SCOTT MCCLOUD

"When I was a little kid I knew exactly what comics were," Scott McCloud writes in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). "Comics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights." But after looking at a friend's comic book collection, McCloud became "totally obsessed with comics" and in the tenth grade decided to become a comics artist.

In 1982, McCloud graduated with a degree in illustration from Syracuse University. "I wanted to have a good background in writing and art and also just liberal arts in general because I thought that just about anything can be brought to bear in making comics." Later McCloud worked in the production department of DC Comics until he began publishing his two comic series, "Zott!" (1984) and later "Destroy!!"

In *Understanding Comics*, a caricature of McCloud leads readers through an insightful study of the nature of sequential art by tracing the history of the relationship between words and images. "Most readers will find it difficult to look at comics in quite the same way ever again," wrote cartoonist Garry Trudeau of McCloud's work. In 2000, he published *Reinventing Comics*, which he describes as "the controversial 242-page follow-up" to *Understanding Comics*. Recently McCloud has been working with comics in the digital environment. His web site is at scottmcccloud.com. "Show and Tell" is the sixth chapter in *Understanding Comics*. 
CHAPTER SIX

SHOW AND TELL.

THIS IS MY ROBOT.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR ROBOT, TOMMY?

WELL, UH... I LIKE IT CAUSE... CAUSE, UH...

IT'S GOT ONE OF THESE THINGS.

WHAT IS THAT, TOMMY?
IT'S THIS THING AND IF YOU PULL IT, IT GOES LIKE THIS.

---

THE HEAD FLIPS BACK.

...

YEAH.

---

AND THEN YOU CAN DO THIS AND IT GOES UP AND YOU FLIP THIS.

---

I DID IT WRONG. WAIT.

---

LOOK, IT'S A AIRPLANE NOW!

---

THANK YOU, TOMMY. WE ALL STARTED OUT LIKE THIS, DIDN'T WE? USING WORDS AND IMAGES INTERCHANGEABLY, IT DIDN'T REALLY MATTER WHICH WE USED SO LONG AS IT WORKED.

---

IT'S CONSIDERED NORMAL IN THIS SOCIETY FOR CHILDREN TO COMBINE WORDS AND PICTURES, SO LONG AS THEY GROW OUT OF IT.
TRADITIONAL THINKING HAS LONG HELD THAT TRULY GREAT WORKS OF ART AND LITERATURE ARE ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN THE TWO ARE KEPT AT ARM'S LENGTH.

WORDS AND PICTURES TOGETHER ARE CONSIDERED, AT BEST, A DIVERSION FOR THE MAJORITY; AT WORSE, A PRODUCT OF CRASS COMMERCIALISM.

AS CHILDREN, OUR FIRST BOOKS HAD PICTURES GALORE AND VERY FEW WORDS BECAUSE THAT WAS "EASIER." THEN, AS WE GREW, WE WERE EXPECTED TO GRADUATE TO BOOKS WITH MUCH MORE TEXT AND ONLY OCCASIONAL PICTURES. -- AND FINALLY TO ARRIVE AT "REAL" BOOKS -- THOSE WITH NO PICTURES AT ALL. OR PERHAPS, AS IS SADLY THE CASE THESE DAYS, TO NO BOOKS AT ALL.

GREETINGS FROM [Image]
Meanwhile, words and moving pictures have half the world in thrall to their charms, but must struggle to make their potential understood.

Words and pictures are as popular as ever, but this widespread feeling that the combination is somehow base or simplistic has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The roots of this attitude run pretty deep.

As near as we can tell, pictures predate the written word by a large margin. Here are some big hits from the golden age of cave painting, about 15,000 years ago.

Some of this art shows considerable attention to detail. Very much concerned with pictorial representation.

But others were very iconic, acting as symbols rather than pictures—more like a primitive language.
AS MENTIONED IN OUR LAST CHAPTER, THE EARLIEST WORDS WERE, IN FACT, STYLIZED PICTURES.

AS SEEN, MOST OF THESE EARLY WORDS STAYED CLOSE TO THEIR PARENTS, THE PICTURES.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG, THOUGH—RELATIVELY SPEAKING—BEFORE ANCIENT WRITING STARTED TO BECOME MORE ABSTRACT.

SOME WRITTEN LANGUAGES SURVIVE TO THIS DAY BEARING TRACES OF THEIR ANCIENT PICTORIAL HERITAGE.

* SEE PAGE 129.
But, in time, most modern writing would come to represent sound only and lose any lingering resemblance to the visible world.

With the invention of printing, the written word took a great leap forward.

And all of humanity with it.

Words and pictures did still coexist at this stage in Western civilization.

But those instances were becoming the exception, not the rule.

In illuminated manuscripts, for example.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHEN THEY WERE COMBINED, AS IN THIS GERMAN COMIC FROM THE 1400s, WORDS AND PICTURES STAYED SEPARATE, REFUSING TO MIX LIKE OIL AND WATER.

THE WRITTEN WORD WAS BECOMING MORE SPECIALIZED, MORE ABSTRACT, MORE ELABORATE, "LESS AND LESS LIKE PICTURES." -- AND PICTURES, MEANWHILE, BEGAN TO GROW IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION: LESS ABSTRACT OR SYMBOLIC, MORE REPRESENTATIONAL AND SPECIFIC.

FACSIMILE DETAILS OF PORTRAITS BY DÜER (1519), REMBRANDT (1662), DAVID (1789), AND MONET (1810-185).
John Keats

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweeter than our rhyme;
What leafage's legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both.
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

BY THE EARLY 1800's, WESTERN ART AND WRITING HAD DRIFTED ABOUT AS FAR APART AS WAS POSSIBLE.

ONE WAS OBSESSED WITH RESEMBLANCE, LIGHT AND COLOR, ALL THINGS VISIBLE...

...THE OTHER RICH IN INVISIBLE TREASURES, SENSES, EMOTIONS, SPIRITUALITY, PHILOSOPHY...

PICTURES AND WORDS, ONCE TOGETHER IN THE CENTER OF OUR ICONIC ABSTRACTION CHART, HAVE AT THIS POINT DRIFTED TO OPPOSITE CORNERS.
In a way, pictures and words had reached the end of a 5000 year journey if they were to continue moving, where could they go?

Impressionism sent Western art toward the abstract vertex, but in a way that eludes to what the eye saw.

Impressionism, while it could be thought of as the first modern movement, was more a culmination of the old, the ultimate study of light and color.

Soon after came the explosion! Expressionism, futurism, dada, surrealism, fauvism, cubism, abstract expressionism, neo-plasticism, constructivism.

Every which way but backwards!

Strict representational styles were of little importance to the new schools. Abstraction, both iconic and non-iconic made a spectacular comeback.
Some artists headed upward to the summit of the picture plane, wanting neither resemblance nor external "meaning."

But the main thrust was a return to meaning in art, away from resemblance, back to the realm of ideas.

Meanwhile, the written word was also changing. Poetry began turning away from the elusive, twice-abstracted language of old toward a more direct, even colloquial, style.

John Keats
Ode on a Grecian Urn

There still are worlds to end of questions,
When fastest child of Sirens and slow time,
Sylvan harmonies, who cares that empress
A hollow tale more wond'rous than real there
What had been of legend haunt stew the shape
Of dreams as on moral; or, of truth,
"Sir, in Songs to the title of Phoebus!
What more is found in things? When wisdom found!"

Walt Whitman
Facing West from California's Shores

Facing west, from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking
What is yet unfound,
1. a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations, look afar
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled:
For strolling westward from Hindustan,
from the vales of Kashmir, from Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero, from the south, from the flowery peninsula and the spice Islands, long having wandered since, round the earth having wandered.
Now I face home again, very pleased and joyous;
But where is what I started for, so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?

--and headed for a collision!

Meaning was not abandoned by any means, but authors were definitely moving left--

704. On the Theory and Practice of Seeing
Paintings increasingly took on symbolic, even calligraphic, meanings...

While some artists addressed the ironies of words and pictures head-on.

Portrait de TRISTAN TZARA par FRANCIS PICABIA

THE WORK OF DADAISTS, FUTURISTS AND VARIOUS INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS OF THE MODERN ERA BROUGHT THE FRONTIER BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND MEANING...

DADA POSTER FOR THE PLAY "THE BEARDED HEART."

...COOL, NOT PAINTING, PIPE.
AND IN POPULAR CULTURE
THE TWO FORMS COLLIDED
AGAIN AND AGAIN WITHOUT
ANY PRETENSES OF "HIGH ART."

NOWHERE IS THIS COLLISION
MORE THOROUGHLY EXPLORED THAN
THE MODERN COMIC, AND IT'S
NOT A RECENT OBSESSION.

LET'S
GO BACK TO
THE EARLY 1800s
BEFORE ANY OF
THIS HAPPENED,
WHEN WORDS AND
PICTURES HAD
DRIFTED AS FAR
APART AS
POSSIBLE.

UP TO THAT POINT, EUROPEAN
BROADSHEETS HAD OFFERED REMINDERS
OF WHAT WORDS AND PICTURES COULD
DO WHEN COMBINED.

BUT AGAIN IT WAS RODOLPHE
TOUFFER WHO FORESAW THEIR
INTERDEPENDENCY AND BROUGHT
THE FAMILY BACK TOGETHER AT LAST.

M. CREPIN ADVERTISES FOR A TUTOR, AND MANY APPLY FOR THE JOB.

I'M SURE THAT
THESE IDEAS WERE
THE FURTHER THINGS
FROM TOUFFER'S
MIND WHEN HE
PIUT PENS TO
PAPER—

—but the fact
that the modern
comic was born
just as art and
writing were
preparing to
change direction
is at least
intriguing.

and perhaps this
common thread of
unification
did grow out of
a shared instinct
of the day...

—An instinct
which said that
we had reached
the end of a long
journey and
that it was time
at last to head
for home.
UNFORTUNATELY FOR COMICS, NO SOONER HAD THE FINE ARTS REDISCOVERED THE LINK BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES -- THAN MODERN ART ITSELF BECAME VIRTUALLY INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO THE AVERAGE VIEWER!

WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?

IT'S A HOAX I TELL YA! MY TWO-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER CAN PAINT BETTER THAN THAT!

DO PEOPLE REALLY PAY MONEY FOR THIS?

IN FACT, THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING HASN'T CHANGED MUCH IN 500 YEARS. ANY ARTIST WISHING TO DO GREAT WORK IN A MEDIUM USING WORDS AND PICTURES WILL HAVE TO CONTENT WITH THIS ATTITUDE.

Thou still unravish'd bride
Thou foster-child of sile.
Sylvan historian, who can
A flowery tale more sweet.
What leaf fring'd legend has
Of deities or mortals, or
In Tempe or the dales.
What men or gods are these?
What mod pursuit? What
What name and rumble?

...BECAUSE, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, MANY COMICS CREATORS STILL MEASURE ART AND WRITING BY DIFFERENT STANDARDS AND ACT ON THE FAITH THAT "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING WILL COMBINE HARMONIOUSLY BY VIRTUE OF QUALITY ALONE.

*NOT AS MUCH AS WE LIKE TO THINK IT HAS, ANYWAY.*
THE ART FORM OF COMICS IS MANY CENTURIES OLD, BUT IT'S PERCEIVED AS A RECENT INVENTION AND SUFFERS THE CURSE OF ALL NEW MEDIA.

EVER SINCE THE INVENTION OF THE WRITTEN WORD, NEW MEDIA HAVE BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD.

CAREFUL, JACOB! IF YOU KEEP DOING THIS, YOU'LL STOP USING YOUR MEMORY!

EACH NEW MEDIUM BEGINS ITS LIFE BY IMITATING ITS PREDECESSORS. MANY EARLY MOVIES WERE LIKE FILMED STAGE PLAYS, MUCH EARLY TELEVISION WAS LIKE RADO WITH PICTURES OR REDUCED MOVIES.

FAR TOO MANY COMICS CREATORS HAVE NO HIGHER GOAL THAN TO MATCH THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF OTHER MEDIA, AND VIEW ANY CHANCE TO WORK IN OTHER MEDIA AS A STEP UP.

AND AGAIN, AS LONG AS WE VIEW COMICS AS A GENRE OF WRITING OR A STYLE OF GRAPHIC ART THIS ATTITUDE MAY NEVER DISAPPEAR.
WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMBINATION MAY NOT BE MY DEFINITION OF COMICS, BUT THE COMBINATION HAS HAD TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE ON ITS GROWTH.

A HUGGE RANGE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCES CAN BE PORTRAYED IN COMICS THROUGH EITHER WORDS OR PICTURES.

AS A RESULT--AND DESPITE ITS MANY OTHER POTENTIAL USES--COMICS HAVE BECOME FIRMLY IDENTIFIED WITH "THE ART OF STORYTELLING."

AND INDEED, WORDS AND PICTURES HAVE GREAT POWERS TO TELL STORIES WHEN CREATORS FULLY EXPLOIT THEM BOTH.

DADA
HORROR
SURREALISM
HISTORICAL FICTION
FOLK TALES
EROTICA
MYSTERY
RELIGIOUS TOPICS
ADAPTATIONS
STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
SATIRE

AND SO FAR, WE'VE ONLY SEEN THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG!

AS CHILDREN, WE "SHOW AND TELL" INTERCHANGEABLY, WORDS AND IMAGES COMBINING TO TRANSMIT A CONNECTED SERIES OF IDEAS.

THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH WORDS AND PICTURES CAN COMBINE IN COMICS IS VIRTUALLY UNLIMITED.

BUT LET'S TRY TO BREAK IT DOWN INTO SOME DISTINCT CATEGORIES.

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First, we have the word specific combinations, where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text.

Then there are picture specific combinations where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence.

And, of course, duo-specific panels in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message.

We stumbled back to the apartment shortly before dawn, vomiting every 20 yards.

Judy gave me her keys and smiled.

The United States Constitution was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in 1787 and put into effect in 1789.

But the captain's mighty blow misses its intended target! Blast! He dodged my punch and I struck this brick wall.

Grim-faced, George lifted his lollipop.

I feel so sad.

...thought Amy.
Another type is the **additive combination** where words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa.

In **parallel combinations**, words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting.

Still another option is the **montage** where words are treated as integral parts of the picture.

**My head feels like a smashed pumpkin!**

**How 'ya like my new threads, babe?**

**Is this the same Jupiter of my youth?**

**Talked to Bill yet?**

**Sally did. Why?**

**'The test results came back. All negative.' **

**'Really? That's great!'**


[Cereal box with 'Happy!']

'Happy Bottom Line Annual Report'

[Crowd in background, one saying: 'Happy']
Perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination is the interdependent, where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone.

Meanwhile...

Did anyone see you?

This is all I need to stop him!

I ask you, does this guy look like a CEO to you?

"And just guess who drove up in Bob's truck an hour later!"

Hey, Marge?

Oh, my God!

"After college, I pursued a career in high finance."

Hurry up, Wilma!

He's lying.

Uh-huh.

Generally speaking, the more is said with words, the more the pictures can be freed to go exploring and vice versa.

\[
\begin{align*}
P & \quad W \\
W & \quad P
\end{align*}
\]
In comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading.

When both partners try to lead, the competition can subvert the overall goals.

...though a little playful competition can sometimes produce enjoyable results.

But when these partners each know their roles--

--and support each other's strengths--

--comics can match any of the art forms it draws so much of its strength from.
WHEN PICTURES CARRY THE WEIGHT OF CLARITY IN A SCENE, THEY FREE WORDS TO EXPLORE A WIDER AREA.

LET'S SAY I SHOW YOU A WOMAN WALKING ACROSS THE STREET IN THE RAIN, BUYING A PINT OF ICE CREAM AND EATING IT IN HER APARTMENT---

ALL IN PICTURES.
WHEN A SCENE SHOWS YOU ALL YOU "NEED" TO KNOW, LIKE THIS ONE, THE LATITUDE FOR SCRIPTING GROWS ENORMOUSLY.

I MAY BE ALONE LIKE THIS FOR A VERY LONG TIME. IT COULD BECOME AN INTERNAL MONOLOGUE. (INTERDEPENDENT)

Perhaps something wildly incongruous.

MISSION CONTROL, MISSION CONTROL, DO YOU READ ME? (PARALLEL)

MAYBE IT'S ALL JUST A BIG ADVERTISEMENT? YOU'LL LOVE THE TASTE! (INTERDEPENDENT)

Or a chance to ruminate on broader topics.

This is the way the world ends. (INTERDEPENDENT)
On the other hand, if the words lock in the "meaning" of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off.

I crossed the street to the convenience store. The rain soaked into my boots.

I found the last pint of chocolate chip ice cream in the freezer.

The clerk tried to pick me up. I said no thanks. He gave me this creepy look....

I went back to the apartment——

—and finished it all in an hour.

ALONE AT LAST.
NOW, ONE COULD JUST COMBINE THE PICTURES FROM PAGE 157 WITH THE WORDS FROM PAGE 159 —

--BUT WHAT ARE SOME OTHER OPTIONS?

I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

IF THE ARTIST WANTS TO, HE/SHE CAN NOW SHOW ONLY FRAGMENTS OF A SCENE.

(WORD SPECIFIC)

THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID NO THANKS. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

(AMPLIFICATION)

PERHAPS THE ARTIST CAN GIVE US SOME IMPORTANT EMOTIONAL INFORMATION.

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT—

(INTERDEPENDENT)

OR SHIFT AHEAD OR BACKWARDS IN TIME.

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

(WORD SPECIFIC)

OR MOVE TOWARD GREATER LEVELS OF ABstraction OR EXPRESSION.

MCLEOD / SHOW AND TELL 717
THE PICTURE PLANE

RESEMBLANCE

MEANING

HOWEVER MUCH WE MAY CHART THESE THINGS, THEY'RE ALL ULTIMATELY BEST LEFT TO THE CREATOR'S INSTINCTS.

THE MIXING OF WORDS AND PICTURES IS MORE ALCHEMY THAN SCIENCE.

SOME OF THE SECRETS OF THOSE FIRST ALCHEMISTS MAY HAVE BEEN LOST IN THE ANCIENT PAST.

BUT WE HAVE SOME POWERFUL MAGIC RIGHT HERE IN THE 20th CENTURY, TOO!

THE RICHNESS OF MODERN LANGUAGE IS AN IRREPLACEABLE COMMODITY!

--WHEN TO TELL WAS TO SHOW--

--AND TO SHOW WAS TO TELL--

THIS IS AN EXCITING TIME TO BE MAKING COMICS, AND IN MANY WAYS I FEEL VERY LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN BORN WHEN I WAS.

STILL, I DO FEEL A CERTAIN VAGUE LONGING FOR THAT TIME OVER 50 CENTURIES AGO.
SEEING & WRITING 3

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