

**Portraits as Parts of Comics**  
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## **1. Introduction**

A comic featuring panels upon panels of haunting gouache renderings of an artist's despairing father sounds like a vaguely familiar exercise in comics autobiography. If the same comic also featured the painted likeness of the artist's friends and acquaintances in throes of sorrow and anguish, one would likely assume it to be a comics narrative about an especially tormented personal life. Mark Waid and Alex Ross' *Kingdom Come* (1996), however, is far from a non-fiction comic. It is instead one of the more influential superhero comics of the nineties, weaving an "imaginary" story regarding the potential future of the DC comics universe and its occupants.<sup>1</sup> Over four issues, Ross' distinctive painting style and model-driven process generates a remarkable aesthetic effect with little precedent in superhero comics.<sup>2</sup> Written by Waid and premised upon original concepts from Ross, *Kingdom Come* revolves around Superman yet relies upon a new character, Norman McCay, to serve as the reader's proxy in a crumbling version of the DC universe. Throughout the comic, familiar characters are presented not only in an unfamiliar context, but also in a striking and unfamiliar way. Rather than being presented via familiar line art interpretations, characters appear in the comic through the painted likenesses of actual people—perhaps most notably, Ross' father, Clark, serves as the model for McCay throughout the story.<sup>3</sup>

The use of models and photo references is common in comics practice.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, this usage is second- or third-hand: artists rely upon drawn sourcebooks of poses by anonymous models to inform their own drawings. In more familiar cases, photos of actual cityscapes guide drawings of fictional cities or staged photos taken by the artist are used to double-check aptness of lighting, figure and proportion. In less familiar but notable cases, direct likenesses are realized on the page—in one example, comics writer Louise Simonson's likeness, drawn by Bernie Wrightson, appears on the cover of *House of Secrets* #92 (1971).<sup>5</sup> The interaction between source materials like posed photographs of models and their subsequent realization on the comics page is a rich and largely unexplored topic, but in what follows, my aim is not a full catalogue of this issue. Instead, I take as a starting point that there is a distinctive aesthetic effect present in much of Ross' comics art and in a limited category of other "painted comics" which employ an intensely realistic style.<sup>6</sup> As I'll argue, this effect traces back to an unprecedented deployment of portraiture in comics and the peculiar interaction between the norms that guide our engagement with comics on the one hand and portraits on the other.<sup>7</sup>

In Section Two, I discuss the distinctive aesthetic effect of Ross' comics art and argue against explanations that appeal only to conventions or artistic style. In Section Three, I argue that the pervasive use of portraits throughout *Kingdom Come* and many other of Ross' comics art best explains its distinctive aesthetic effect and the subsequent reception of Ross' work. In Section Four, I turn to a puzzle about portraiture in superhero comics that stems from the question of whether portraits of fictional characters are in fact possible.

## 2. The Puzzle of Realistic Painted Comics

There's *something* remarkable about the comics art of Alex Ross, but it's not quite clear what it is. Reviewing *Kingdom Come* in 1996, comics critic Tom Spurgeon points toward the striking reception of Ross' art as well as the lack of clarity regarding its precise source:

And then there's the painted art, which everyone seems to love without being able to explain why. It could be that to the fan painted art is better than regular art because it approximates real art and therefore justifies his/her fannish preoccupation. It may be that because Ross uses photo models, his characters look different in a way that characters by tenth-generation artist clones can't. But the point is moot: because of *Marvels'* success, painted art — particularly Alex Ross' painted art— is now a value in and of itself.<sup>8</sup>

Spurgeon's assessment is useful for marking salient features about Ross' work (e.g., his use of models) but also making clear that, even after describing Ross' process and materials, we might remain puzzled about why it exerts such a distinctive aesthetic effect—one that Spurgeon notes as being widely valued.

Other critical assessments of Ross' comics art serve to deepen this puzzle. In describing the reception of Ross' *Marvels* (1994) and *Kingdom Come*, comics writer Grant Morrison notes that "Ross's lush watercolors were the nearest comics had come to film stills."<sup>9</sup> He adds: "First contact with an Alex Ross painting was genuinely astounding, as if someone had found a way to broadcast color TV from a real Marvel universe spinning somewhere in hypertime."<sup>10</sup> Where a typical critical appraisal of comics art usually invokes the individual styles of earlier or contemporary artists, Morrison's assessment is curious since it instead gestures firmly outside of the medium of comics. Rather than drawing comparisons to, say, the verisimilitude of Bryan Talbot or the boldness of Hal Foster, Morrison invokes film stills and television as apt ways to understand the aesthetic impact of Ross' distinctive style. In a similar vein, cartoonist Jason Lutes explains Ross' style by appeal to television rather than anything within the comics medium: "all [Ross' art is] really about is making real every comics-reading boy's childhood fantasy. Like seeing your favorite superhero made real — it's like watching a movie. It's like watching your dream movie."<sup>11</sup> Once again noting that there is something not-quite-comic-like about Ross' work, designer Chip Kidd draws comparison to sculpture and describes Ross as "conjuring superheroes with gouache and illustration board the way Michelangelo coaxed David from a block of marble."<sup>12</sup>

The preceding critical evaluations of Ross' art count against a simple but ultimately unsatisfactory strategy for explaining its distinctive effect. According to this simple explanation, there is a prevailing conventional style of comics art that dominates the superhero genre and Ross' realistic painting style exerts its effect merely because it is contrary to this convention. This sort of explanation squares with a familiar conception of comics art within the superhero genre—a conception typified in comics writer and artist C.C. Beck's short essay, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Comics Creators." There, Beck sets out a normative account of how comics ought to be drawn, informed by the production techniques of comics history. After asserting that "[c]omic pictures are basically line art with color added,"<sup>13</sup> Beck cautions against a visual style in comics that prioritizes detail and complexity, saying "The drawings should be simplified and

easily understandable, as the reader will only glance at them out of the corner of his eye while reading the story they illustrate.”<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, Beck notes that printing techniques place a limit on what art can be adequately reproduced, so his counsel to artists might be interpreted as merely a recognition of the realities of printing technology at the time. As he says,

Comic drawings are printed; they are more like woodcuts and etchings than like paintings and murals. The artists who prepare the drawings should be aware of the limitations of printing. Art prepared with too much fine detail, too many gradations of tone and color, and with too much shading and technique will not reproduce properly.<sup>15</sup>

But alongside what might seem to be practical advice, Beck is steadfast in his aesthetic conservatism regarding the comics medium. Regardless of any technological constraints, he claims that “artists who use too many vignettes, too many montages, or who make their pictures of different sizes and shapes, are straying outside the limits of the medium and will lose their audiences (comic readers) without gaining other audiences (gallery goers, fine art collectors, readers of other kinds of printed material).”<sup>16</sup>

It is noteworthy that, in Ross’ case, Beck’s assertion proved flatly mistaken: Ross’ comics art has been collected and discussed in several lavish volumes, featured in a variety of gallery shows, and received significant attention by fine art collectors. Moreover, the appearance of Ross’ work in fine arts museums is atypical for being both within the superhero genre as well as relatively recent. It is therefore unlike the attention received, on the one hand, by Art Spiegelman and Robert Crumb or, on the other hand, by Jack Kirby or Jim Steranko. This atypical and distinctive reception cannot be explained merely by noting that Ross’ art runs contrary to the stylistic conventions of the superhero genre. After all, there are many ways in which superhero comics might depart from a conventional artistic style—e.g., not only by pursuing a greater degree of realism but by departing from naturalistic rendering for an atypical degree of abstraction. Ross’ comics art and its effect are interesting not merely because they defy conventions of the genre, but for the specific manner in which they do so.

A more plausible explanation of the distinctive effect of Ross’ art is premised upon the striking degree of realism secured via his style of gouache painting. Although there is only a limited theoretical apparatus for analyzing individual artistic style in comics, Scott McCloud’s approach to conceptualizing stylistic variation in comics is helpful here.<sup>17</sup> For McCloud, dimensions of artistic style vary along several axes, one of which corresponds to the intuitive notion of “realism” in comics and representational drawing.<sup>18</sup> At one pole, we find photographic or photorealistic representations of subject matter and, at the other, radically simplified depictions that elide specificity and detail which might be associated with the folk notion of a “cartoon.”<sup>19</sup> Quite clearly, Ross’ attention to naturalistic detail places his superhero comics near the “realistic” pole of this axis.

According to McCloud, this variation with regard to realism interacts significantly with cognitive phenomena like closure and reader identification that are central elements of comics-reading. Closure and reader identification with characters are enhanced by simplification and correspondingly inhibited by detail. So, for example, while we swiftly and smoothly read

comics that are drawn in, say, the style of Charles Schulz or Harvey Kurtzman, McCloud's hypothesis predicts that photographic or photorealistic comics would have a kind of arresting effect by virtue of their specificity and detail. Unlike more familiar, sparser styles, the complexity that attends their degree of realism slows our readerly progress, engaging us in a manner quite different from simpler line art comics, which we can usually speed through given their limited detail.

The critical reception of painted comics offers support for the view that Ross' work and similar comics exert this predicted arresting effect upon readers. As cartoonist Seth remarks, "I don't think painted comics, for example, work so well because they inevitably slow everything down. The images tend to become deadly still and frozen...The whole thing is a series of dead images with no movement between them."<sup>20</sup> And, while Seth's attitude is that this aesthetic effect is detrimental, Spurgeon's earlier remarks indicate that the arresting effect of painted comics like Ross' is broadly valued by fans and certain critics. As Ross himself notes.

Some of my works, particularly the ones I've done that were more like art books in their design, caused readers to spend more time per page in a way, absorbing an illustration, letting it sink in, admiring the little details I may have painted. That's not necessarily the average form of comic expression. It's not necessarily a form that works on everyone.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Ross' comics art exerts an arresting effect upon readers should be explained alongside its distinctive critical reception. But, as I'll now argue these phenomena cannot be accounted for simply by noting that Ross' comics are undertaken in his specific photorealistic style of painting. As Spurgeon's remarks suggest, a satisfactory explanation proves to be a somewhat complicated matter.

To see why simply noting that Ross deploys a painted, photorealistic style cannot explain the conspicuous arresting effect, consider a comic painted in Ross' style but that depicts a car racing down an empty street, a river flowing through a wood, or, more generally, scenes empty of focal characters. Although such scenes would obviously look different than if rendered in roughly conventional line art, they fail to generate the same arresting effect that is operative when Ross presents focal characters. A purely stylistic explanation of Ross' is therefore inadequate, since it would predict the presence of this arresting effect so long as a photorealistic style is deployed, regardless of the subject matter.

Put simply, it is not merely that *things* are rendered in a certain style, it is instead the fact that focal *characters* are rendered in this intensely realistic style that yields the arresting effect. This suggests that a satisfactory explanation of the distinctive effect of Ross' art must issue from the way in which characters are presented in his work and cannot be traced simply to the presence of a certain style. The fact that the distinctive effect of Ross's art stems from its presentation of characters is borne out by the overwhelming critical focus on the depiction of superheroes themselves rather than worlds, scenes, or events in works like *Marvels* and *Kingdome Come*. Throughout discussions of Ross' work, critics return constantly to the challenge of articulating the distinctive pictorial rapport he generates with depicted characters. Kidd's remark that Ross' comics art allows us to "really see [DC Comics characters] for the first time" is

representative on this score both for the vividness of the aesthetic effect but also the puzzling nature of this effect.<sup>22</sup>

Second, if we view style as a continuum of artistic possibilities with an indefinite number of ways to vary along the axes McCloud notes, it is puzzling why Ross' work in particular would generate such a remarkably different critical reception in the fine arts world or prompt peculiar analyses that analogize it with mediums other than comics. If it is stylistic variation alone that purports to explain what is remarkable about Ross' comics, then we are committed to the peculiar claim there is a genuinely remarkable aesthetic quality to Ross' specific style that are not shared by the many nearby styles of comics art. To be sure, style must play a role in explaining the distinctive of effects of Ross' work, but it is poorly suited to bear the full explanatory burden. An explanation of the distinctiveness of Ross' work that is premised upon its *form*—specifically, its incorporation of the art form of portraiture into comics art—rather than merely on stylistic variation is therefore better equipped to mark its discontinuity with nearby works in both its effect and reception.

### 3. Portraits in Comics

An explanation of the distinctive aesthetic effect of Ross' comics art and similar work should account for several phenomena. These include its critical assessment by Morrison, Lutes, and others that analogizes it with mediums other than comics, its robust reception by the fine arts world, and the arresting effect it exerts on readers. And, as just argued, this arresting effect should be considered in relation to how Ross presents characters rather than the deployment of a certain style irrespective of subject matter. Although style is surely part of the story about the distinctive nature of Ross' comics art, I'll now argue that our best explanation traces back to the complicated interaction of the comics medium with the art form of portraiture, which Ross deploys in his work.<sup>23</sup>

Although there is broad agreement that portraiture can be realized across a diversity of media—paintings, sculptures, drawings, engravings, coins, and medals among them—there remains significant controversy about what works are properly counted as portraits.<sup>24</sup> The more permissive views hold that any production of a likeness should rightly be counted as a portrait. Other views, in contrast, place substantial further requirements on those works that aspire to the title of portraiture. For instance, philosopher Cynthia Freeland holds that for something to be a portrait it must be a representation or depiction of “(1) a recognizable physical body along with (2) an inner life (i.e. some sort of character and/or psychological or mental states), and (3) the ability to pose or to present oneself to be depicted in a representation.”<sup>25</sup> As Freeland acknowledges and others like philosopher Hans Maes (2015) note, strict accounts face a variety of challenges—for example, regarding whether to count death masks or painted likenesses of animals or babies as portraits. At the same time, strict views have additional theoretical resources to explain why we find portraits and our engagement with them distinctive and aesthetically valuable.

Although portraiture has received no mention in a range of volumes concerned with Ross' comics art and painted comics, portraits can be found throughout his work.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, *Kingdom Come* features a vast number focal characters presented via portraiture. Importantly, the presence of portraits in Ross' work is compatible with both permissive and strict

conceptions of portraiture, partly because it is not the mere presence of portraits that explains the phenomena noted above. Instead, we are arrested by the presence of *evident* portraiture—roughly, portraits that conform with a common conception of painted portraits and are therefore readily recognizable as such. On the permissive view of portrait taxonomy, it is plausible that portraits are widespread in comics, occurring throughout non-fiction comics and regularly in fiction comics almost whenever a drawn likeness is produced. In contrast, according to strict views, many of these drawings are excluded from the category of portraiture given their unrecognizability, lack of self-presentation, or failure to meet some other requirement. But whichever view one adopts, it is a conspicuous feature of Ross' comics art that it includes paintings of models that are portraits *and* that these can be recognized by typical readers *as* portraits, mostly by virtue of their stylistic proximity to the work of portrait artists like Norman Rockwell and others.

In Ross' painted comics like *Kingdom Come*, readers encounter recognizable works of portraiture, which forces them to engage with the work in ways that depart from usual methods of comics reading.<sup>27</sup> If we assume that Beck is correct about how we read comics, then, upon discovering a portrait in the middle of one, we are forced to look and read differently. This is partly because portraits are typically (though not essentially) non-sequential, but, as philosopher Alessandro Giovannelli argues, our practice of *portrait-seeing* is of a distinctive and contemplative character quite different from the hasty mode of comics reading Beck describes:

portrait-seeing [is] a distinctive kind of vision-based experience, cognitively and imaginatively rich, which focuses on the person in the picture, qua person (i.e., bearer of mental states, character traits, and more generally moral agency), whose presence is entertained in one's experience – is in other words contemplated...<sup>28</sup>

In reading Ross' comics, we repeatedly encounter portraits among their parts. And given our usual mode for regarding portraits, readers are forced to reconcile the dynamic practice of comics reading with the contemplative practice of studying portraits. Apt engagement with portraits requires us to look carefully at *someone* and to both study both them and scrutinize the nature of their presentation to us by the portrait's artist. In this way, parts of comics recognized as portraits prompt us to assess their specificity and their details rather than simply seeing through them to subsequent action. Because of their form and our learned engagement with them, portraits are therefore exactly the kinds of things that one would expect to arrest our reading in a comic.<sup>29</sup>

As argued above, the distinctive effect of Ross' work stems specifically from its presentation of characters rather than mere settings or scenes. And, unlike other forms of painting, portraiture is essentially character-focused. An explanation of the Ross effect grounded in the occurrence of evident portraiture therefore correctly predicts the presence of this arresting effect only when characters are on display and has its source in our disposition to engage with their presentation as portraits. Moreover, this disposition is activated, not simply because of the presence of portraiture, but because Ross' style renders portraits recognizable as such. So, while the drawings of subjects in Joe Sacco's work of comics journalism *Paying the Land* (2021) or the self-portrayals that pervade Julie Doucet's *Dirty Plotte* (1991-1998) are quite plausibly counted as portraits, their stylistic distance from paradigmatic instances of portraiture

prevents them from being regarded as such when they are embedded within comics.<sup>30</sup> Note also that it is not only style that renders Ross' portraits as *evident* portraits: staging, which is a key component of the aesthetics of portraiture, plays a key role. So, for example, posed figures drawn in a highly realistic style might nevertheless not be "read" as portraits in, say fantasy illustration of the kind associated with Frank Frazetta, where characters are "distant" or in peculiar stances.

This explanation, which holds recognizable instances of portraiture to be the source of what we might call "the Ross effect," is also useful in explaining the noteworthy uptake of Ross' work by the fine arts world. Works of portraiture, unlike comics, have a familiar pattern of reception in fine arts circles. Their critical appraisal and their mode of engagement is therefore governed by well-established norms, and comics art that is constituted by evident portraits is therefore especially apt for incorporation into these practices. This is clear when we consider Ross' cover art, which regularly receives prominent position in his gallery shows and can be engaged with by audiences in a manner that more or less conforms to the usual way of regarding portraiture. Roughly put, since much of Ross' comics art includes and often consists in portraits and the fine arts world has long-standing norms for presenting and engaging portraits, it is ideally suited for absorption into its critical practices.

Additionally, the presence of portraiture in Ross' comics art helps us account for receptions of Ross' work that are marked by dispositions to analogize it with forms or media that are not comics. In short, this tendency follows, on the one hand, from the presence of the style which renders it as evident portraiture, but, on the other hand, from the fact that Ross' work is suffused with an art form that precedes and is usually distinct from comics: portraiture. Because Ross' comics art prompts readers into a different way of looking, one largely alien to comics reading, the experience of reading comics painted by Ross requires us to do something conspicuously unfamiliar to comics. And, since this activity of looking is character-focused, it invites analogies to works of sculpted portraiture of the kind Kidd mentions as well as the photographic presentations of characters Morrison and Lutes note.

Collected editions of *Kingdom Come* and *Marvels* include something atypical for superhero comics: a list of "credits" for the models used in Ross' art. The peculiarity of this acknowledgement is additional evidence that Ross' comics involve a significant departure from the standard practice of comics production, which I've argued is due to the formal innovation of including a host of evident portraits. Moreover, Ross' remarks suggest that creative practices standardly associated with portraiture—namely, a direct engagement between artist and subject—are key features of his work. Ross notes that "The connection to a person grounds me to the work, and feeds my imagination, which is not infinite... If all I ever looked at was comic books for reference, then everything I did would just be flat."<sup>31</sup> Speaking about this long-time model Frank Kasy, Ross says "I found things on Frank's face that I wouldn't have come up with on my own and that somehow spoke to [Joel] Shuster's sensibility: the pinched nose, angular knitted brow, strong jaw, squinted eyes."<sup>32</sup> He adds "I'll always have something new to discover from the live model." Eschewing live, posed models is one way to distance his work from portraiture and so Ross' insistence on retaining this element in his comics practice is further evidence that portraits are a distinctive component of his comics art.

#### 4. Portraits of Fictional Characters?

In the previous section, I argued that the distinctive aesthetic effect of Ross' comics art is best explained by the fact it regularly includes portraiture and that this portraiture is both recognizable *as portraiture* and treated by viewers unlike typical comics art. In this section, I conclude with an objection to this account, which issues from puzzles about how portraits and superhero comics might fit together.<sup>33</sup>

Recall that Freeland's strict view requires that portraits be of actual living subjects, individuals with inner mental lives. This requirement generates a puzzle once we recall that *Kingdom Come* is about Superman and, if the proposed explanation of the Ross effect is correct, it requires that *Kingdom Come* is shot through with portraits of Superman and other fictional characters. But Superman isn't an actual living subject. So how could there be one—much less many—portraits of Superman?

This puzzle hinges, in part, on the vexed issue of whether portraits of fictional characters are possible. With strict views that take portraits to require a direct causal interaction between subject and artist, the answer seems to be a mandatory "no." However, as Shearer West, notes, there is a significant history of portraits being produced on the basis of extant paintings, via intermediary models, and without sittings or the subject posing for the artist.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the strongest case for holding that portraits must be of actual living subjects is that it seems to be both a criterion for constituting a portrait and for evaluating its merits that the subject be recognizable. Since merely made-up people or contrived imaginary characters might be unrecognizable to anyone but their artist, they would seem to be unsuitable as portrait subjects.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, fictional characters like the Thing or the Hulk would seem to be potential counterexamples in this regard, since each seems to be apparently recognizable as a fictional character. There is, given these complications, an open debate about the limits of what can be depicted in portraiture.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than defending the view that Ross' work includes portraits of Superman among its parts, an alternative resolution to this puzzle can be offered, which distinguishes between the subject of the portrait and how the portrait is used. Since Ross' portraits secure their specificity and individuality from the careful use of models and their posing, we ought to further grant that they are, in fact, portraits of models like Frank Kasy. But, just as photographs, collages, and other visual media can be woven into comics art to represent characters, events, or settings, we can simultaneously hold that Ross' portraits of models depict fictional characters like Superman—indeed, as Ross says, "[e]xtensive reference to numerous models was employed to add as much individuality as possible in the depiction of the various Justice League members."<sup>37</sup> But, given the specificity, constancy, and clarity of these presentations, they can naturally be looked at by readers as though they are portraits of fictional characters. Properly understood, then, portraits of a model like Kasy are used to depict the character of Superman, and, in doing so, afford the reader the remarkable experience of looking at what seems to be a portrait of Superman.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Like other stories in the *Elseworlds* branch or designated as "imaginary stories" by editorial *Kingdom Come* stands outside ordinary DC Comics canon.

<sup>2</sup> On the lineage of painted comics, see Christopher Lawrence, *The Art of Painted Comics* (Mount Laurel, NJ: Dynamite Entertainment, 2016). While the appearance of painted comics art in an intensely realistic style is relatively common on comics or pulp covers via artists like Norman Saunders and James Bama, it has little precedent as a technique for the production of sequential interior art. The production of entirely or primarily painted interior comics art clearly precedes Ross through the work of Richard Corben, Scott Hampton, Kent Williams, and others, but these artists differ substantially in style.

<sup>3</sup> As noted in model credits for the trade paperback edition of *Kingdom Come*.

<sup>4</sup> Ross' use of Andrew Loomis' illustration guide *Figure Drawing For All It's Worth* (1946), replete with models, is noted in Chip Kidd, *Mythology*, (New York: Pantheon, 2003), PN.

<sup>5</sup> In certain cases, the direct and covert deployment of other comics as source material constitutes morally objectionable "swiping" although the distinction between swiping and homage remains a murky one.

<sup>6</sup> In the nineties, "painted comics" was regularly used to single out work by artists like Ross, Jon J. Muth, George Pratt, and Kent Williams. Its current usage is inconsistent and regularly broader. Contrast, for instance, the description of Brecht Evens work as "painted comics" with Ross' work: <https://www.tj.com/reviews/the-city-of-belgium/>. Rather than use "painted comics" throughout, I focus on Ross specific style and leave open which other artists like Jon Muth and Simone Bianchi achieve a comparable effect via the use of realistic painted portraiture in interior comics art.

<sup>7</sup> The relationship of comics and portraiture reminds largely unexamined including the interesting career of Everett Kinstler who worked as a comics artist before becoming a noteworthy American portrait artist.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Spurgeon, Review of *Kingdom Come* #1, *The Comics Journal* 187, (May 1996), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Grant Morrison, *Supergods* (New York: Random House, 2011), 296.

<sup>10</sup> Morrison, 296.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Lutes, interview by Greg Stump, *The Comics Journal* 228 (November 2000), p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Kidd, Chip, "Introduction" to Alex Ross and Paul Dini, *Justice League: The World's Greatest Superheroes*, (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> C.C. Beck, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Comics Creators," *Alter Ego* 3.6(2000): 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> Beck, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Beck, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, 42.

<sup>17</sup> On style and genre in comics, see Catherine Abell, "Comics and Genre," in *The Art of Comics* (eds. Roy Cook and Aaron Meskin), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 68-84, and Sam Cowling and Wesley D. Cray, *Philosophy of Comics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993, p. 52-53. Another dimension concerns the measure of abstraction—roughly, the extent to which marks in comics serve representational purposes. It is noteworthy that Ross' style omits the deployment of certain elements of familiar comics technology—namely, motion lines and other emanata. In this respect, Ross joins with other distinctive stylists in the comics medium like Pete Morisi. For discussion, see Ken Parille, "Don't Move: The Still Life of Pete Morisi," *The Comics Journal*, 2014. And, while the absence of emanata contributes to the "stillness" of Ross' and Morisi's styles, the presence of this stylistic effect is operative even in panels and pages where emanata would not likely be included by other artists. A broader explanation is therefore required than one that merely points to this stylistic choice.

<sup>19</sup> On the complexities of "cartoon" as a concept and cartooning as a technique for comics production, see Andrei Molotiu, "Cartooning" in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (eds. Hatfield and Beaty) 2020, 153-171.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Hoffman and Dominick Grace, *Seth: Conversations*, (Oxford, MS: Mississippi, 2015), 181.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Lawrence, *The Art of Painted Comics*, (Mount Laurel, NJ: Dynamite, 2016), p. 242

<sup>22</sup> Chip Kidd, *Mythology*, New York: Pantheon 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Like photographs, portraits appear in comics in a variety of ways. For present purposes, three are worth distinguishing at the outset. In *Batman: Leonardo*, the *Mona Lisa* is a key plot point and a drawing

of the painting (or more accurately a fictionalized version of the painting) appears. In such cases, there is little temptation to view the drawing of the painting as itself a portrait and hold instead that, while the thing drawn is in actuality a portrait, the drawing of the fictionalized version of the painting is merely a drawing. For a parallel issue regarding the appearance of photographs in comics, see Roy Cook, "Drawings of Photographs in Comics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70.1: 129-138.

<sup>24</sup> See, for discussion, Shearer West, *Portraiture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>25</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 74

<sup>26</sup> Portraiture is undiscussed throughout the two Kidd volumes collecting Ross' art, *Mythology* and *Marvelocity*, and goes unmentioned in the Lawrence volume, *The Art of Painted Comics*.

<sup>27</sup> On the nature of our engagement with comics and the practice of picture-reading, see Cowling and Cray, *Philosophy of Comics*, 55-61.

<sup>28</sup> Giovanelli, Alessandro, "Portraiture and Potrait-Seeing: From Caravaggio to Digital Selfies," in *Portraits and Philosophy* (ed. Hans Maes), New York: Routledge, 2020: 61-75.

<sup>29</sup> There are elements of Ross' comics art that involve deviations from this practice—e.g., his collaborative art done with Doug Braitwaite on *Justice* (2007)—and his reliance on non-human models for fantastic characters like the Thing and the Hulk. I contend that these works are indeed different in kind from Ross' work that involves portraits albeit for different reasons and to varying degrees.

<sup>30</sup> On non-realistic portraits, see Maes, "What is a Portrait?," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55.3 (2015), p. 304. It is a still deeper question of what element of Ross' style activates the engagement with it as works of portraiture. While the line art of artists like Bryan Talbot or Alex Raymond might be deemed comparably realistic, the volume of color information that issues from the use of gouache might be taken to explain the distinctive effect of Ross' work. That said, comics that are digitally colored or comics with painted color but that include conventional line art exhibit no similar effect, so it cannot be a function merely of color information. There is an additional degree of remarkable constancy in the presentation and look of characters in Ross' comics that is secured partly via the use of models, but constancy alone does not yield any arresting effect, given its presence in Gould's *Dick Tracy* or Schulz's *Peanuts*.

<sup>31</sup> Kidd, *Mythology*.

<sup>32</sup> Kidd, *Mythology*.

<sup>33</sup> A different objection arises given the account of portraiture defended in Hans Maes, "What is a Portrait?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55.3 (2015), 303-323. This objection holds that Ross' comics art is not aimed at producing works of portraiture but instead at pieces of comics art. Note, however, that the presence of explicit intentions regarding portraiture are unnecessary for the production of portraits provided that other portrait-relevant intentions are in place—e.g., striving to capture the likeness of a subject via certain techniques.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, West, *Portraiture*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> This constraint would explain why, for example, Basil Wolverton's drawing of "Lena the Hyena" and other grotesque figures are, despite their detail and form, not works of portraiture. Roughly put, there is no context, whether real or fictional, to recognize these figures *from*. Alternatively, one might insist on the incompatibility of works of caricature with works of portraiture and categorize these and similar works as the former.

<sup>36</sup> See Maes, "What is a Portrait?," p 309.

<sup>37</sup> Alex Ross and Paul Dini, *Justice League: The World's Greatest Superheroes*, (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> There is a peculiar effect that occurs in looking at photos of Kasy after reading Ross' work which uses him as a model or, conversely, looking first at photos of Kasy and then returning to Ross' work. A familiar feature of portraiture is the sense of imparting a sense of the subject and, despite depicting Superman, Ross' paintings of Kasy do—at least to this reader and viewer—accomplish this end.