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Caricature and Comics

John Holbo

ABSTRACT

Caricature and comics are elastic categories. This essay treats caricature not as a type or aspect of comics but as a window through which we can view comics in relation to the broader European visual art tradition. Caricature is exaggeration. But all art exaggerates, insofar as it stylizes. Is all art caricature, since all has 'style'? Ernst Gombrich's classic *Art and Illusion* comes close to arguing so. This article conjoins critical reflections on Gombrich's discussion of 'the experiment of caricature' with a survey of art historical paradigm cases. It makes sense for comics to emerge from this mix.

The true interpretation of caricature is the exaggeration of an illusion of the actual; or the sensation of the actual put into action.

- Walt Disney

1. The Experiment of Caricature

Caricature and comics have this in common: they have typically been regarded as minor arts, yet both categories have a tendency to spread. A great many works of visual art satisfy Scott McCloud's definition of 'comics' (see Holbo 2012). And if caricature is, to a first approximation, the art of drawing 'funny' faces and forms? Art history has had its share, from primitive to Picasso. For a *very* broad view, see Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999). For a sharp rebuttal, see Hyman (2010).

Relating such elastic terms is tricky. I propose the following view as suitable for this themed volume. Caricature is not a style, genre or distinguishing mark of comics. But it may be a conceptual window, opening up a view of the place of comics in art history as a whole.

Let me begin by suggesting the best specialist monograph on caricature and comics may be Gombrich (2000/1963), although no one has thought to describe this general art history/aesthetic theory text in such narrow terms before, I'm sure. *Art and Illusion* poses "the riddle of style" (3-30). Gombrich exemplifies it by means of an absurdly wrong solution, courtesy of a *New Yorker* cartoon: ancient Egyptian life drawing class; model standing in hieroglyphic profile; the students sizing up her angularity ... to the life!

But if *that's* obviously not the true explanation for why those old Egyptians drew so funny, what is?

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Gombrich's conclusion is that the "discovery of appearances was due, not so much to a careful observation of nature as to the invention of pictorial effects" (330). What *that* means is best exemplified by what Gombrich terms "the experiment of caricature" (330-358). Caricature exemplifies "the rhythm of invention and simplification," which is as close as we can get to the "sublime wizardry" of style, the ineffable heart of visual art.

Gombrich looks to Rodolphe Töpffer, 'the father of the comic strip'. Both his theory and practice illuminate, "the illusion of life which can do without any illusion of reality" (336). Loop-dot-dot is a face. Life! (Your life drawing instructor may be underwhelmed by your genius, however.) Or take Snoopy. In the 1950's he is discernably dog-like. By the 1960's, he has risen up, been squeezed like a water balloon. No beagle consulted. Rather, the 'rhythm of invention and simplification' in Schulz' wrist has hit upon increasingly satisfactory effects.

Advice from a practicing cartoonist:

Spend 3-4 minutes drawing a car. Then, start over and draw it in 2 minutes. Then 1 minute. 30 seconds. Then 15 seconds. And then 5 seconds ... Repeat this same process for four other subjects: a cat, a castle, a telephone, and a self-portrait. (Brunetti 2011:25)

The wrist is quick, but the process by which the wrist's wisdom is won is slow. *Your* 5-second cat may take years. The best book-length account of how this goes may be Johnston and Thomas (1995). The authors relate how Disney studios revolutionized the fledging art of animation in the 1930's by establishing, almost literally, a laboratory for the experiment of caricature.

What makes a series of circles look *most* like a bouncing ball? It should 'squash and stretch', but not realistically.

If we made an extra drawing or two at that point to get the most out of this action, the ball stayed on the ground too long, creating weird effects of hopping instead of bouncing ... If we misjudged our arrangement of the drawings or the distance between them, we created apparitions reminiscent of an injured rabbit, or an angry grasshopper

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or, most often, a sleepy frog. However, many of the circular forms just seemed to take off as if they had a life of their own.

The beginning artists were an inventive group, and all manner of variations were tried. (51)

And *that's* why those old Egyptians drew funny.

The essence of picturing, for Gombrich, is not resemblance, nor convention. Caricature is the paradigm, the case in which things *always* going on in pictures are most *obviously* going on: namely, experimentally established equivalences of response.

Caricature and Comics would have seemed a very odd title for Gombrich's general art history/theory, of course. The present essay is about to seem odd in the opposite direction: too broad for my narrow title (whereas Gombrich's thesis seems too narrow for his broad one.) I will now offer a series of moments, from the European history of works we regard as 'caricature'. The reader will see comics emerging from the mix, but should be prepared to suffer healthy confusion, as terms shift and caricature spreads.

Is caricature a universal art, born anew each time a child acquires the motor skills to close a crayon loop and land a few dots, like darts, inside the target? Is it a minor art, mostly met with on the covers of political magazines; on the op-ed page; *Spitting Image* puppets; souvenir portraits sold to tourists? Historians often start with Leonardo, so I follow suit, leaving the reader to decide whether she would have preferred to start in a cave, in Lascaux; or on a page of the *New York Review of Books*, with David Levine.

2. Leonardo: Caricature and Portraiture

"As early as 1478 we have seen Leonardo beginning to modify his ideal type in the direction of caricature, even if one cannot say that the boundary dividing portraiture from caricature has actually been passed" (Popham 1946: 66). Why are we more tempted to label Leonardo's heads 'caricatures' than, say, Bosch's hellscapes? Bosch employs the caricaturist's devices—distortion, exaggeration, hybridity—but to uncanny, rather ornamental effect. Uncanniness, Freud says, depends on doubts whether some figure is animate. Caricature, by contrast, is livelier than life. Grotesques strike us as caricatures if they seem like portraits of characters.

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Can we say, simply: caricature is exaggerated portraiture?

But all portraiture ‘exaggerates’, insofar as it strives to catch that most characteristic expression of the sitter? Perhaps a narrower definition would be more stable: abusive portraiture? (“With wretched pencil to debase/ Heaven’s favorite work, the human face” as a poet deplores the 18th Century English craze for the stuff.) This fits what Leonardo is doing in various sketches often given pride of place in histories of caricature. But it won’t do.

3. Arcimboldo: Two Targets

We see Rudolf II in a portrait by Heintz, again in Guiseppe Arcimboldo’s “Vertumnus” (1590). Thanks to the former, the latter may be the earliest caricature for which pictorial means survive to induce that shock of personal recognition—likeness in unlikeness—that is the intuitive hallmark of this art.

[Figures 1 & 2]



But this face mocked-up in fruit and flowers is not mocked. So with our first clear case we fail to hold the line on behalf of abuse. Caricature triggers recognition, hence favors faces—known faces, hence famous ones. It activates responses viewers tend to have towards public figures—i.e. anger/contempt *or* celebration (Heller 1992). Just as you wouldn’t define linear perspective in terms of architecture, just because architecture is a suitable subject for showcasing

perspective effects, so we shouldn't anchor the art of caricature to typical responses to celebrities/public figures.

What is the caricaturist doing *beyond* picking a likely-to-be-recognizable target? "I define caricature as an exaggerated likeness of a person made by emphasizing all of the features that make the person different from everyone else" (Redman 1984: 1) More specifically: "The essence of a caricature is exaggeration—not distortion. Exaggeration is the overemphasis of truth. Distortion is a complete denial of truth." Max Beerbohm: "The most perfect caricature is that which, on a small surface, with the simplest means, most accurately exaggerates, to the highest point, the peculiarities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment in the most beautiful manner" (Beerbohm 1928: 130).

Still, the oxymoron of 'true/accurate exaggeration' could do with unpacking. Saying the essence of caricature is exaggeration is like saying the essence of the high jump is setting the bar high. True, not the *trick*.

Caricature takes simultaneous aim at two targets: likeness and—the other is variable. Make them ugly, sexy, animals; out of fruit; out of as few lines as possible. Redman and Beerbohm conflate this trick to be pulled off with the trick for pulling it off. Exaggeration ought to attenuate recognizability but, done right, increases it.

Gombrich:

Caricature becomes only a special case of what I have attempted to describe as the artist's test of success. All artistic discoveries are discoveries not of likeness but of equivalences which enable us to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality. And this equivalence never rests of the likeness of elements so much as on the identity of responses to certain relationships. (345)

Equivalence of response is not exaggeration, but is often a function of it. Crudely, if a man has a big nose, a bigger one may trigger a stronger recognition response. This is not conceptual analysis but peculiarities of the visual system (Sinha et al. 2006; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999). Betwixt big and bigger lies room for Gombrich's "rhythm of invention and simplification." In here we play
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the caricature game—animal, vegetable, or minimal—engineering equivocal equivalence response.

Gombrich's larger point is that it would also make sense to flip his formula: *all visual art becomes a case of the caricaturist's test of success*. The charm of Arcimboldo's picture is that we recognize Rudolf, yet he is made of plants. But, more generically, the charm is that we recognize Rudolf yet he is made of paints.

4. The Carracci: Drawn To Life

Courtesy of the Carracci cousins (Annibale, Agostino, Ludovico) European art gains a Baroque style, an academic tradition, and 'caricature', from *ritrattini carichi*—'loaded' little portraits. From Annibale, a first philosophy of the form:

Is not the caricaturist's task exactly the same as the classical artist's? Both see the lasting truth beneath the surface of mere outward appearance. Both try to help nature accomplish its plan. The one may strive to visualize the perfect form and to realize it in his work, the other to grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than the reality itself. (quoted in Kris and Gombrich 1940:11-12)

Here again, we are close to *all art is caricature*. What did the Carracci do? They played games.

One game entailed drawing several figures without lifting pen from paper. Another consisted of drawing a few lines to suggest a scene while the participants guessed what was presented. Exaggerating the features of a subject became a game in itself and the first true caricatures originated in the Carracci academy [founded 1582]. (Benati 1999:22)

Unless we say Arcimboldo or Leonardo got there first. But the Carracci do seem first to establish the quick-draw school. It is charming when a dashed-off
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likeness comes off. More importantly, there is steady gain in life-likeness for more polished productions, when eye and wrist adapt to this mode.

In spite of Annibale's meticulous care in drawing realistically described and articulated forms, what sets him apart and places him in the category of great graphic artists is his ability to set down a few strokes to imply an entire scene ... No one before Annibale, and only Rembrandt after him surpassed his genius for subtle suggestion. (21)

The original meaning of 'cartoon' is a preparatory drawing. So Annibale, drawn to life, cartoons before cartooning, to paint to the life. His Baroque style is a compound of realism and caricature. The latter aspect does not detract from the former but enhances it. Life-likeness—courtesy of subtle exaggeration—reads as 'like life', hence as real, hence as realistic.

Thus, caricature has a career choice to make, upon graduating from the Carracci academy: steady job in animation effects, behind the realist scenes; or—somehow—the star of some anti-realist show.

5. Bernini and Ghezzi: Private, Public

Mention should be made of Bernini's famous caricature of Pope Innocent XI as a cricket, propped on pillows; also, his caricature of Cardinal Scipione, whose simple lines may make it the oldest caricature that could be mistaken for a perfectly modern cartoon. But the next big step for caricature art is to break down the wall between courtly wit and popular satire, and credit goes to a lesser artist, Pier Leone Ghezzi (Olszewski 1983). He sells not-too-abusive stuff to tourists (retail sideline for this court painter to the pope, from 1708-1748.) English visitors to the Eternal City carry home graphical ephemera as souvenirs. Soon it is an aristocratic fashion, a public culture, a publishing industry, a national institution. By 1818, it is possible to regard the reign of George III, retrospectively, as 'the age of caricature' (Donald 1998).

6. England and France: Public Faces

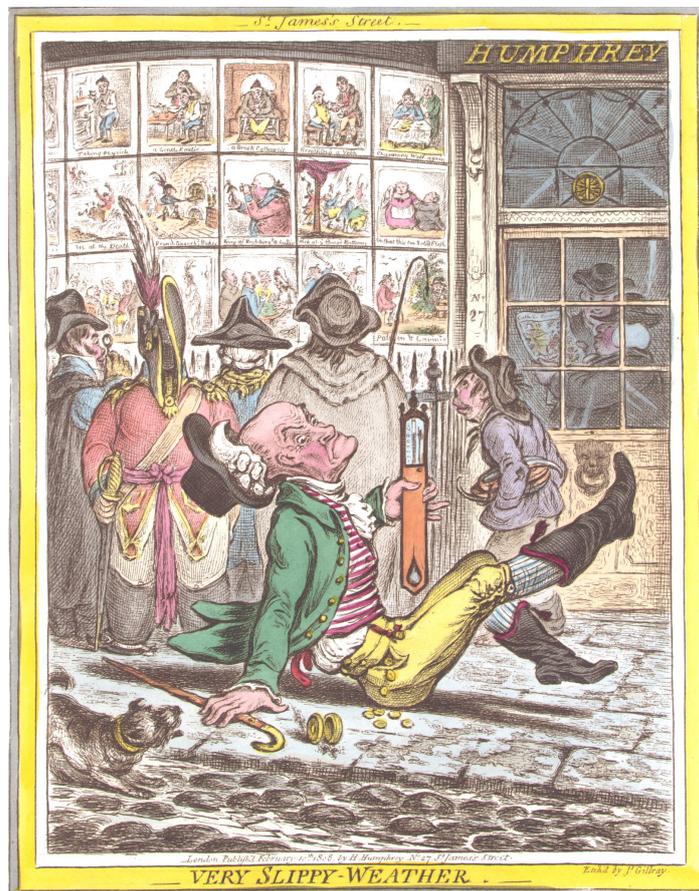
Caricature conquers England, then France.

Twice, it begins with genius: William Hogarth (1697-1764) in England; Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) in France. Twice, it starts politically savagely, then subtilizes, socializes. In England, James Gilray (1757-1815) and Thomas

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Rowlandson (1756-1827) are preeminently willing and able to pile injury on insult. No personage too high to be laid low in front of the caricature shop, whose window is a new style of public theater.

[Figure 3]



But cancellation of caricature's most popular character, Boney, at Waterloo, coincides with contraction in the market, from which English comic art recovers by assuming new 'cartoon' forms.

In 1841, Mr. Punch is born. He mellows with age, and the Age. From an 1895 history:

Men and artists alter, and become moulded and modified by their environments, and it may safely be said that there is to-day no effort on *Punch's* part to be 'smart,' anti-popular, anti-bourgeois, or anti-anything, save anti-virulent and anti-vulgar. (Spielmann 1895:101)

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With the exception of George Cruikshank, whose career bridges the two eras, the great 'cartoonists' of the second period are *Punch* artists: John Leech and John Tenniel are first on the list.

The first era of English caricature lasts a century; the first French era is a five-year flourish (see Wechsler 1982). Charles Philipon founds *La Caricature* (1830) and *Le Charivari* (1832) and, most famously, transmogrifies Louis-Philippe into a pear. After 1835 such stuff is illegal, but the form's graphic energy finds alternative outlets. The great names, after Daumier, are Gavarni, Grandville, Doré—down to Baudelaire's 'painter of modern life', Constantin Guys.

Baudelaire's thoughts on caricature, culture, the comic and modern life attest to the implications in the French case: nothing less than modern art (see Hannoosh 1992). John Ruskin on caricature is less well known, equally prophetic. English comic art turns from ugly, urban street scenes to the snug fireside. Ruskin quotes a French author, Ernest Chesneau:

From the honest but fierce laugh of the coarse Saxon, William Hogarth, to the delicious smile of Kate Greenaway, there has past a century and a half. Is it the same people which applauds to-day the sweet genius and tender malices of the one, and which applauded the bitter genius and slaughterous satire of the other? After all, that is possible—the hatred of vice is only another manifestation of the love of innocence. (Ruskin 1884:99)

The arc of Anglo-Saxon caricature is long but it bends toward *cute*.

7. Caricature To Cartoon

Throughout the 19th Century, technological innovations leapfrog expansions of graphic imagination. The balance between quality and cost is struck and re-struck. Lithography is invented in 1798. No comic cut against any grain is more revolutionary than Thomas Bewick's invention of wood engraving. Without the sharp effects of burin on end grain, no illustrated weeklies.

Better pictures are a boon. But mere boosted circulation almost equals *cartoon characters*—a new thing—by force of repetition.

Pitt's beanpole torso, the Prince Regent's paunch, Sir William Curtis's gherkin-pickle nose, Wellington's hooked bridge, and the swelling globes of Lady Hertford's breasts. These features developed a life of their own as they shuttlecocked from one caricature to another, gaining in definition and expressive distortion according to the style and purpose of the individual print. In these respects, caricaturists were trying not to draw *from* or *like* life but to replicate a vocabulary of physical signs that had been established by a process of graphic analysis, selection, reduction, and exchange among artist, subject and audience. (Patten 1983: 336-7)

A physiognomic case, cracked, stays cracked. Anyone can draw a pear, so anyone can draw a king—after Philipon. "Nixon looked like his policies. His nose told you he was going to invade Cambodia" (Navasky 2013:34). But it takes caricaturists to teach a cartoon nose such tricks. But Georgian England runs recognizable characters *across* satiric prints, in rough careers, leaving it to Daumier and 'Phiz' to refine character design (the villain, Robert Macaire, 1842; the hero, Pickwick, 1836); and for Rodolphe Töppfer to take the next step (1831): the comic strip.

We are well launched along that career path initially not taken: caricature, star of an anti-realist stage. The comic strip—comics—is as direct and logical an outgrowth of Carracci training techniques as is academic art. And yet: if the artistic apotheosis of caricature is comics, the latter may efface its own essence as effectively as any fresco hides its gesture-drawn origins. Serial caricature ceases to read *as* caricature. A caricature refers us to its real-world subject. A comics character refers us to other appearances of that character. Since Snoopy in one panel resembles Snoopy in others, he neither looks distorted *nor is*. Cartoon/comics characters are auto-iconic, hence do not seem caricaturish. Thus, although in one sense caricature and comics are always together, in another sense these forms tend to exclude each other.

8. 'Caricature' To 'Cartoon'

In a famous etching, "Characters and Caricatura" (1743), Hogarth, first genius of English caricature, denounces caricature on behalf of character. By 'caricatura' he means *cartooning* ('burlesque' if you pressed him for a synonym): From *The Routledge Companion To Comics* (2016), eds. Bramlett, Cook and Meskin, pp. 367-379.

grimacing faces, broad gestures. By 'character' he means *good* caricature. Hogarth refers readers to Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742):

It is much easier, much less the subject of admiration, to paint a man with a nose, or any other feature, of a preposterous size, or to expose him in some absurd or monstrous attitude, than to express the affections of men on canvas. It hath been thought a vast commendation of a painter to say his figures seem to breathe; but surely it is a much greater and nobler applause, that they appear to think.

Nevertheless, 18th Century 'caricature' comes closest to 'comics', in our sense, insofar as the caricature shop is where you buy your graphical print matter, including Hogarth's.

'Cartoon' arrives exactly 100 years after Hogarth-contra-caricature, in an 1843 series of John Leech *Punch* graphics, the first making fun of a public exhibition of Italian cartoons, i.e. preparatory drawings for frescos:

After this series *Punch* for a long while dropped the word "cartoon," but the public remembered it, and has clung to it ever since ...

But the very first number of *Punch*, as we have seen, rejoiced in a cartoon as we now understand it—that is to say, a large full-page or double-page block of a satirical nature, usually placed in the middle opening of the paper, and for the most part still further dignified by being "unbacked" by other printing. (Spielmann 1895: 187-8)

This shift is a function of *Punch*'s drift into Gladstonian complacency. There was need for some term that would not connote forms of rudeness fallen from Victorian fashion.

As satirical prints give way to comic journalism, comic journals give way to mass circulation daily newspapers by the turn of the 20th Century. Thomas Nast, 'the father of American cartooning', deserves that title for elaborate compositions. From *The Routledge Companion To Comics* (2016), eds. Bramlett, Cook and Meskin, pp. 367-379.

we would call 'caricatures'. We now instinctively restrict 'cartoon' to simplified line styles suitable for daily production schedules and cheap printing: comic-strip styles. Last but not least, 'cartoon' goes to the movies. Graphics executed in any style associated either with comic strips or animation are now 'cartoons' (although Disney persists in calling it 'caricature', behind the scenes.)

9. Caricature To Modern

"After Courbet, after Manet—the caricature! What could be more logical!" (quoted in Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990: 101). A French critic, offended by a gallery exhibiting caricatures-as-art, hoped this would be a devastating *reductio*. Later, Clement Greenberg would substitute 'illogical', trying to damn just the cheap stuff. "Popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics" (Greenberg 1971:9). All this *must* be the opposite of modernism!

These days Manet is not shocking; Greenberg's highbrow fortress has fallen. The case for Picasso, the caricaturist, is already in Hofman (1957). It was made, before Picasso, by historians projecting the pedigree of caricature back to primitive art, and outside the European tradition (Champfleury 1867; Wright 1875; Parton 1877). Admittedly, it is hard to date these shifts in sensibility. A philosopher argues that, "we can for each case [of a work by Goya or Picasso] explain why the painting in question is not a caricature" (Ross 1975: 291). This presupposes *that* they are not. I would be more comfortable presupposing the opposite.

'Caricature' has long been handled unsteadily in connection with modernism, even when it has not been held at arm's length. To illustrate with examples just concerning German Expressionism: in Michel (1919) we find Daumier and Cruikshank, as ancestors, no 'caricature' as a category. Lang (1976) also lacks 'caricature', despite documenting the extensive influence of caricature journals. Figura (2011) has a section on portraiture: "Such highly distilled images are marked by provocatively exaggerated features, gestures, and expressions" (134). Yet 'caricature' occurs only twice. Some of Groz' works are "grotesque, farcical caricatures" (134); Dix' work "border[s] on caricature" (238). There is no address to the obvious question: if Groz and Dix are caricaturists, isn't Expressionism a sub-genre of caricature? Writers From *The Routledge Companion To Comics* (2016), eds. Bramlett, Cook and Meskin, pp. 367-379.

approaching from the portraiture side stumble here as well. "[Otto] Dix's portrait [of Sylvia von Harden] strays into the realm of stereotype, even caricature" (West 2004:147). Why not: Dix *is* a caricaturist?

Lyonel Feininger, Caricature & Fantasy (Sheyer, 1964) is a biography, tracing "the gradual process of transformation from caricature to 'pure fantasy'," in the work of one Expressionist artist. 'Caricature', here again, is as accurate as it is misleading. "I caricature almost all my spare time" (28); soon enough, "I work very much for the caricature papers" (30). But Feininger's favorite 'caricaturists', as of 1890, are the American 'Zim'—Eugene Zimmerman—and Wilhelm Busch: cartoonists, in our sense. (Zim is right on the line. His *This and That About Caricature* (1905) is retitled *Cartoons and Caricature* (1910). Nod to shifting usage?) One can project a graphic line through the work Feininger contributes to German satire publications like *Ulk*, *Lustige Blätter* and *Simplicissimus*, and beyond. I see Zim in the 'prism-ism' of mature Feininger. The artist might not go so far, but nearly: "I am far from underestimating in my development the very important years which I spent as a draftsman for "Funny Papers"—on the contrary! They were the only means to discipline myself!" (68).

Feininger, Funny-Papers & Fantasy would then have been more alliterative, no less accurate. But still misleading. Feininger's paintings are fine art—though often comic. One of Feininger's two 'funny papers' strips, *Wee Willie Winkie's World*, isn't even funny—although it is always comics. The strip's title character simply sees figures and faces in everything: clouds, trees, buildings. There's scarcely a story to support multi-panel, pan-pareidolic cartoon exercises in proving Gombrich right about the ubiquity of the experiment of caricature—except we don't call that sort of thing 'caricature'.

I am afflicting the reader with confusion to exemplify a typical state of the art historical mind. 'Caricature' jostles for space in a cluttered gallery: comics and comic art; cartooning; the grotesque and carnivalesque; monstrosity, mimicry, mockery, masks, make-up, mannerism; personal satire and portraiture. There is great interest in tracing such delicate tangles. But coherent employment of 'caricature' needs cleaner, broader lines. We circle back to Gombrich, who provides them.

10. Caricature Vs. Realism

Caricature, through the ages, shows us how to keep it funny, crude, indignant—many things—but, crucially, *simple*.

[The simple style's] true field is the humorous story, initiated more than a hundred years ago by the Swiss R. Toepffer ... and culminating in the "comic strip" which stands at the cradle of the one peaceful conqueror of the modern world, Mickey Mouse (Gombrich and Kris 1940: 24).

Understanding how the simple style is possible is, Gombrich argues, the key to understanding pictoriality—the riddle of style; all of art history. The most complex, realist productions depend on the fact that you *can* keep it simple—and will. Paradoxically, the Turner and Constable landscapes Gombrich analyzes are, for him, not departures from the simple style but *disguised special cases*. All of *Art and Illusion* grows from this simple thought: in all pictures, what is always going on is, at bottom, what is more *obviously* going on in caricature cases.

Let's push back. It is one thing to point up how absurd it is to suppose the ancient Egyptians all flunked life drawing. It is another to race to the other extreme, inferring all the Old Masters were just ace comic-strippers in disguise. A drop of pure white paint is a 'caricature' of light? Clever thought! But how far will this take us in appreciating systematic mastery of the mysteries of light and shadow, of color and form? The Masters have always known—and declared—the charm of sketches. Does this prove all masterpieces, begun cartoonishly, *are* cartoons? One student of the subject sees the problem:

I am reminded of my teacher in the kindergarten, who, when she taught us how to fold a paper hat, said: 'Half-way to making a boat, you will find you have made a paper hat. Those who are not able to get any further, can put on the hat.' A paper hat is as amusing—or unamusing—as a paper boat; but because the latter was harder to make, it was a point of honour not to stop at the hat stage. The hat was regarded as a dunce's hat. (Hillier 1970:9).

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We don't want 'caricature', qua pictorial crown, as our dunce cap. Disney really did use 'caricature', instinctively, in Gombrich's sense, which says something. But:

There was some confusion among the animators when Walt first asked for more realism and then criticized the result because it was not exaggerated enough. In Walt's mind, there was probably no difference. (Johnston and Thomas, 1995:65)

Is Gombrich, likewise, missing the difference? There may be 'an illusion of life that can do without any illusion of reality.' But there is also: the illusion of reality. Gombrich sees this skeptical challenge and maintains that, indeed, simplicity comes not just at the sketchy start but in the refined end.

Things objectively unlike can strike us as very similar, and things objectively rather similar can strike us as hopelessly unlike. There is no way of finding out except by trial and error, in other words, through painting. I believe that the student of these inventions will generally find a double rhythm which is familiar from the history of technical progress but which has never yet been described in detail in the history of art—I mean the rhythm of lumbering advance and subsequent simplification. (Gombrich 2000: 331)

The interesting issue is whether—to what extent—Gombrich is right.

A survey article on 'caricature and comics' is not the place to say, but it is the place to point out that Gombrich, one of the true giants of 20th Century art history and aesthetic theory, spent much of the 20th Century trying to rotate the history of visual art around caricature-minus-the-jokes, i.e. the set of 'simple styles'; roughly, comics. 'Caricature and comics' does not point us to any particular corner of comics, but it may open up all of art history.

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