

Making comics: manga, graphic novels, and beyond

Jessica Abel & Matt Madden

Drawing WORDS & WRITING Pictures

A definitive course
from concept to comic
in 15 lessons

PLOP!



Constructing a World

Chapter 12

In this chapter we'll focus on creating a sense of place. We'll also take a side trip, as we did in Chapter 5, to talk more about drawing figures.

12.1

Creating a sense of place



Homework critique for
Chapter 11 on page 244



THE IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUNDS

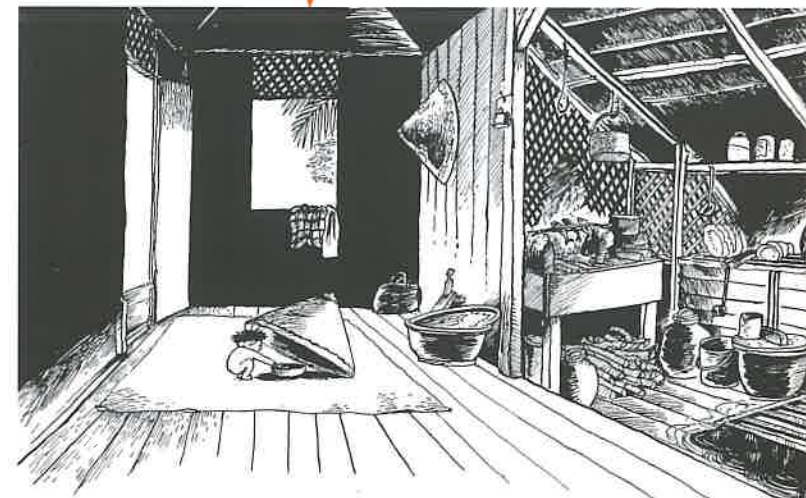
If there's one thing that consistently challenges new comics artists, it's backgrounds. Or rather, it's coming around to the understanding that you have to draw them! Most of us learned to love drawing by sketching page after page of heads, faces, eyes, and character and costume designs. But how many of you can look through your old sketchbooks and find fully-imagined worlds? Houses? Trees? Landscapes? Or even an interior? In fact, your *Chip and the Cookie Jar* strip may be the first time you ever had to grapple with drawing places.



Now think of your favorite comics. Depending on what you are into, what springs to mind might be just about anything: **fascinatingly complex vehicles** or **futuristic buildings**, an **animation studio circa 1933**, a **New York apartment in the 90s**, or a **small-town Malaysian kitchen in 1951**. Regardless of what your taste is, though, one of the central elements of memorable comics is a deeply imagined sense of place. The characters you love so much inhabit a world, and that world reflects and enhances what the characters are like and what they do.

Even if your comics are completely cartoony, you still are going to have to occasionally put your characters on a **bike**, or in a car, (or, as one student of ours recently realized, on the set of *The Price is Right*), and you'll need to figure out how big a car is relative to your characters, and how does a steering wheel attach, anyway?

In the last chapter, you started penciling your six-page story. It's crucial that you make your comics world real to your readers. So it's time to bite the bullet.



APPROACHES TO WORLD-BUILDING

There are a number of approaches to world-building: drawing from life, using photo reference, researching the real world, researching the imaginary, learning perspective, and simply using your imagination.

Drawing from life

One way to create an evocative sense of place is to use drawings of real locations for the setting for your comic, like a **convenience store** in Mexico City. This is how it works: Bring a sketchbook (preferably one with a spiral binding so you can flip the cover back and hold it more comfortably), and a pencil and/or pens. Find a good vantage point where you won't be in the way of other people, and draw what you see.



Matt drew the comics panel on the right with the help of the drawing on the left, from his sketchbook.

While this may sound simple, drawing from life is a skill that takes a lot of practice. So don't worry if your drawings don't look perfect. Anyway, when you're sketching locations from life, you're not there to make a finished drawing, you're mainly taking visual notes. When you get home and start your comic, you'll have a fresh memory of the places you sketched, a detailed set of notes, and, most importantly, you'll have looked more closely at the locations than you probably ever have before. Drawing something is a really good way to learn about it.

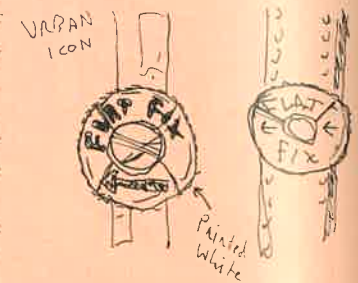


Drawing specifics

Fine-tuning as you draw

Keepin' it real

We will mention the dreaded *cliché* several times in this chapter for a reason. Cliché is a direct result of laziness. When your story is seeming kind of samey and overly familiar, either in the way the characters look or act, in the construction of plot, or in the world you've created, that is because you have not thought hard enough about those elements, and more specifically, because you have relied entirely on the limited contents of your own memory to design them. The answer to cliché is always to go outside your own brain and look at the world around you. This is harder than it sounds: Can you do a drawing off the top of your head of a garbage truck? Of the street where you live? Of three different kinds of trees in your neighborhood? One way to train yourself to pay close attention to the world around you is to keep an "I notice" diary for a week, a month, or a year. Every day, make it a point to notice, and make written and/or pictorial notes on, at least five things. These things could be anything, from the way your roommate stacks the dishes in the drainer to the mechanism of the doors on newspaper boxes on the corner. Just make a point of really paying attention and then noting what you observe, and your stock of material will grow exponentially.



From Matt's "I notice" sketchbook

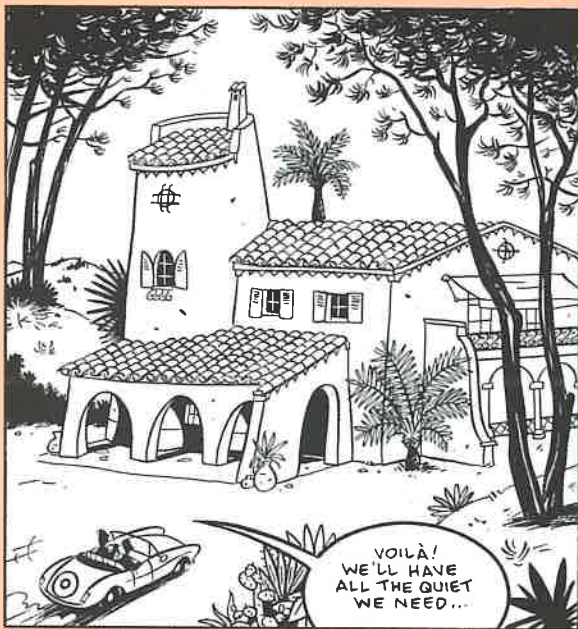
The devil's in the details

When you draw from your imagination, especially when you're a novice, you tend to draw schematic, idealized forms. For example, when you draw a "tree" you usually draw the same tree you've drawn for years. It will have a trunk (sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, but usually quite straight and featureless), and a crown of leaves (usually round, and perhaps a bit bumpy).



Look outside your window. If you've got trees in view, you'll immediately notice that each one, and especially each type, is different. Outside our window are plane trees. They bend and lean toward the street as a result of years of pruning on that side. Their bark is mottled, with patches of light, medium, and darker greenish-beige. Their leaves are pale and cluster in large masses, irregularly. Their branch structure is elegant, visible through the upper canopy. What kinds of trees can you see? A pin oak? A Japanese maple? A black tupelo? Whatever you see, I bet there's not a single "tree."

Part of learning to draw from your imagination—a vital tool for the cartoonist—is stocking your imagination with notations taken from life. When you started drawing people, at the age of two or three, you drew a head, eyes, a mouth. Later, you learned to notice torsos and noses, ears and eyebrows. Gradually, you learned to remember all the parts of the body. Often, though, that is where we stop learning. It's time for you to pick up where you (may have) left off, and to draw from life as a way of stocking your imagination with the endless weirdness that is reality.



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Draw what's in front of you

A common habit among cartoonists is to filter everything they see through an established set of drawing conventions—idealized superhero, manga cute, and so on. Have you tried to draw a realistic portrait of your best friend, and then noticed that he or she came out looking distinctly manga-ish when you were done, and not like him- or herself? That's the "face" you had stored in your imagination, not your friend's face. You are "tracing" from a mental template. This is a tendency to be wary of because it can make your art look lifeless: like the copy of a copy.

At the same time, many comics do call for drawing in a particular style (maybe it's the style you love, or maybe it's what an editor asks for), so what you need to learn is how to regularly step outside a given style's conventions to study the way people and things really look, then bring that back into your style. We're not arguing for photographic realism here: You will notice that several of the examples in this sidebar are in fact quite stylized and cartoony, yet they all feature very specific representations of trees and plant life.



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Missouri, born copyright © 2006 by Leland Myrick

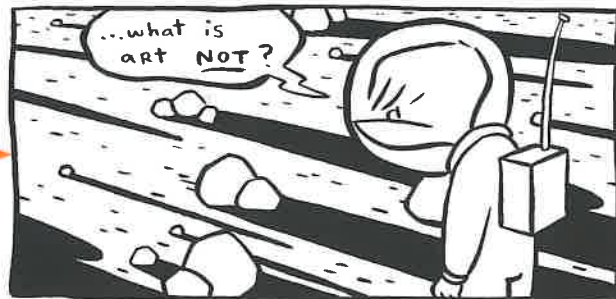


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Using photo reference

If it's not possible to visit the places or objects you want to use in your comic (like, say it's set in **New Zealand**, or **Paris**, or on **the moon**, or on **London Bridge** in 1888), or if you need a lot more information than you can easily gather in a day or two of on-location drawing, use photos.

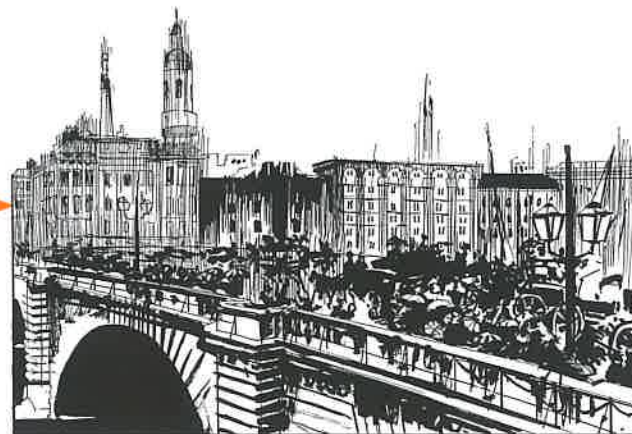
- If you can visit the place, take photos yourself.
- If the place is out of reach, naturally you should check the Internet for photographs—Google image search is a great boon for comics artists. You can find all kinds of stuff there. But sometimes the images are too low-quality to be of much help.
- Go to the library. Large public libraries (as well as some college libraries) often house image banks, and certainly they stock plenty of books full of photos.
- Keep your own image bank. Never throw out a magazine without cutting out good photos you might use for reference in the future—and not just pictures of fighter planes and mountains, but photos of interesting or difficult poses, like holding a phone or shaking hands. Organize your clippings by subject and keep them in a file cabinet or scrapbook.



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Things to keep in mind when drawing from photos

Using photos is tricky. When you draw from life, you move, the world moves, and all that change gets translated in one way or another into the drawing. On the other hand, a photo captures only a fraction of a second in time. If you slavishly copy a photo, your drawing can easily turn out very stiff. It will just scream "photo," no matter how well you render it. You need to treat drawing from a photo as you treat drawing from life, as a set of visual notes for creating your drawing, not something to be carbon copied. Here's a trick: If you're drawing from a photo of a building, rotate the building slightly in your drawing. That is, change the point of view a bit, so you'll have to figure out the angles on your own. Don't copy everything, just the dominant details that make the building look like itself, and not like another building across the street. Don't get caught up in the literal. Make the photo work for you.

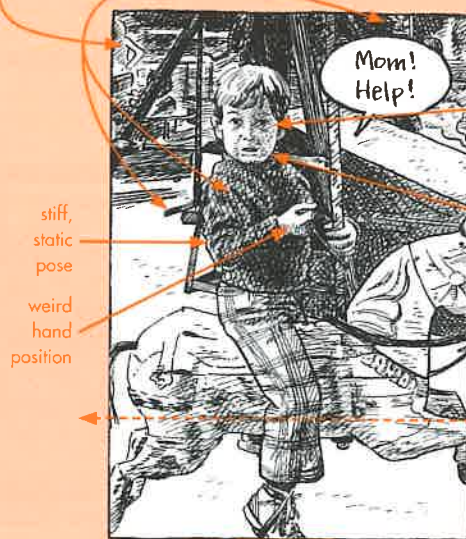
Tracing or closely copying a photo will result in a panel that does not work in a comics context.

The biggest problem with the direct-copy approach is too much information. In this example, the background is confusing, cluttered, and unhelpful, and the various details like straps and handholds are just hard to understand. Also, the four-square composition, stiff pose, and straight gaze of the character make the panel feel as static as can be.

The key to using this photo properly is not to simply copy all of the details, but to find the *telling* details. The angle has been rotated to avoid a static drawing, and the background and other details have been simplified. The plaid pants and boots tell us this is the 1970s, and the delicately worn wooden horse puts us in a very specific park. Other changes make the panel feel more kinetic and help it integrate with the panels that come before and after it.



TOO MUCH INFORMATION! Centered composition



stiff, static pose
weird hand position

awkward cropping

looking straight at reader

awkward facial expression
awkward cropping

parallel to picture plane

Asymmetrical composition



simplified background

emanata

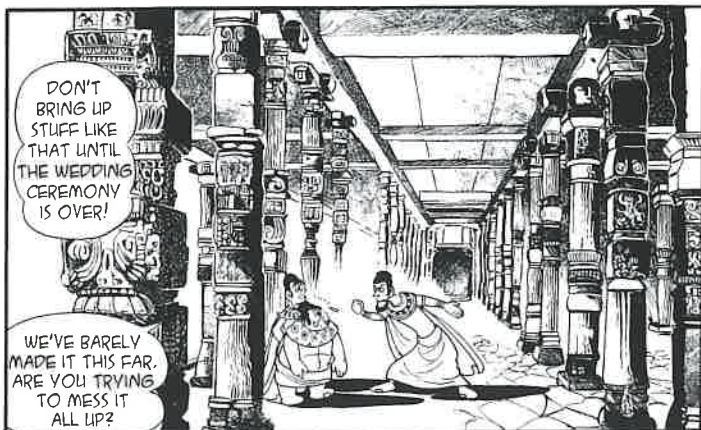
clarified expression

focus off to the side, not on reader

full figure in panel

active pose

diagonal picture plane



By Osamu Tezuka. Image used with permission from Vertical, Inc. and Tezuka Productions.

Researching the real world

Locating photographs to use as reference is a form of research, but it is just one element of the research that can go onto your comic. Any story that takes place in a specific place and time requires further research. Whether you set your comic in *New York City in 1982*, a temple in ancient India, or in *Bosnia in 1995*, your story will need backgrounds that show a visual richness that you're not going to be able to just pull off the top of your head. You need to show locations, buildings, clothing, hairstyles, objects and other details that are accurate for the time and place—even the way people moved might have been different. You need to fill sketchbook pages with visual notes, collect reference images and text, and read books about the period in question.

You may be saying to yourself, yeah, whatever, but my story is set in *my old high school*, I can remember that. Bet you can't. If you don't go there and take pictures, or pull out your yearbooks for image reference, your story will be full of generic "classrooms" and "lockers" and "students," and your readers will feel that the world you've presented to them is shallow and unconvincing. A story without a clear, specific setting feels generic and clichéd. It can ruin all of your hard work on characters and story structure.



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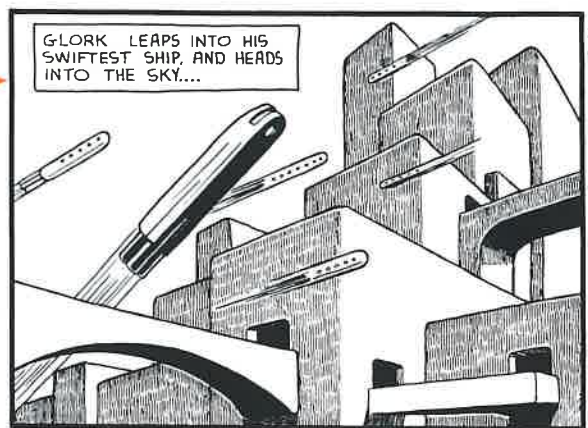
Especially if, for example, your old high school is a fancy private school in Hawaii, as drawn by R. Kikuo Johnson. Check out those light fixtures!



Copyright © 2007 R. Kikuo Johnson

Inventing realities

If you're thinking, "OK, fine, but my story takes place on Mars, do you know what it looks like?" go find out. Even if you want to set your story on an imaginary Mars, with elaborate cities and highways criss-crossing the landscape, what will they look like? If you sit down to draw them with only what you have stored in your brain already, you will end up drawing—you guessed it—"buildings," "highways," and "space vehicles." It will all feel a bit lame. You have a harder research job than that of artists setting stories in the real world, because every aspect of the world you're creating is up to you. You have to make all the rules, set the design standard, and imagine how the history of Martian architecture will be reflected in the Mars of today. But research can be a great help. What about using strange rainforest seedpods as an inspiration for building types? Insects for cars? Beehives or warehouses for spaceships? Or why not interpret Italian fascist architecture for a low-gravity environment? Will your people wear space suits? Evolve new breathing apparatus? Are they even human? If not, how will they walk, talk, cry, fight? How many legs (if any)? Do they live underwater? You will need a lot of sketchbook space to figure it all out, and you need to do that work before starting the story.



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Perspective

Linear perspective is a system of visual conventions used to create the illusion of three-dimensional space or a two-dimensional surface. Although teaching you to use perspective in your comics is beyond the scope of this book, it's a topic that will be absolutely necessary for many of you to study. Even those who work in an entirely cartoony style will find themselves needing to place characters relative to one another and in some kind of deep space at least some of the time. Look for classes on the subject, and study some of the books in the "Further reading" section below.

FURTHER READING

David Chelsea, *Perspective For Comic Book Artists*

Joseph D'Amelio, *Perspective Drawing Handbook*

Ernest Norling, *Perspective Made Easy*

Ernest W. Watson, *Creative Perspective for Artists and Illustrators*

Using your imagination

None of what we've discussed above is meant to imply that you're not imaginatively involved in the process of developing the world of your characters. We've emphasized research over and over again, because you're unlikely to have really *looked* at, and made a mental catalog of, the world around you. If you become the world's greatest racecar comics artist, you probably won't need to closely observe and research racecars after the first year or so. You'll just know all the parts by heart. Same goes for figure drawing. There is always more to learn and more to observe, but once you learn anatomy and how the human body fits together, you won't have to go to the model every time you want to draw another panel. In fact, too much reliance on observation and research can be a real crutch. You never want to get so married to your reference that you can't invent what you need. Try not to get addicted to drawing from photos. Do take all that material you've found, recombine it, alter it, and use it as a jumping-off point. Your imagination is central to this whole enterprise. Just don't let it go hungry. ■

