., 2015).

The target of Garry Trudeau's 1985 comic strip (**Fig. 359**) about Ching "Honey" Huan posing nude at the "Shanghai Art Institute's Figural Studies Program" is Chinese, not American, prudery, with Trudeau assuming that his viewers recognized the allusion to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Even so, the side view of the carefully draped Huan was designed with American puritan sensibilities in mind.

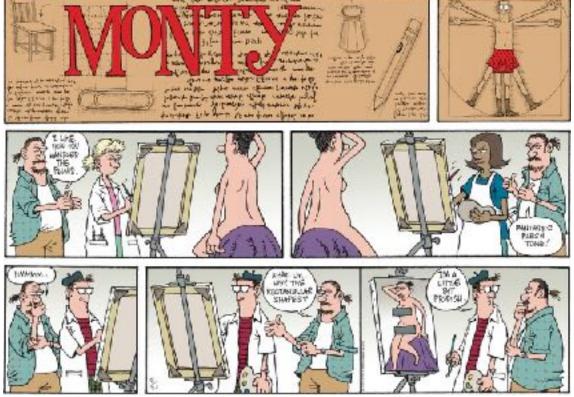


Fig. 360. Jim Meddick, *Monty*, 21 Aug., 2016.

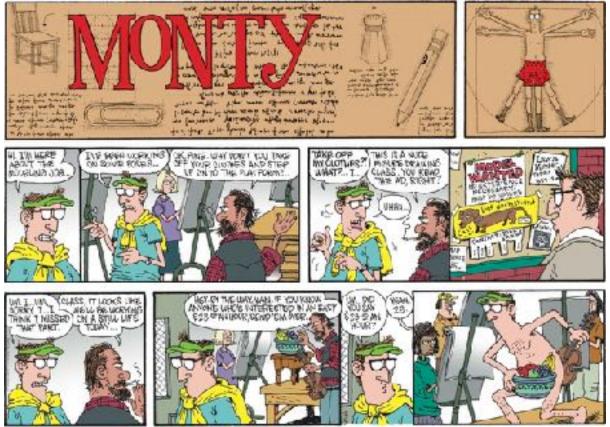


Fig. 361. Jim Meddick, Monty, 3 March, 2013.

Similarly, a Jim Meddick *Monty* comic strip (**Fig. 360**) presents a discrete back view of the nude model in the two panels of the upper row, where we see only the backs of the students' paintings admired by the stereotypically pony-tailed and goateed instructor (cf. Wiley Miller's use of the pony-tail and goatee motif, **Figs. 312–314**); while the reveal of Monty's expurgated painting in the gutter-less final panel is supposed to be incongruously funny, that incongruity is lessened when we consider that newspaper editors would have insisted on the obscuring rectangles even if Meddick had wanted "to get crap past the radar." Meddick had earlier used the nude modeling art-class theme, this time with Monty demonstrating his prudishness with still-life props (**Fig. 361**). The target of this cartoon, however, is not Monty's aversion to nudity, but rather his avarice, here indicated in the narrow, borderless, penultimate close-up panel where we can imagine \$-signs whirling in his head; this gag is set up by a remarkable "flash-back" in the final panel of the first row, where we are inside Monty's head as he recalls—in rather remarkable detail—when he first saw the ad for modeling.



Fig. 362. Dave Whamond, Reality Check, 13 July, 1998.

The Canadian cartoonist Dave Whamond gives us an art-class cartoon (**Fig. 362**) with a nude model discretely placed off to the side; this rather risqué subject for a school setting—where we might have expected a bowl of fruit—heightens the incongruity of a teenage boy working on a mathematical formula in an art class rather

than, like so many budding cartoonists had done in their school days, doodling in a math class. [For more on art class cartoon humor, see the "Kidding Art" section of this essay below.]

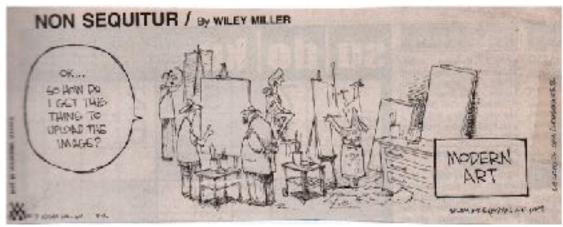


Fig. 363. Wiley Miller, Non Sequitur. 2 Nov., 2011.

Wiley Miller's *Non Sequitur* art-class gag (**Fig. 363**) targets the same Millennial cluelessness that he would use the following year in his "Art Appreciation for the Laptop Generation" cartoon (**Fig. 207**). Like the nude in the Whamond art-class cartoon, the classically-clad model in Miller's joke is a surprising subject for a drawing class for teenagers.



Fig. 364. Mark Parisi, Off the Mark, 12 Dec., 2012.

Mark Parisi has come up with a "nutty" variation of the nude modeling joke in a cartoon (**Fig. 364**) where the provocative frontal pose of the de-shelled peanut model elicits no editorial censorship. For an American audience, the bespectacled art student on the left evokes echoes of Mr. Peanut, the monocled mascot of the Planters peanut company.

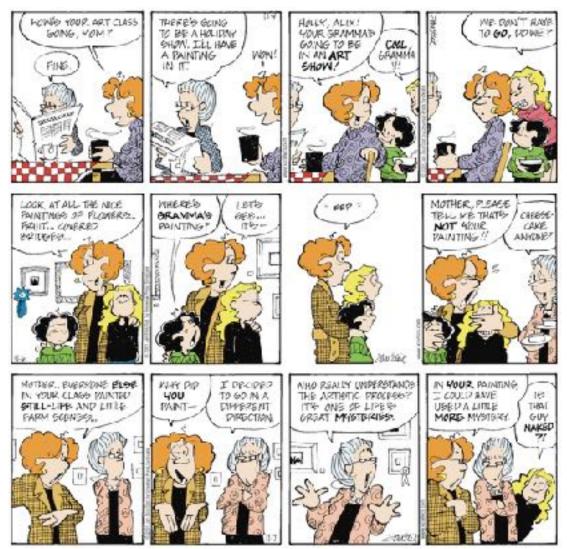


Fig. 365. Jan Eliot, *Stone Soup*, 4, 6–7 Dec., 2001.

The taboo against nudity in American syndicated cartoons and comic strips has given rise to offerings where nude modeling is only described and not portrayed. A week-long series in Jan Eliot's *Stone Soup* strip about "Gramma" Stone's art-class painting of a nude man (**Fig. 365**), for instance, never shows us even an expurgated version of the painting. Instead, the joke centers on her daughter's and granddaughters' reactions when they saw the painting at a show where it was displayed. The borderless third panel of the 6 Dec. makes us focus on the family's wide-eyed shocked reactions,

with the next panel adding a clever pun on "cheesecake." Similarly, a two-week series of daily Robb Armstrong *Jump Start* strips (**Fig. 366**) features the character Charlene showing her friend Marcy and her husband Clarence a charcoal sketch she drew of a live, nude, model—a sketch that we the viewers also never get to see. We laugh at Charlene mistakenly taking Marcy's shock as supporting her belief that the medium of charcoal can capture a subject better than photography. Clarence's reaction, on the other hand, is gender-specific; in this series of strips, Armstrong wants to expose an inherent American sexism where a husband can accept great artists painting "nudes" but not his wife sketching nude "dudes."



Fig. 366. Robb Armstrong, *Jump Start*, 6–7, 10–11, and 13 Jan., 2003.



Fig. 367. Bill Schoor, The Grizzwells, 13 March, 2017.

Bill Schoor uses an off-screen nude modeling set-up to his two-panel *The Grizzwells* gag (**Fig. 367**). Here the joke depends on the bear Gunther Grizzwell mistaking his porcupine friend Pierpont's comment; we the viewers are expected to think that anyone who models in the buff would be embarrassed, but the humorous incongruity of Gunther's reply suggests that the artist Schoor believes students making bad art is more shameful.





Fig. 368. Isabella Bannerman, Six Chix, 20 Oct., 2015.

Of course not all art-class cartoons are about nude modeling. The rather lame pun on ant/art in Isabella Bannerman's *Six Chix* cartoon (**Fig. 368**) is augmented by her wonderful depiction of a multigenerational colony of artists incongruously at work in the attic.



Fig. 369. Hilary B. Price, Rhymes with Orange, 21 Oct., 2012.



Fig. 370. Hilary B. Price, Rhymes with Orange, 3 April, 2016.

For her "adult enrichment class" cartoon (**Fig. 369**), Hilary Price allows us, but not the beret-wearing art instructor, to view the gruesome canvas Igor has painted for his still-life assignment, thus adding a deliciously painful pleasure to the visual gag as we anticipate how she will react when she sees it. Price's related gag about art therapy (**Fig. 370**) literally targets the trendy fad of adult coloring books.

As we have seen in the "Comic Art in Museums and Museums in Comic Art" essay above, cartoonists and comic-strip artists are quite familiar with art museums, and they have no doubt witnessed earnest copyists replicating works hanging in the galleries, if not actually having given it a try themselves.



Fig. 371. Anatol Kovarsky, The New Yorker.

The copyist in Anatol Kovarsky's *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 371**) has humorously turned the tables on what appears to be a Neo-Classical version of the Rape of the Sabine Women. Although, judging by the sexism evident in his other mid-20th century cartoons (cf. **Fig. 307** above), Kovarsky may intended for us to laugh *at* the woman for her audacious gender role reversal, in today's #metoo age, we laugh *with* her as she puts the Hercules club in the hands of the oppressed survivor of sexual violence.



Fig. 372. William O'Brian, The New Yorker, 19 Aug., 1967.

A William O'Brian *New Yorker* cartoon (**Fig. 372**) does ask us to laugh *at* the beret-topped woman as she copies one of Ad Reinhardt's infamous black-on-black

paintings. As Thierry Groensteen observed in commenting on this cartoon, there is no need to have a model for a flat-black monochrome painting, and the small scale of the copy signifies the woman's basic misunderstanding of what Reinhardt was attempting to with his monumental work. [For Ad Reinhardt's comic strips about modern art, see **Figs. 687** in the "Mocking Modernism" section of the following essay.]



Fig. 373. Harry Bliss, The New Yorker.

Harry Bliss's museum-copyist cartoon (**Fig. 373**) similarly makes fun of the copyist, here attempting to replicate Jackson Pollock's action-painting technique. To the absurdity of the copyist looking up at the painting while dripping paint on the canvas, Bliss has added a secondary joke as we anticipate the reaction of the museum guard we see walking into the gallery. [As we noted at the end of the previous essay, this Bliss cartoon and Hilary Price's **Fig. 369** cartoon are thus examples of *anticipatory* timing, where the humorous action of a single-panel cartoon is projected into the future.]



Fig. 374. Tony Carrillo, F Minus, 3 June, 2011.

The target of Tony Carrillo's cartoon (**Fig. 374**) is not the museum-copyist, but rather the curator who asks him to leave for having painted too exact a copy. Part of the brilliance of Carrillo's gag is how he has adjusted the replica on the easel to account for the fact that we are viewing it at a slight angle—a detail that is barely noticed at first glance.

Cartoonists and comic-strip artists have also trained their humorous pens and brushes at the hobbyist painter, although they have generally shown a little more kindness towards the amateur than they have the professional painter.



Fig. 375. Lincoln Peirce, Big Nate, 20 Nov., 2016.

As we had seen in a Lincoln Peirce strip about Nate's grandparents chaperoning a school trip to the museum (**Fig. 232** above), the target of this *Big Nate* strip is the grandfather Vern, once again leading his wife Marge to distraction (**Fig. 375**). In the first row of this strip, Peirce has used a variety of panel forms to establish the first two "initial-peak" pairs of his joke: a borderless first panel is conjoined without a gutter to a second panel to give us the first part of the set-up—that Vern is a hobbyist painter; the silhouette third panel makes us pause before we proceed to the second part of the set-up—that Vern is not actually painting *en plein air*. In the bottom row, with its three panels of increasing size, we move from focusing in on Nate's face, to seeing him jump in the air from Marge's off-camera scream, to seeing him close his eyes at his grandfather's lame excuse. Peirce cannot allow us to see Vern's canvas in the first row without giving

away the set-up to the joke; while he could have let us see the canvas in the second row, doing so would have been an unnecessary distraction from the gag.



Fig. 376. Brian Crane, Pickles, 2012.

Like Nate's grandparents, Brian Crane's Opal and Earl Pickles are an older couple who are enjoying a humorously imperfect retirement, often in the company of their grandson, Nelson. One of the running gags in Crane's *Pickles* strip is Opal's attempt to be an artist—a quest at which she thinks she is succeeding more than her family does. In a 2012 Sunday strip (**Fig. 376**), Crane uses alternating borderless and bordered panels to time his gag about Opal's taking off her thick white glasses to look at the world like an Impressionist painter—a joke which wouldn't work as well as it does if we actually saw her bump into the wall. In a 2014 Sunday strip (**Fig. 377**), here presented in a vertical format, Opal turns the tables on Earl in a joke that depends on our being able to see the face that Nelson paints on his grandfather's balding pate. In spite of her belief that she is a great artist, Opal apparently likes to paint pictures of cats (**Figs. 378–379**), although in all of these running gags we never get to see the canvases Opal is painting, as doing so would ruin the punch lines.



Fig. 377. Brian Crane, *Pickles*, 16 March, 2014.



Fig. 378. Brian Crane, *Pickles*, 4 Sept., 2016



Fig. 379. Brian Crane, Pickles, 8 April, 2019.

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- **Fig. 130**. Mary Mills Lyall and Earl Harvey Lyall, *The Cubies' ABC*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913.
- **Fig. 131**. Harvey Peake, "Why Not Let the Cubists and Futurists Design the Spring Fashions?," *New York World*, 16 March, 1913.
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