

THE ART OF COMIC BOOK INKING

By GARY MARTIN

(Rewrite by Anina Bennett)

GLOSSARY

Contour lines: The outline of a figure or object; also known as “holding lines.”

Cursive line: A flowing, elegant ink line that is thin on one end, thicker in the middle, then thin again on the other end (see figs. 4, 5, & 13).

Dead-weight line: A line with a consistent width, not varying in thickness (see figs. 1 & 2).

Feathering: A series of lines that are thin on one end and thicker at the other end (see figs. 6-12).

Filling in blacks: Inking in the solid black areas on a page, where indicated by the penciler; not to be confused with spotting blacks.

Finishes: When an inker spots blacks and adds details, textures, and feathering to an incomplete penciled page such as a layout or breakdown.

Force lines: Long, feather or cursive lines that emphasize an action or event by surrounding and pointing toward it (see fig. 12).

Gritty: An overused term (especially by editors) that means . . . well, I don’t know **what** it means!

Gutters: The white space between panels and around the edges of the page.

Line weight: The thickness of an ink line.

Loose: An inking style that is less controlled and more spontaneous and free-flowing, or a penciling style that is vague and sketchy.

Negative space: The white space on an inked page.

Slick: A controlled inking style that is smooth and precise; Joe Sinnott’s work is the epitome of slick.

Spotting blacks: When an inker is doing finishes, this means deciding where to place solid blacks in the overall composition of a page, then filling them in.

Terse line: A contour line that’s thin on one end and thicker at the opposite end (see figs. 28 & 57).

Tight: A penciling style that is clear and precise, making the inker’s job of interpretation easier.

Volume: The appearance of three-dimensionality in a two-dimensional drawing.

FOREWORD

WHAT IS A COMIC BOOK INKER?

“What does an inker do? Are you responsible for the coloring? Don’t you just trace over the lines? How much of the linework is done by computer?”

You would not believe how many times I’ve heard these questions in my 16-year comic book inking career. By writing this book, I hope to demystify a very important part of the comic book creative process. If you’ve purchased this book solely for the art by our spectacular roster of contributors, you’ll get your money’s worth. But *The Art of Comic Book Inking* is mainly intended for:

- people who want to become inkers
- working inkers who haven’t had professional training
- pencilers who want their work to be more inker-friendly
- the majority of editors working in comics today.

Inkers are ultimately responsible for the stylistic look of most comic book art, including that uniquely American genre: superhero comics.

Inking is important largely because pencil lines are much harder to reproduce than bold, black line art. It’s also more difficult to create a variety of line weights and textures with a pencil than with a brush or crow-quill pen.

Of course, printing and imaging technologies are more sophisticated now than during the Golden Age of comics (1930s-40s), so it’s possible to reproduce pencil art more accurately than ever before. But the inked line is still easiest to reproduce, and – in an ironically high-tech twist – generally most compatible with computer coloring. The contour ink line continues to be essential to the art form of comics.

Listed below are the comic book inker’s primary job responsibilities as I see them. These goals are the foundation of my inking approach.

1. The inker’s main purpose is to translate the penciler’s graphite pencil lines into reproducible, black ink lines.

This goal seems so basic and self-evident that it’s sometimes overlooked. Nevertheless, it should be the inker’s number-one priority.

2. The inker must honor the penciler’s original intent, while adjusting any obvious mistakes.

Staying true to the integrity of the pencil work is very important. However, sometimes even the most Godlike pencil artists make mistakes. It’s your responsibility to identify goofs and fix them when possible. The inked line is what’s reproduced in the finished comic book, since pencil lines are erased after inking. So the excuse that a mistake was “in the pencils” just doesn’t cut the mustard!

3. The inker determines the look of the finished art.

Inking involves many decisions about line weights, contour styles, solid blacks, textures, and other artistic concerns. These combined decisions result in what most people visualize when they think of comic book art – i.e., inked pages. Line weights (see Chapter III) are especially important, since they factor into almost every aspect of drawing. The use of varying line weights is a defining element of comic book inking, particularly in “mainstream” American comics.

For those of you considering a career as a comics inker, be forewarned that inkers are often underappreciated and overlooked when the art in a comic is being lauded. Let’s be realistic: The star of the comic book creative team is the penciler. Most people buy the comic to see their art. Remember, job responsibility number two is to make the penciler look good. The better you do that

job, the more your penciler will appreciate you – and the more chance you’ll have of consistently working on good projects with talented pencil artists.

For pencilers reading this book to get some inking insights, my main comment is that **inking is not tracing**. If you expect the inks to be exactly like the pencils, you should just use a harder lead and dig grooves in the paper when you draw, then pour ink on the page and wipe off the excess.

I worked with a penciler for a while who had (and still has) a tendency to get facial proportions kind of squirrely – the eyes out of place, or the nose out of line with the mouth. I was fixing them in the inks, and he told me not to. He wanted me to ink it exactly the way he’d drawn it. When I told him his proportions were wrong, he said he didn’t care. “That’s part of my charm!” was his reply. Unfortunately, his ego interfered with the art. There’s a difference between idiosyncratic art and sloppy draftsmanship, and inkers as well as pencilers should be able to tell them apart.

Think of the inker as another pair of eyes. They can help the art read more clearly by fixing problems that you may not have seen. The inker is part of the art team and will have their own creative statement to make. As long as they stay true to the pencils, you should appreciate their contribution.

The other group of comic book professionals who I hope will read this book are editors. Since editors assemble art teams, they should understand the value of a good inker. The right combination can yield awesome results, and the wise editor has the opportunity to orchestrate this magic. The wrong stylistic combination, on the other hand, can be disastrous even if both penciler and inker are brilliant.

The inker should be part of the creative process from the very beginning. Ideally, an inker should be selected before the penciler has started drawing, since the inking helps determine the art’s overall style. Editors should also listen to their pencilers when choosing inkers. I’m amazed by how often editors totally disregard pencilers’ wish lists, instead picking someone (apparently at random) from their usual “stable.” Good pencilers know what suits their own art the best – and good editors know that if you hook up two artists who want to work together, they’re both likely to be more motivated and produce better work.

Although I wrote the how-to section of this book, that doesn’t mean I’m saying that mine is the only way to ink. It’s one man’s approach. Art, by its nature, is intuitive. That’s why I included contributions from top artists in the comics industry: to help give an idea of how the same basic techniques can be applied to a wide variety of styles.

If you disagree with my opinions, I encourage you to write to me care of Dark Horse Comics. But I warn you, I’ll hammer you into submission with my logic. The guys at Studiosaurus don’t call me “the Spock of inking” for nothing!

—Gary Martin
Portland, OR

CHAPTER I BEFORE YOU START

LEARN TO DRAW!

A required prerequisite to becoming a comic book inker is **knowing how to draw**. The process of inking a comic book page includes making dozens of drawing decisions as you translate the pencils into inks. You must also be able to identify and fix mistakes when you come across them.

Above all, **do not make comic books your only source of art training!** Superhero anatomy in particular is exaggerated and stylized. You need to learn how to draw real people before you experiment with developing your own style, whether exaggerated or naturalistic.

I strongly recommend taking some life-drawing classes from an art school, local studio, or community college. Drawing from a live model is the best way to learn about the human figure. If this is not an option for you, there are many fine anatomy books designed for artists, as well as countless sources of visual information on art history and illustration techniques.

Get out and draw the world around you, too. Public parks, cafés, zoos – anywhere you can hang around long enough to fill a few sketchbook pages.

STUDY THE REAL THING

Of course, you can still learn from comic book art in addition to other sources. The best way to study inked art up close is to collect original pages. The original can give you much more information than a page printed in a comic book. This can be an expensive form of education, but you can cut costs by buying “dialogue pages” without big action or splash panels. You can usually pick up such pages from professional artists at local comics conventions, or sometimes from art dealers.

After you’ve obtained some good-quality original art, you can practice by putting tracing paper over the page and trying to ink on top of the existing lines. This is good control practice, and it helps you get into the inker’s head to figure out why they made certain inking decisions.

DO YOUR MATH

Generally speaking, artists and mathematics don’t mix very well. But like it or not, before you launch into a career as a comic book inker, you need to think about how much money you’ll make. A good starting rate for inking is \$100 per page. If you can only ink one page a day and are fortunate enough to get a regular gig of 22 pages a month (plus covers), that adds up to about \$28,000 a year. Subtract one-third for the I.R.S., because you will now be self-employed and paying quarterly tax estimates. If you’re single and still living at home, this isn’t bad – but if you have a family and a mortgage, you should now qualify for food stamps! At the other end of the scale, if you’ve been inking for a while and can do two pages a day at a top rate of \$150 per page, that’s about \$80,000 year. Only the best and the fastest can do this.

A word about royalties: Only a select few creators are lucky enough to receive royalty payments on a regular basis; the days of the giant royalty check are long gone. This is not income you can count on.

CHAPTER II

GETTING STARTED

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

You'll need the right equipment if you want to ink professionally. Following is my list of useful tools and supplies. As you experiment, you may find that you prefer another brand of brush or ink; use whatever works best for you.

Drawing table: An adjustable surface angle is a must.

Good light source: A full-spectrum Chromalux light bulb helps reduce eyestrain, and a swing-arm, adjustable lamp puts the light where you need it.

Inking brushes: Winsor & Newton series 7 or Raphael 8404, both in numbers 2 or 3.

Crow-quill pens: Hunt 102 is the industry standard; use Hunt 107 for a flatter line, Hunt 512 for a bolder line. Rotring pens combine crow-quill tips with ink cartridges like those in technical pens.

India (black) ink: Higgins, FW, Black Magic, or Pelikan waterproof drawing ink.

Erasers: Higgins, Magic Rub, or Staedtler Puraplast.

Technical pens: Staedtler disposable or Rotring Rapidoliner, in sizes 0.3, 0.35, and 0.7 mm.

White ink: FW white and Pro White (opaque watercolors) work on most black inks; standard white-outs like Liquid Paper do not.

Nonphoto-blue pencil: Also called "nonrepro blue." Look for one that won't show up on photocopies.

Black crayon or grease pencil: Used for a rough or "toothy" effect.

Old toothbrush: For splatter effects.

Old sponge: Good for adding texture.

Tracing paper: Handy for practice inks and inking on overlay. Some types repel ink, so try out different brands.

Masking film: Also known as frisket; for masking off art when you apply splatter or other effects. You can buy this ready-made, or make your own by very lightly spraying repositionable glue on one side of a sheet of tracing paper. (Be extra careful with the do-it-yourself version!)

Zip-a-Tone: A brand name for shading film, often used as a generic term; other brands include Format and Chartpak. Shading film comes in a wide variety of dot patterns and textures, printed on a transparent sheet with adhesive on the back side.

Ruler: The see-through kind with a beveled edge is best; a T-square can also come in handy.

Circle and ellipse templates: As many sizes and shapes as you can get your hands on, to aid in inking everything from the moon to a frying pan.

French curves: Two or three different shapes.

Compass: Get one that'll hold a technical pen.

X-acto knife: You'll need this for cuttings things like masking film and Zip-a-Tone.

White artist's tape: For taping together double-page spreads; also useful for covering up the occasional large ink splotch, especially in gutters.

Lap board: Good for erasing pages and x-acto cutting.

Draftsman's brush: Brushing eraser crumbs off your pages is better than blowing them off. (Spitting on pages is bad!)

Container of water: Keep one close at hand for rinsing out brushes and diluting ink.

Paper towels: Use them to wipe off brushes, blot sponges, or in case of emergency.

Beverage: Your choice. Lime-Aid out of a peanut butter jar is a Terry Austin fave!

BRUSHES VS. PENS

What are the advantages of inking with a brush over inking with a crow-quill pen? Versatility, for one: A brush is capable of both a finer line and a much bolder line than a pen. It can also hold more ink, so you don't need to dip into the ink well as often.

Despite that, pen lines take longer to dry than brush lines because the crow-quill pen lays down a thicker bead of ink on the paper. It's easy to forget where these wet lines are and plop your hand right down on top of them, thus smearing your page all to heck! With a brush, you can ink an entire panel in one go, then move on to the next one. With a pen, you have to ink part of the panel, then work on different areas of the page while you wait for your lines to dry.

The main advantages of the crow-quill pen are that it takes less time to learn how to use, and you can ink faster with it. (Remember, speed = \$\$\$!) Also, if you like a harder-looking line, this is the instrument for you.

It takes longer to learn how to control a brush — much longer. It took me about three years of inking professionally before my brush started doing what I wanted it to. Inking comic books with a brush is an old tradition, but I fear it's a dying art. The satisfaction of mastering this craft is well worth the time and effort involved.

INKING WITH A BRUSH

First, saturate your brush with ink. Wipe it off two or three times on the ink-bottle rim, then roll it on a scrap of paper to get a fine point. Grasp it between your thumb and forefinger and rest it on your middle finger (see fig. A). Plant the side of your hand (at the wrist) on the paper; this is the pivot point. Now rest your middle finger down on the paper. Do not move the brush or your fingers when inking — only move your wrist at the pivot point with the brush in this locked position. Ink lines from left to right in a horizontal direction, using the natural curve of your wrist. (This is for a right-handed person; you lefties do the opposite.) Just rotate the page as you work to keep the lines horizontal. Some inkers like to go vertically by dragging their hand down the page when they ink a line. Again, experiment until you find the working method most comfortable for you.

The secret to controlling your brush is controlling the ink flow. Bold lines need more ink in the brush and more pressure on the brush stroke. Thin lines and detail work take very little ink in the brush and a very light touch on the brush stroke. Don't do detail work with a brush full of ink.

For detail work on a face (e.g., a nostril), first outline the shape, then fill it in. Don't try to do this with one stroke; you risk losing the shape the penciler has put down, thus changing the features.

Do not use technical pens or felt-tip markers when inking figures. Tech pens produce a flat, dead line that will not add variety or life to your figure work. Markers contain a different kind of ink that will fade over time, making your originals green and worthless.

For a more controlled technique when feathering (see Chapter VI), use slow, even strokes and ink into the blacks, thin to thick. For a looser approach, increase your hand speed and ink out of the blacks when feathering, starting at the thick end and moving toward the thin end of each feather line.

All the lines in figs. 1-13 were inked with a Winsor & Newton series 7, number 2 brush and reproduced at original size. These are some of the types of lines you will be inking in comics, whether with a pen or a brush. Practice them over and over again, until you're sick of doing them – then do some more! Look for consistency in line quality and spacing. When you've started getting a handle on these line techniques, you'll be ready to ink figures.

CHAPTER III

LINE WEIGHTS

ESTABLISHING THE LIGHT SOURCE

The first thing you need to do when inking a comic book panel is determine which direction the light is coming from. This is most important because it's the cornerstone of all your subsequent line-weight decisions. The penciler's placement of shadows will eliminate some of your guesswork. But (and this is a big "but") sometimes there are no clues as to the direction of the light. In such cases, our hero — the inker — must step in to save the day!

The easiest way to indicate the light source is simply to use a heavy line weight on the dark side of an object and a thinner line weight on its light side. This works with almost everything: a leg, arm, or body; a lamppost or telephone pole; a tree, shrubbery, or even the castle Anthrax. The exceptions are objects that are not solid, such as clouds, fire, or smoke.

This pencil drawing of a post sticking in the ground (fig. 14) is flat and indistinct. By adding a heavy line weight and a shadow, not only have we planted the post firmly into the ground, we've also given it mass and form. The same technique can be used with figures. Notice how the little man in fig. 14 looks more three-dimensional when he's inked with varying line weights and a shadow.

Now look at the arm in fig. 15. Even though this arm is inked, it still looks flat and weak. In figs. 16-18, the arrows show which direction light is coming from. Adding heavy line weights to the dark side of each arm suggests weight and volume.

Varying your line weights works like a charm when there's only one light source in a panel. But when the penciler has added a secondary light source to a figure, your line-weight decisions become more complicated. I almost always base my line weights on the primary light source, then use the secondary light source to help determine how to handle highlights and other such details.

For the most part, light sources should stay consistent from panel to panel within each scene. Shadows on figures and objects shouldn't move around randomly. Also watch out for lighting schemes that may conflict with common sense and/or information in the story — for example, shadows pointing west when characters are riding toward an off-panel sunset. Keep in mind, though, that comic book art often uses "inconsistent" lighting for dramatic effect, and you don't want to undercut the drama just for the sake of establishing "realistic" light sources. If you do find lighting inconsistencies, always consult with your editor or penciler before making significant changes to the pencil art.

INKING FACES

The importance of getting the faces right when inking a comic book cannot be overemphasized. Facial expressions communicate most of the emotional drama in a story. Besides, comic book readers may miss some of the art details on a page, but they always look at faces!

One of the things I enjoy most about being an inker is working with excellent pencil artists like Steve Rude. Look at the penciled heads (fig. B) that Steve has provided. They're very well drawn, but with the techniques we learned in Chapter II, we can add mass, form, and volume.

In figs. 18-20, we decide that the light is coming from above, which is pretty standard daytime lighting in comics. We then add heavier line weights accordingly: the underside of the top eyelid, under the nose, under the top lip, under the bottom lip, and under the jaw line. These are the natural places where shadows fall on a face lit from above. We can't add shading in these places without changing the pencil drawing, but we can suggest shadows by using heavy line weights.

In the three-quarter angle (fig. 19), we must modify our approach since some of the face's profile is exposed: the forehead, eye socket, cheekbone, and jaw line. Notice how different line weights in these areas help define the face's shape and lighting in the following manner.

- Forehead: facing light source (thin line).
- Eye socket: in shadow (heavy line).
- Cheekbone: top facing light (thin line); bottom in shadow (heavy line).
- Jaw line: in deep shadow (extra-heavy line).

With a full profile (fig. 20), these line weights are even more important. Again, note where they are and how their thicknesses are **consistent**. You don't want the line under the lip to be heavier than that under the nose, for example, but you do want the line under the jaw to be the heaviest weight. See how a detail like the ear looks more three-dimensional in the inked version, thanks to the addition of appropriate line weights.

When inking a female face (figs. 21-23), the same rules apply — but even more so, because idealized female features are simpler than male faces. In fact, you can make faces more feminine by adding extra thickness to the upper eyelid and below the bottom lip to give the appearance of eye makeup and fuller lips. In the three-quarter angle (fig. 22), note how the cheekbone and jaw lines are rounder and less angular than those on the male face. This suggests a soft, fleshy texture. The same rules apply in the full profile (fig. 23), but the angles are rounder.

Check out figs. 24-26 to see how we can shift the light source (indicated by arrows) simply by shifting the heavy line weights to the dark side of each head. Fig. 24 uses a sidelight, whereas figs. 25-26 are lit from below.

Underlighting can help create a spooky atmosphere, a shocked expression, and more. For an underlit look, reverse the line weights used in the top-lit face: Everything that was thin is now thick, and everything that was thick becomes thin. Don't forget details such as a thick line on the bottom eyelid and less black in the nostrils.

Compare the profile shot in fig. 26 with fig. 20. Notice how different the same drawing can look when line weights are reversed. We haven't changed the pencils to establish various light sources — we just suggest them with the inker's friend, **line weight!**

INKING HAIR

While we're looking at figs. 18-23, let's talk about hair. It happens to be one of the more difficult things to translate into black ink because its texture is wispy and solid at the same time.

Blond hair is comparatively simple. Your lines should be cursive and elegant, with weights determined by the primary light source.

Dark hair is trickier. Look at the female heads (figs. 21-23) — I inked their hair with three different techniques. For fig. 21 I used a dry brush (see Chapter IX), which gives a very soft, almost frizzy look. In fig. 22 I employed the bolder approach of massing together the blacks, producing a wetter or slicker look. And finally, in fig. 23 I used feathering for a more heavily styled, "salon" look.

With dark hair, it's especially important to follow the penciler's white highlight patterns, or negative space. These patterns actually define the hair's shape, so pay as much attention to them as to the black patterns.

CHAPTER IV CONTOUR LINES

The contour line plays many roles in comic book art, including:

- “holding” the color inside figures and objects
- delineating form
- indicating texture
- acting as a design element
- creating the illusion of depth within panels.

That last function is another crucial point that tends to get overlooked. You can add depth to a panel simply by outlining foreground figures with heavy contour lines, inking the middle ground with medium-weight lines, and using fine lines for backgrounds. This helps give the impression that objects in the panel are on separate planes, some closer to the reader and some farther away.

There are different styles of contour lines, each of which can have a very different effect on the same pencil art. When you work with a penciler for the first time, it’s important to determine which style works best for that penciler. I highly recommend that you communicate with your penciler about what kind of approach you should take. Remember, the penciler and inker are a team.

To examine a few contour styles, let’s start with Steve Rude’s penciled male figure (fig. D). It’s intentionally vague, offering few clues about light source or contour style. I know from working with Steve that he prefers a cursive line, so all I need do is decide where to beef up the line weights to indicate light direction. The results are shown in fig. 27 – the inked figure has mass and texture, rendered in classic cursive style.

If you want a harder, leaner look, try a more angular or terse approach (fig. 28). Klaus Janson uses this method very well. Notice how the line weights are heaviest at the bottom part of each brush stroke, as opposed to the cursive line, in which the middle portion of the stroke is heaviest.

Steve’s illustration of a woman (fig. E) has also been left vague. I usually ink female figures with a cursive line (fig. 29); it adds soft texture and feminine elegance to their form.

When inking contours, keep working on making your line weights consistent. Your thinner lines (facing the light source) should all be more or less the same width, as should your heavier lines (away from light source). As an example, in fig. 29 you wouldn’t want the line under her right arm to be noticeably thicker than the one under her left arm.

In contrast, fig. 30 is inked with a dead-weight contour line. This style is used very effectively by Dave Stevens and Adam Hughes. It creates a stylized design, juxtaposing bold contour lines with thinner, interior detail lines.

To ink a small figure (fig. 31), you must identify details that won’t reproduce, then eliminate them or translate them into basic shapes. Use a very thin line for the light-source side, and of course a thicker one on the dark side.

CHAPTER V

SPOTTING BLACKS

The penciler usually indicates where to place solid blacks, either with small “x” marks or by shading the areas in pencil. However, sometimes they may indicate too much black or not enough, making the panel look flat and/or unbalanced. The best way to solve the depth problem is to layer three values — black, gray, and white — into the foreground, middle ground, and background.

Fig. 32 is a panel of outline silhouettes. Adding depth (fig. 33) is simply a matter of putting black in the first plane (foreground), gray in the second plane (middle ground), and white in the third (background). See figs. 34-38 for more alternatives; notice how using different value arrangements affects the panel’s design by changing the visual “weight” of each compositional element.

Make sure you don’t use the same values for objects that are next to each other but on different planes (fig. 39). This effectively places both figures on the same plane, creating the illusion that the small figure is standing on the large figure’s shoulder.

I realize that these guidelines are somewhat oversimplified, and you want to know how to apply them to a fully penciled comics panel. What if you were inking a penciled panel like the one in fig. 40? This panel is over-rendered; if you squint your eyes, it looks gray and flat. To give it depth, we need to add a black value and a white value. I used the example in fig. 37 as a guide. The inked panel (fig. 41) now has blacks in the foreground, whites in the middle ground, and grays in the background. It reads more clearly than the penciled version, with relatively minor changes to the art. (Note: Adding blacks to faces can be tricky, since a misplaced shadow may alter the original construction. Check out the facial-shadow guide in Chapter X.)

Omitting line detail when you’re inking is sometimes an improvement on the pencil art — but sometimes it can interfere with a penciler’s stylistic choices. As always, talk to your editor or penciler before making any drastic changes.

CHAPTER VI FEATHERING

Feathering has three main functions in comic book inking:

- softening a hard, black edge
- graduating values from light to dark
- giving form and volume to objects and figures.

When inking over penciled feather lines, the ink artist is actually interpreting the pencil artist's intent. A pencil is not as good at making clear, thick-and-thin strokes as a brush or crow-quill pen is. The inker must understand what effect the penciler is trying to achieve, rather than just inking over the lines without knowing why they are there.

Fig. 42 shows an arm, penciled with feathering coming out of the blacks. If we ink it exactly like the pencils, the result is fig. 43. We've accomplished only one out of three purposes: softening a black edge.

In fig. 44, the inked feathering serves all three functions. For a closer peek at how the lines graduate from light to dark, look at the magnified circles. In fig. 43A, we see that the thick part of the feather line doesn't blend smoothly into the black edge, but instead meets it at right angles. (Always keep in mind that organic shapes do **not** contain right angles!) Compare it to fig. 44A, in which the negative space looks like little white needles poking into the black. This achieves function number two by giving the appearance of a more natural, gradual light-to-dark fade. Also compare fig. 43B with fig. 44B.

The third function, lending volume and form, is accomplished by curving feather lines around the muscle. Look at the forearm in fig. 44 and see how much more three-dimensional it looks than the version in fig. 43. Rudy Nebres (see p. XX) is the man to study for this technique.

Fig. 45 includes examples of horizontal feathering. Inking the pencils literally (fig. 46) is the textbook way of how **not** to do it — the lines look more like ornamental stripes than like shading. Unfortunately, this method is often used in comics today.

By following all three feathering guidelines, we get improved results (fig. 47). Again, compare the magnified circles (figs. 46A-47A). Fig. 47A shows that the feathering functions better because the thick lines blend into the black, getting thinner as they graduate out from the dark areas. Scott Williams is tops at this type of inking.

CHAPTER VII CROSS-HATCHING

Cross-hatching is a time-honored technique of graduating light to dark by simply drawing layers of parallel, intersecting lines. It's surprising how many ink artists don't handle cross-hatching well, given its long history.

On the facing page are examples of standard cross-hatch patterns. The pattern in fig. 48 is the most common form of hatching in comics. In the top row of smaller panels next to it, we see each layer of lines separately (note their direction and length). The second row of panels shows the step-by-step effect of combining these layers. Notice how each layer further softens the black edge until the lines fade into it almost seamlessly.

The next example (fig. 49) is more complicated. This pattern produces a more random effect and softer edges. The two rows of smaller panels again demonstrate how to achieve this look with overlapping layers of linework. Our goal is still the seamless light-to-dark fade. (See Chapter XI for a look at how this technique can be used in illustration.)

The same goes for fig. 50. This pattern uses rows of shorter or broken lines that get heavier as they merge into the black, making for a particularly organic texture.

Fig. 51 is an example of **bad** cross-hatching. First, the lines are all the same length, so both the outer gray edge and the inner black edge are too hard. Second, the lines intersect at right angles, creating a mathematical pattern that looks monotonous and unnatural.

Fig. 52 shows what happens when the lines in two layers get close to being parallel. This results in a moiré pattern that can be cool if it's the effect you're trying to achieve; however, it can also be rather jarring to the eye, and it doesn't work with every art style.

The example in fig. 53 is a popular hatching technique, but it has the same problems as fig. 51. In fig. 54, we've solved these problems by using feathering methods from the previous chapter.

Now that you know the basics about feathering and cross-hatching, I'll offer one last piece of advice: **don't overuse them**. Excessive cross-hatching is not a sign of artistic skill — in fact, it's often just the opposite, since overly detailed linework distracts the eye from poor construction and composition. It actually takes more skill and talent to render a figure with as few lines as possible. Alex Toth is a master of the "less is more" style.

CHAPTER VIII

ESTABLISHING YOUR INKING STYLE

Every inker has their own style. Yours will be determined by your contour and line-weight choices, combined with your texture and feathering techniques. Consistent use of one approach will establish a recognizable style, which generally prompts pencilers and editors to think of you when certain pencil styles need inking. Perhaps more importantly, you must be versatile enough to shift inking styles to complement a variety of pencil art. Adding versatility to your skills will put you in wider demand.

The examples in this chapter are just a few of the stylistic choices available to you. Let's start with Steve's penciled illustration of an action guy (fig. 55), which includes spot blacks and some vaguely feathered edges. If we're not able to check with the penciler, the inking style is up to us.

My first choice of styles (fig. 56) would be the approach I use when inking *Nexus*. I rely on the blacks within the figure, plus any background blacks that intersect with it, to define its shape. After filling in blacks, I complete the figure with cursive contour lines. I use a dry-brush technique (see Chapter IX) to soften the black edges. This approach is simple and graphic, and I know that it's the one Steve prefers.

The next example (fig. 57) is sort of a Neal Adams approach for which Tom Palmer set a standard when he inked Neal in the early '70s. The bold, terse contours are set off by delicate feather lines. In this style, the feathering lines are inked out from the black, resulting in a looser look.

Contrasting with the last approach, fig. 58 employs a rendering technique that Rudy Nebres has mastered. The contour lines are not as important here because the form is defined by feathering. Notice how the tight, controlled feather lines curve around muscle shapes, lending mass and roundness to the figure.

Fig. 59 showcases a style mentioned in Chapter IV, which is used so well by Dave Stevens and Adam Hughes. The feathering lines are short, controlled, and regular. A dead-weight contour line is the defining design element.

The last example (fig. 60) is frequently called the "Image look." Scott Williams popularized this inking style in the late 1980s, but most of his imitators don't have the skill to pull it off. Note that the contour style is crisp and angular, and the secondary light source is indicated by horizontal feathering.

These inking-style examples are also simplified, of course. Use them as starting points, and don't be afraid to invent your own combination of techniques from different sources — that's what developing your style is all about!

CHAPTER IX FACIAL-SHADOW GUIDE

Four or five years ago, I started keeping a file of light and shadow patterns on the male face. I photocopied a simple drawing of a male head 12 times on one sheet of paper, then made several copies of this sheet. Whenever I come across an interesting shadow pattern on a face, from a photo or comic book, I draw the pattern on my sheet of heads. This guide helps me understand the planes of the face. It's also helpful to have several choices at my fingertips when I need reference for adding blacks to a head.

The artists whose works I based these drawings on include Michael Golden, Dave Gibbons, Kevin Nowlan, Wally Wood, and Bernie Wrightson.

The light sources on these heads fall into three categories: underlight, backlight, and top-light. The first drawing is the original, unshadowed head that I started with. Notice how shadows can create different emotions and moods on the same face – underlighting, for example, usually makes a face look more menacing or mysterious.

CHAPTER X

INKING BACKGROUNDS

One task you'll eventually face as an inker is trying to make dull or blank backgrounds more interesting. Some pencilers don't spend much time on backgrounds, so their panels lack depth and detail. These are usually the same pencilers who only want to draw splash pages where Captain Stupendous is oozing with dynamic pyrotechnics. But good illustrators — inkers as well as pencilers — have to be able to draw trucks, dogs, coffee cups, and other real-world items just as convincingly as they draw imaginary environments. Backgrounds help define a story's mood and sense of place.

In fig. 61, we see what an uninspired penciler (we'll call him Biff) may give you. This is a barely adequate drawing of a building's corner window. Your first step is to determine the time of day and the light source, since Biff apparently hasn't done so. The script tells us that it's daytime, so we establish that the light is from above and to the right.

Now look at fig. 62. I've dropped in shadows under the ledges by using heavy line weights, as determined by our light source. Notice how three-dimensional the surface of the building now appears. The heavier contour line on its left edge also serves to create depth between the foreground and background buildings. To make the buildings less featureless, I added extra lines and texture marks around the window frame, inside the moldings of each glass pane, between the bricks, and elsewhere.

In fig. 63, the building looks old and weathered. This effect is best achieved by inking as much of the architecture as you can without using a ruler. Your lines will be less crisp and straight, making the building seem older. Breaking up your lines and putting dents in the corner edges of raised surfaces also helps create a worn look. We can give our building more personality by adding details such as bricks and some woodgrain on the window frame. Lastly, we "turn off" the lights by adding black inside the window.

What if it's nighttime, yet good old Biff gives us the same lighting that he uses for day scenes? In fig. 64, we make our building much more interesting by lighting it from the streetlights below. To do this, simply place your heavier line weights on the upper edges of raised surfaces. Add a little shading in the form of texture marks to the upper part of the building, then darken the night sky (in this case, I've used Zip-a-Tone.) Include a few stars — but not too many, since this is an urban scene! Finish by turning on the light inside the window to show that someone's home.

By adding varied line weights and a little detail to the backgrounds, we have helped out Biff considerably and improved the overall look of the art.

Let's look at another example of how we can add depth with contour line weight. In fig. 65, Biff has given us a better background drawing by adding more detail and some blacks in the foreground. The panel still looks flat, though, so in fig. 66 we create space between the objects in the room by making their contours heavier. Notice the line weight inside the door frame, the thicker lines around the middle-ground control panel, and the heaviest line weight around the foreground control panel and chair.

Biff has gone all-out with this next panel (fig. 67). Still, it could use some depth and texture. In fig. 68, we've created depth by emphasizing the separate planes of background, middle ground, and foreground. Objects now have mass because we've added heavier line weights on their dark sides. (Not the evil side, but the side with less light!) Compare the different contour line weights used in the inked panel; besides adding depth, they help the reader distinguish between individual objects.

We've also given this panel some texture in the inking stage. The crate in the foreground now looks like wood, for example, and the brick wall looks rougher. Bricks should not be inked with a ruler — you want them to look a bit uneven, since that's how real bricks look. Try inking just the shadow sides of the bricks, and notice how this raises each brick from the surface. The glass has been made more transparent-looking by breaking up the blacks and thinning the lines behind it. The

floor is now shiny, because we've added reflection lines under the objects touching it. For excellent, detailed background inking, you can't beat Terry Austin's work.

Following are more tips on adding detail to your backgrounds.

NIGHT BUILDINGS

In the real world, lights rarely run in vertical patterns on office buildings at night (fig. 69). Think about it: Office space is usually rented along a horizontal axis, with one or more floors grouped together. The lights on an office building should run mainly in a horizontal direction (fig. 70). Besides, if you draw them running vertically, your buildings will look like crossword puzzles! Also remember that at night, the primary light source is coming from below (fig. 71), so rooftops should be black. Leaving a little white space between buildings on different planes helps give the panel depth and perspective.

TREES AND BUSHES

Guess what? The same principles of line weights and blacks apply to organic objects as well as figures and buildings. Think of trees and bushes as spherical objects, then place blacks on them accordingly (figs. 72-73). Remember to layer your values and vary your contour lines to create depth between foreground, middle ground, and background. Keep leaf patterns random, with detail diminishing as the image fades into the distance.

OUTER SPACE

When a penciler wants an outer-space background, they usually just write, "black with stars" or "BWS." It is the inker's job to create the space scene. All some inkers will do is put white dots on a black background, as shown in fig. 74. Haven't they ever looked up into a night sky? Stars don't look like that!

When inking outer space, keep these characteristics in mind:

- stars are round
- stars come in various sizes
- stars are grouped together in more or less random patterns
- some parts of space contain no stars at all.

The example in fig. 75 follows these guidelines. I use two different methods of placing stars on a black background. One way is to water down some white ink, dip a toothbrush into the mixture, and spray on stars by flicking the bristles with your thumb. The disadvantages of this technique are that you have to mask off everything you don't want showered with stars, and it's easy to get carried away and put down too many. The method I prefer is to hand-place each star with a brush loaded up with white ink. Just be careful not to be too mathematical in your patterns — try to keep them random. Check an astronomy book to get some idea of how real stars arrange themselves.

Fig. 76 is a night sky in the city. Put fewer stars in urban skies, along with a few twinkles. A city-lights effect is achieved with Zip-a-Tone that has a quick fade pattern. (See the next section for more about Zip-a-Tone.)

Fig. 77 shows an example of deep space. This gives you the opportunity to play God and create planets, novas, star clusters, black holes, and energy fields. Way cool!

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Here are some tricks that'll help create different textures in your backgrounds.

- **Dry brush** (fig. 78): Wipe most of the ink out of your brush until it won't ink a line without breaking up. Then ink out from the black, using a quick feathering motion. When the brush runs dry, just repeat the process.
- **Black crayon or grease pencil** (fig. 79): If you were ever a kid, you know how to use these. Just make sure you apply them **after** you've erased the page — erasers will smear 'em all over the place.
- **Sponge** (fig. 80): Take a small piece of an old sponge and dip it into ink. Soak most of the ink out of the sponge with a paper towel until there's only a little left. Blot the paper with the sponge, rotating it so you don't get a repeating pattern.
- **Splatter** (fig. 81): This is the old toothbrush trick I mentioned earlier. Dip the bristles in some ink and flick them with your thumb. Always use masking film to cover up everything on the page that you don't want sprayed with ink!
- **White feather lines** (fig. 82): You can use white ink to correct mistakes as well as to add negative-space details. Thin your white ink with water (if necessary) and lay it down with a clean brush or pen. A white-on-black cross-hatch pattern like the one seen here creates a unique fade effect.
- **Zip-a-Tone** (fig. 83): Various patterns and textures come printed on transparent sheets with adhesive backs. First, figure out approximately where you're going to place a particular Zip pattern. If need be, trim the sheet down to fit the panel or page you're working on. After exposing the adhesive, carefully lay the sticky side down on the art and use an x-acto knife to cut away the areas you don't want. (See the Zip-a-Tone illustration in Chapter XI.)

CHAPTER XI

ADVANCED ILLUSTRATION TECHNIQUES

This chapter includes a few of my attempts at experimenting with different illustration methods. I hope you all expose yourselves to the wide variety of inking techniques that have been developed over the years. Studying some of the great pen-and-ink illustrators will broaden your capabilities as a comic book inker. Some of my favorites are:

- Franklin Booth
- Walter Appleton Clark
- Joseph Clement Coll
- Charles Dana Gibson
- Frank Godwin
- Howard Pyle

To me, Franklin Booth has always been the greatest of illustration greats. No one can match his line control and consistency. If you have trouble finding his work, buy a copy of Bernie Wrightson's *Frankenstein* book, which features an excellent homage to Booth.

I drew fig. 84 in this style. Since I have better control with a brush than a crow-quill pen, I only used my Winsor & Newton series 7, number 2 on this piece.

This (fig. 85) is my ultimate Zip-a-Tone illustration. "Ultimate," because I never again want to spend two 10-hour days Zipping one piece of artwork! I used a very labor-intensive process whereby I laid down layers of Zip, matching the dot patterns to create a fade effect. This piece was done for our *Studiosaurus Pinup Portfolio*.

Fig. 86 is my Burne Hogarth homage. I used a cross-hatching technique described earlier (see Chapter VII, fig. 49). The original image is 11 x 15 inches. I used my trusty number-2 brush for the cross-hatching and a sponge for the hair. My original goal was to produce two of these pieces — one male and one female — but my hand hurt so badly after finishing this one that I gave up on that scheme.

CHAPTER XIII

PRACTICAL TIPS

SHOWING SAMPLES

If you're trying to break into comics as an inker, I recommend that you start by showing your samples to professional comic book artists as often as possible. You can find pros at comics conventions, book signings, or local studios. Most pro artists don't mind critiquing portfolios, because they were in your shoes when they were just starting out.

Sometimes artists use portfolio review as a means of finding assistants. At minimum, assisting a professional inker usually involves filling in blacks, inking backgrounds, and erasing pages. It's a great way to enter the field and learn about the craft from the ground up.

Why not start by showing your samples to editors? For one thing, artists can be more specific about how to improve your work. In addition, if you wait until professional artists tell you that your work is ready to be seen by editors, you'll have a better chance of being hired. (To find an editor at a comics convention, hang out near the freelancers — they're always trying to get editors to buy their meals. When it's time to eat, just follow the crowd. Either that, or stop by the publishers' booths and ask to talk to editors.)

When assembling your portfolio, always start with your best, most recent pages. Update your portfolio as you do new work, removing the older material. Do **not** include inking samples over your buddy's amateurish pencil art. It's hard for other people to discern your relative skill level when you're working over nonprofessional pencils. (Your buddy will have to break in on his or her own.)

The best approach is to ink on heavy tracing paper over photocopies of professionally penciled comic book pages. You can obtain such copies by requesting them, usually in writing, from submissions editors at comic book publishing companies. You may have to wait a while, but be patient; publishers, especially the larger ones, receive dozens of submissions and requests each week. Local artists are another potential source of photocopies.

Your portfolio should include original, inked pages (or full-size copies), along with facing copies of the corresponding pencils. You absolutely must show actual storytelling pages, not just pinups or splash pages. Inking a page of sequential panels is different from inking a single illustration.

Before submitting samples to a comic book publisher, contact the submissions editor to get their guidelines — then follow the guidelines. One universal rule is that you should **never** send original art in your sample packages. Send 8 1/2" x 11" copies of each inked page followed by the penciled version. Enclose a cover letter with your name, address, and phone number. It can also be a good idea to stamp your contact info on the backs of your sample pages, in case the letter gets separated from them. Once again, be patient — but don't be afraid to be persistent, too, if you initially get no response.

ESSENTIAL READING

Everyone who works in comics, or aspires to, should read *Comics and Sequential Art* by Will Eisner and *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. 'Nuff said!

REPRODUCTION

When you're working on a comic book page with a 10" x 15" image area, it's tough to visualize how it will look when reduced down to about 6" x 9" inches (60% of original size) and saturated with color. However, you do need to be aware of how your inking techniques will reproduce at a smaller size, if for no other reason than to save yourself from slaving over line details that won't be seen in the printed comic.

Seeing your work in print is the only way to learn about the many variables — reduction, coloring, paper stock, etc.— that affect how your inking reproduces. The next best method is to compare your original pages to reduced photocopies. Most copiers have a preset 64% reduction feature, which is close enough for our purposes. This will help you see the drastic effect that reduction has on your ink lines.

Watch out for details that close up or bleed together when reduced, as well as any lines that break up or vanish altogether. An ink line thinner than about 0.3 millimeters usually won't reproduce well, and the minimum space between lines should be about 0.7 mm. The line width of technical pens is measured in millimeters, so you can use them for reference. (A number-0 Staedtler tech pen, for example, has a 0.35 mm tip.)

CHECKING PROPORTIONS

As you ink faces and figures, sometimes you'll notice that the proportions or construction are out of alignment. It's not always easy to spot precisely what's causing the problem. A good way to find out is to look at the image in reverse: hold your page up to a mirror, or turn it over and hold it up to a light. This makes it much easier to pinpoint what's wrong.

WATCH YOUR POSTURE

Hunching over a drawing table for eight to 10 hours a day may lead to chronic back and neck pain that can prematurely end your career. I used to get knots in my neck that were so bad, they prevented me from working for days at a time. I solved this problem by raising the surface angle of my drawing table to about 60 degrees. That way I could sit upright and still work close to the page. It took some time to get used to this, but it saved my back and my comics career.

ERASING PAGES

Another way to prevent work-related pain is not letting your inked, unerased pages stack up. Erase your pages one at a time as you finish them. This will save you some major armache.

When I'm inking a page, I mark an "x" in ink on each area of solid black. I then fill in blacks **after** I erase the page. This helps keep the blacks nice and dark.

WORKING WITH EDITORS

Just like artists, editors have different working styles. Editors and assistant editors at different companies also have different job responsibilities. Identifying and adapting to these differences will make your relationship with them much smoother. There are good editors and bad editors, and you should learn how to work with both. This topic deserves its own book, but I'll limit myself to a few basic suggestions.

When an editor offers you an inking job, there are a few things you should think about before saying yes, even if every fiber of your being cries out to accept immediately! First, find out the deadline and page count. (Wait until after you've talked scheduling to ask about page rates.) Then look at your calendar to see if you can finish the job within the allotted time. Be realistic! Don't forget to allow for some time off — man does not live by inking alone. Remember that you'll occasionally run into unexpected delays. And any projects you're already working on, of course, must be taken into consideration as well. It's very easy to get yourself overcommitted by accepting too much work. When a job is due, the last thing your editor wants to hear from you is that you're late because you're working on something else for another company. You will be abducted by aliens before this editor gives you another assignment.

If you don't have time in your schedule to take on a new job, it's okay to turn it down. Tell the editor why you're saying no, and you'll earn points for honesty and professionalism. This editor will most likely keep you in mind for future gigs.

When I'm offered a job that I do have time to ink, if I've never seen the penciler's work, I ask to look at samples before I make my decision. Many times in the past, I have regretted not doing this. Sometimes the pencils just aren't very good, which means a lot of correcting on my part; other times, I may not like the penciler's style. It's far easier to motivate myself and give 100% in the inks if I respect the pencil art.

Once you've started a job, do **not** ignore deadlines, even if you think meeting the deadline will force you to compromise the quality of your work. The most important thing to an editor is getting the work in on time — you won't keep getting assignments if you develop a reputation for being late. Do the absolute best work you can under the time restraints.

Believe it or not, neatness counts. Even when you're doing a rush job, take time to erase the pencil marks from your inked pages and to white out any stray ink lines or splotches. Remember that in some cases you may be required to ink panel borders, sound effects, and/or signage.

If for some reason you won't make the deadline, call your editor as soon as possible. They may be able to buy you a little more time, or as a last resort, find someone to help you. More importantly, they need to know when your work is coming in so they can adjust the rest of their production schedule! Hiding from your editor by not returning their phone calls only exacerbates the problem and ensures your entry on their blacklist.

You may be strongly tempted to fabricate some whopping lie to excuse your tardiness. **Resist this temptation!** No matter how clever and creative you think you are, editors have heard it all.

If you find yourself working with an uncommunicative or irresponsible editor, on the other hand, don't respond in kind. Maintain a professional demeanor, and send any important requests or information in writing.

Communicating with your editor from the start will make both your job and theirs much easier. Ideally, an editor should be more than just someone who sends you work and nags you to get it done — a good editor is your liaison with the publisher, and can either solve problems for you or point you in the right direction to solve them for yourself.

IS THIS THE FUTURE?

Aspiring inkers and working professionals alike always need to keep one eye on new technology, lest it catch them unawares. Computer inking programs are already in use today. Though they're not yet cost- or time-effective, I'm sure they will be in the near future. If digital inking can save publishers money, you can bet that it'll affect the availability of traditional inking jobs.

As with computer coloring, the quality of the finished work will still depend on the operator's skill. Those who don't possess the skill to ink by hand will be able to ink electronically, but this will detract from the overall quality of comics art just as unskilled use of digital coloring has. The best results will come from artists who are skilled in both physical inking and computer use.

CHAPTER XII SECRETS OF THE STARS

Okay, now the fun really starts! This is where we compare inking styles from the best in the industry and read about some of the methods that helped them achieve their status.

Steve Rude has provided different penciled pages that fall into three categories:

- The Nexus page (fig. 87) is in Steve's regular, tight penciling style.
- The Moth page (fig. 88) is drawn in a Jack Kirby style.
- The Sundra and Jil page (fig. 89) is an unfinished layout.

This is the part of the book that I've been looking forward to the most. Even though I contributed to this section (hey, I'm writing the book!), I will be studying these inked pages for years to come.

Before you read this chapter, you should know a little about the processes behind it. Normally, comic book artists ink directly on the original penciled page. But for this book, we needed to reproduce Steve's original pencils so you could compare them to the inked versions. Consequently, none of the artists in this book inked their pieces on the original penciled page, which made their task more difficult.

Each inker was provided with a photocopy of their page. We inked on tracing paper over the copy, or put the copy under regular comics art board and inked on a light box, or inked on a nonphoto-blue copy of the copy.

To keep myself from being influenced by what everyone else was doing, I inked my pages before the others started to come in. I have to admit that I was tempted to change a few details on my pages when I saw what some of the other artists had done. But none of the other contributors had this advantage, so I resisted the temptation. My Sunday-school teacher would be proud!

AFTERWORD
IN CONCLUSION . . .

I can't end this book without mentioning some artists whose inking abilities I admire. The list below includes artists from both past and present. If it had been possible, I would have included their work in this book.

Dan Adkins	Klaus Janson
Alfredo Alcalá	Walt Kelly
Murphy Anderson	Steve Leialoha
Hilary Barta	Rick Magyar
John Beatty	Jerome Moore
Brett Breeding	Paul Neary
Reed Crandall	Art Nichols
Jack Davis	Bruce Patterson
Hal Foster	Mike Royer
Alex Garner	John Severin
Michael Golden	Joe Sinnott
Al Gordon	Bob Smith
Floyd Gottfredson	Bob Wiacek
Dennis Janke	Al Williamson

The one man who I think did the best comic book inking ever was **Frank Frazetta**. Even after all these years, no one has come close to touching his abilities.

I hope this book has been helpful to you and made inking less of a mystery. It would be nice if I never again had to hear those dreaded words: "Don't you just trace over the pencil lines?"