

ENGL 2201 – S018

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Project 2: Historical Artifact

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“Holy History, Batman!”; Using Comic Books as Teaching Tools

Art provides a different perspective on life that can only be experienced through art itself.

In the same regard, books and documents provide another view on events that can only be seen through reading and analyzing them. So what can be perceived by combining the two?

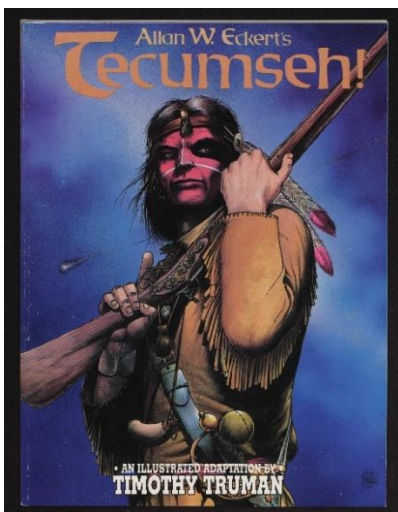
Combining illustrative art with text can result in a few things; an illustrated book, a graphic novel, or a comic book. Comic books have been a source for visually narrative entertainment for decades. Due to their popularity amongst children, many consider comic books juvenile and often too fictionalized to be regarded as credible, legitimate literature. Though a comic book’s primary concern is to entertain those who read them by fulfilling fantasies of adventure, mystery, or heroism, they were occasionally used to illustrate significant historical events (Witwek 1989). One such comic is Timothy Truman’s illustrated adaptation of Allen Eckert’s play “Tecumseh!” which has been performed outside of my hometown, Chillicothe, Ohio, since 1973. This 66 page artifact, published in 1991, allows readers to visualize the history behind Shawnee tribal leader, Tecumseh, by taking the bold, narrative art style of typical comic books and applying it to a historical context (Eckert & Truman 1991). Many students and school-aged children are familiar with comic books, due to the increasing relatability and popularity of modern comics. As such, the artifact provides evidence as to how comics can be effective and useful tools in the classroom for teaching history to students.

To understand the artifact's effectiveness in teaching history, we must be familiar with the historical context it is focused on. Tecumseh was a significant tribal leader for the Shawnee Tribe during the late 1700s to early 1800s (Cwiklik 1993). Born in 1768 in the Shawnee town, Chalahgawtha (present day Chillicothe, Ohio), Tecumseh grew up in a war-ravaged era. He had four brothers; Chiksika, born as Nehaaseemoo, and triplets, Kumskaukau, Laloeshiga (later known as "The Prophet", Tenskwatawa), and one who died at birth (Sugden 1998). Tecumseh also had an older sister, Tecumapese, with whom he lived with at various points in his life (Cwiklik 1993). His oldest brother, Chiksika, was a war leader and eventually became a Shawnee war chief after his father, Pucksinwah's, death during a war in 1774 known as Lord Dunmore's War (Cwiklik 1993). As he matured, Tecumseh aided his brother and fellow tribesmen in defending native lives and land. He later became the Shawnee war chief after Chiksika's death in 1789 and led the battle against the Americans on Wabash River in 1791, which was the most one-sided defeat of the U.S. Army to date (Cwiklik 1993). Tecumseh initiated a religious movement amongst the natives, along with his brother, Tenskwatawa, which resulted in an influx of natives joining his army, bolstering his war efforts against the white settlers (Sugden 1998). These war efforts culminated during the War of 1812, when Tecumseh allied with the British to capture the U.S fort at Detroit (Cwiklik 1993). With the aid of a new alliance, Tecumseh fought hard against the Americans for natives' rights. However, Tecumseh suffered a betrayal at the hands of British general, Henry Proctor, and was killed during an unsuccessful siege on Harrison's army at the Battle of the Thames in 1813 (Cwiklik 1993). Since his death, Tecumseh has been revered by both Shawnee natives and Canadians alike, and is hailed as one of the most famous Native Americans in all of history (Sugden 1998). In addition

to this background knowledge, we must also analyze how comic book form serves as a crucial visual aid in capturing readers' attention.

The bold and graphic nature of comics helps readers visualize important elements of a narrative or historical context. The theme of both the narrative and illustrations change based on the intent of the comic book itself, but most comics and graphic novels are set up in a relatively similar form; with a strong, and often emphatic narrative supplemented by bold, detailed graphics in a grid-style format. Usually comics will have an element of violence or graphic imagery, but this is not just for fluff. According to many social scientists, humans are biologically drawn to violent, graphic imagery, due to our innate attraction to thrill and suspense (Midha 2014). These feelings of thrill and suspense carry our attention, which makes sense as to why many forms of media use bold and graphic imagery (Midha 2014). The boldness of the illustrations in most comics is what draws many people to them, particularly school-aged children (Shinn 2010). The images capture their attention, making them curious of the events in the narrative (Shinn 2010). Color plays an important role in grabbing readers' attention as well. Humans are drawn to certain colors, especially the primary colors; red, blue, and yellow (Peterson). Red demands the most attention, being that it often symbolizes our baser desires as humans, such as rage, passion, or blood (Peterson). Blue is the second most demanding color because it symbolizes emotion and water (Peterson). Yellow is the first color we see with our eyes, so it is a naturally attention-grabbing color (Peterson). A lot of earlier comics revolved around a primary color scheme because of these reasons. In regards to Eckert and Truman's illustrated adaptation, the comic is full of graphic, violent imagery that use bold colors to depict the historical events of the comic's narrative (Eckert & Truman 1991). Seen below, the comic follows a primary color scheme, with red, blue and yellow hues comprising the visuals of the

grid-style narrative. Upon reading the comic, I found it hard to look away, as I was captivated by the imagery. I was left wanting to read the narrative so that I could connect a historical context to what I was seeing. The same could be said for other readers, even school-aged children in a learning environment. Using bold colors and attractive imagery does not necessarily distract from the context, as some would believe of comics (Shinn 2010). Instead, researchers have found that it does the opposite and actually stimulates readers' interest in the topics being explored (Midha 2014). Allowing children to visualize the historical events they are studying helps to generate a sense of interest amongst them, and often leads them to further study of the topic. Knowing the comic book form allows us to better understand how a historical comic, such as the artifact in question, can be used as an effective teaching tool in addition to typical textbooks.



LEFT: Cover of "Tecumseh!" an illustrated adaptation by Timothy Truman.



RIGHT: Excerpt from "Tecumseh!" portraying a battle scene between Tecumseh and the British

The artifact (pictured above), though in comic book form, is an account of a historical event. The text for the comic comes verbatim from Allen Eckert's play of the same name (Eckert & Truman 1991). Eckert's play is a semi-fictionalized account of Tecumseh's life as the Shawnee war leader. It follows his life starting with Chiksika's death and ends with Tecumseh's death during the War of 1812. Throughout the comic, Tecumseh is portrayed as a strong, fierce,

yet compassionate leader (Eckert & Truman 1991). Tecumseh was known for his compassionate nature, which was a trait that garnered him a lot of native support during his efforts (Sugden 1998). The comic illustrates a couple of battles fought by Tecumseh alongside both Chiksika and Tenskwatawa, with emphasis on the latter's involvement in Tecumseh's war efforts as "The Prophet". Though the comic appears to coincide with much of Tecumseh's life as it has been documented, there is a crucial fact that must be considered: both the comic and play are fictionalized accounts of Tecumseh. There is no way to retell Tecumseh's life with total accuracy unless you were Tecumseh himself or someone very close to him. Even biographies cannot provide insight as to how Tecumseh and his peers felt and thought during the wars. But what the comic does provide is a visual aid to the events presented. Essentially, the comic puts the life of Tecumseh into perspective, allowing readers to visualize the events they learned in history class, as well as how Tecumseh may have physically and emotionally reacted to the events. This is significant because being able to visualize and contextualize what one reads is a crucial component to better understanding any form of text, material, or concept. As such, analyzing a historical comic book in the classroom can provide students with an alternative or supplemental understanding of the history in question.

Researchers, historians, and teachers alike have explored the use of comics as teaching tools in the classroom. According to historian and researcher Matthew Pustz, in his book, *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*, comic books and their heroes "enhance the narrative impact of historical information" (Pustz 2013). Alicia Decker and Mauricio Castro analyzed the efficacy of comics and graphic novels in teaching historical violence and war through a case study they conducted for one of Decker's courses. In this particular study, the instructors/researchers examined the graphic novel series *Unknown Soldier*, which is set in

wartime Uganda, Africa (Decker & Castro 2012). Decker assigned the text for one of her African studies courses, with the hope that it would stimulate students' interest in the history of wartime Africa. What she found was that students were able to understand the gravity of the circumstances in Africa by visualizing the horror of war and violence (Decker & Castro 2012). This understanding allowed them to become fully immersed in the history at hand. Decker was able to conclude that adding the graphic novel was a "simple, yet highly effective strategy for enriching students' experiences in the classroom", which echoes Pustz' stance mentioned earlier (Decker & Castro 2012).

In addition to Decker and Castro, other teachers and historians have utilized comics in the classroom. History instructor, Jessamyn Neuhaus, wrote an article in Pustz' anthology about her use of comic books, including Wonder Woman and Spider-Man, to aid her students in "doing history" (Pustz 2013). She found that while reading the comics, students felt "empowered" by the secondary knowledge the comics provided, and that feeling well-read on the topic at hand allowed them to "join the conversation" about it in the classroom (Pustz 2013). Bridget Marshall, another instructor featured in Pustz' anthology, used the historical, Native American comic *Journey into Mohawk Country* as a primary source for teaching in her history course (Pustz 2013). She found that the bold and intriguing graphics of the comic allowed for students to view the historical figures as real people instead of the banal descriptions given by typical text books, which led the students to want to learn more about the history surrounding the figures (Pustz 2013). In Joseph Witwek's book, *Comic Books as History*, he analyzes how various graphic novels and comics, from notable artists such as Harvey Pekar, Jack Jackson, and Art Spiegelman, tell a narrative story, whether historical, societal, or personal. For example, Art Spiegelman's famous graphic novel, "Maus", appears to be a semi-humorous story about mice during Nazi

Germany but is really both a commentary on the horror of real-life Nazi Germany and an account of his father's life during the Holocaust (Witwek 1989). By utilizing a visual, comic narrative to illustrate the events of a past time, Spiegelman is able to reach out to the public to teach a history that would otherwise be glossed over in a textbook. This is what enables comics to truly rise above their intended purpose into an art that is both functional and entertaining.

Though many believe comics are juvenile and low-brow, comic books as an art form have morphed from the initial goal of fantasy fulfillment to becoming effective tools for teaching history in the classroom. According to Witwek, contemporary comics are being written as near literature, with the focus shifting towards issues such as the clash of cultures in history and the struggles of everyday life. He asserts that comic books “tap into an imaginative vein” that reflects basic human fears and desires, which is something that other forms of literature or text cannot do (Witwek 1989). This “imaginative vein” is what allows for the increasing relatability of comics between readers and the comics themselves. Historical comics attempt to play on this by providing a visual, often graphic, account of the events in question. When students are able to visualize a historical event in a medium that naturally attracts their attention, it adds to their understanding of the event and makes them feel as though they have a well-rounded grasp on the history surrounding it. If the illustrated adaptation of “Tecumseh!” were to be integrated into a history course, I have no doubts that it would help to stimulate students' interest in Native American history. As stated by Allen Eckert, “There is a very special knack involved in taking the bare dry bones of history and fleshing them out so that the characters become living, breathing individuals whose actions and adventures we follow with excitement and whose pains and sorrows, joys and triumphs, we can share as if we were a part of it” (Eckert & Truman

1991). It is exactly this experience that gives comics their unique perspective – a perspective that cannot be received from textbooks.

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