Moebius Gives 18 Wisdom-Filled Tips to Aspiring Artists (1996)

in *Art*, *Comics/Cartoons* | March 4th, 2015 29 Comments

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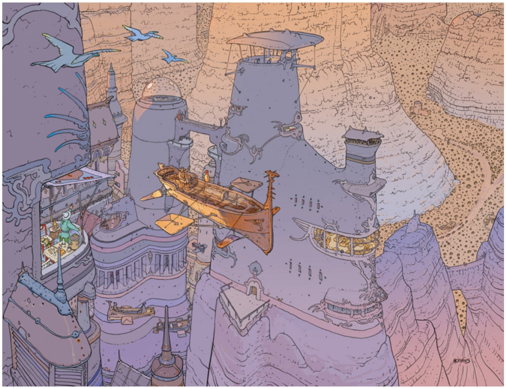
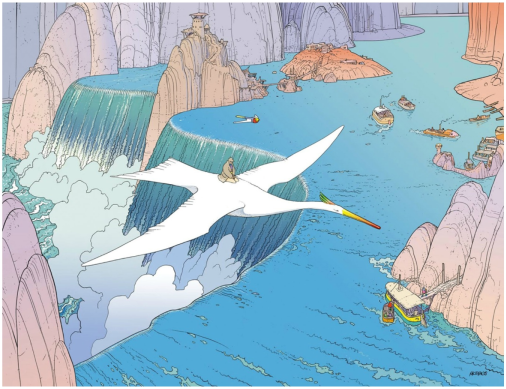


Jean Giraud, aka Moebius, was a comic book artist who combined blinding speed with boundless imagination. He shaped the look of *Alien*, *Empire Strikes Back* and *The Fifth Element*. He reimagined the Silver Surfer for Stan Lee. And he is an acknowledged influence on everyone from Japanese animating great Hayao Miyazaki to sci-fi writer William Gibson.



In 1996, the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* published a lecture given by Moebius called "Breve manual para historietistas" – a brief manual for cartoonists – which consists of 18 tips for aspiring artists. If your Spanish isn't up to snuff – mine certainly isn't – then there are a couple translations out there. Someone called Xurxo g Penalta cranked out a direct version in English, but to get the true nuances of Moebius' wise words, famed illustrator William Stout's excellent annotated version is best.

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For instance, Moebius's first tip is "When you draw, you must first cleanse yourself of deep feelings, like hate, happiness, ambition, etc."

Stout amplifies this with the following:

> *These feelings are typically emotional prejudices that function as a block to creativity.*
>
> *This was something I learned from drawing and hanging out with another Frenchman, the brilliant cartoonist-illustrator (and regular Atlantic Monthly contributor) Guy Billout, when we were traveling together in Antarctica and Patagonia back in 1989. Until I spent time with Guy, I had no idea how many pre-conceived notions and assumptions I held within me regarding people and situations and what a block they were to the flow of my creativity.*
>
> *Divorcing yourself from such emotionally blinding pre-conceptions allows you to see things with fresh eyes. Solutions and ideas then flow with much greater ease. I have noticed with all the creative geniuses I have met that they all share a childlike delight with whatever or whomever they encounter in life (they can even find amusement in life's villains). For them, all creative barriers are down; life and creative problem solving for them is like constantly playing. They gush great ideas all day long like a fountain.*

All of Stout's annotations are like this. It should be required reading for anyone even vaguely interested in visual storytelling. Below are Moebius' original observations. Stout's thoughts on Moebius can be found here.

> *1) When you draw, you must first cleanse yourself of deep feelings, like hate, happiness, ambition, etc.*
>
> *2) It's very important to educate your hand. Make it achieve a level of high obedience so that it will be able to properly and fully express your ideas. But be very careful of trying to obtain too much perfection, as well as too much speed as an artist. Perfection and speed are dangerous — as are their opposites. When you produce drawings that are too quick or too loose, besides making mistakes, you run the risk of creating an entity without soul or spirit.*
>
> *3) Knowledge of perspective is of supreme importance. Its laws provide a good, positive way to manipulate or hypnotize your readers.*
>
> *4) Another thing to embrace with affection is the study of [the] human body — it's anatomy, positions, body types, expressions, construction, and the differences between people.*
>
> *Drawing a man is very different from drawing a woman. With males, you can be looser and less precise in their depiction; small imperfections can often add character. Your drawing of a woman, however, must be perfect; a single ill-placed line can dramatically age her or make her seem annoying or ugly. Then, no one buys your comic!*
>
> *For the reader to believe your story, your characters must feel as if they have a life and personality of their own.*
>
> *Their physical gestures should seem to emanate from their character's strengths, weaknesses and infirmities. The body becomes transformed when it is brought to life; there is a message in its structure, in the distribution of its fat, in each muscle and in every wrinkle, crease or fold of the face and body. It becomes a study of life.*
>
> *5) When you create a story, you can begin it without knowing everything, but you should make notes as you go along regarding the particulars of the world depicted in your story. Such detail will provide your readers with recognizable characteristics that will pique their interest.*
>
> *When a character dies in a story, unless the character has had his personal story expressed some way in the drawing of his face, body and attire, the reader will not care; your reader won't have any emotional connection.*
>
> *Your publisher might say, "Your story has no value; there's only one dead guy — I need twenty or thirty dead guys for this to work." But that is not true; if the reader feels the dead guy or wounded guys or hurt guys or whomever you have in trouble have a real personality resulting from your own deep studies of human nature — with an artist's capacity for such observation — emotions will surge.*
>
> *By such studies you will develop and gain attention from others, as well as a*

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compassion and a love for humanity.

This is very important for the development of an artist. If he wants to function as a mirror of society and humanity, this mirror of his must contain the consciousness of the entire world; it must be a mirror that sees everything.

6) Alejandro Jodorowsky says I don't like drawing dead horses. Well, it is very difficult.

It's also very difficult to draw a sleeping body or someone who has been abandoned, because in most comics it's always action that is being studied. It's much easier to draw people fighting — that's why Americans nearly always draw superheroes. It's much more difficult to draw people that are talking, because that's a series of very small movements — small, yet with real significance.

His counts for more because of our human need for love or the attention of others. It's these little things that speak of personality, of life. Most superheroes don't have any personality; they all use the same gestures and movements.

7) Equally important is the clothing of your characters and the state of the material from which it was made.

These textures create a vision of your characters' experiences, their lives, and their role in your adventure in a way where much can be said without words. In a dress there are a thousand folds; you need to choose just two or three — don't draw them all. Just make sure you choose the two or three good ones.

8) The style, stylistic continuity of an artist and its public presentation are full of symbols; they can be read just like a Tarot deck. I chose my name "Moebius" as a joke when I was twenty-two years old — but, in truth, the name came to resonate with meaning. If you arrive wearing a T-shirt of Don Quixote, that tells me who you are. In my case, making a drawing of relative simplicity and subtle indications is important to me.

9) When an artist, a real working artist, goes out on the street, he does not see things the same way as "normal" people. His unique vision is crucial to documenting a way of life and the people who live it.

10) Another important element is composition. The compositions in our stories should be studied because a page or a painting or a panel is a face that looks at the reader and speaks to him. A page is not just a succession of insignificant panels. There are panels that are full. Some that are empty. Others are vertical. Some horizontal. All are indications of the artist's intentions. Vertical panels excite the reader. Horizontals calm him. For us in the Western world, motion in a panel that goes from left to right represents action heading toward the future. Moving from right to left directs action toward the past. The directions we indicate represent a dispersion of energy. An object or character placed in the center of a panel focuses and concentrates energy and attention. These are basic reading symbols and forms that evoke in the reader a fascination, a kind of hypnosis. You must be conscious of rhythm and set traps for the reader to fall into so that, when he falls, he gets lost, allowing you to manipulate and move him inside your world with greater ease and pleasure. That's because what you have created is a sense of life. You must study the great painters, especially those who speak with their paintings. Their individual painting schools or genres or time periods should not matter. Their preoccupation with physical as well as emotional composition must be studied so that you learn how their combination of lines works to touch us directly within our hearts.

11) The narration must harmonize with the drawings. There must be a visual rhythm created by the placement of your text. The rhythm of your plot should be reflected in your visual cadence and the way you compress or expand time. Like a filmmaker, you must be very careful in how you cast your characters and in how you direct them. Use your characters or "actors" like a director, studying and then selecting from all of your characters' different takes.

12) Beware of the devastating influence of North American comic books. The artists in Mexico seem to only study their surface effects: a little bit of anatomy mixed with dynamic compositions, monsters, fights, screaming and teeth. I like some of that stuff too, but there are many other possibilities and expressions that are also worthy of exploration.

13) There is a connection between music and drawing. The size of that connection depends upon your personality and what's going on at that moment. For the last ten years I've been working in silence; for me, there is music in the rhythm of my lines. Drawing at times is a search for discoveries. A precise, beautifully executed line is

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like an orgasm!

14) Color is a language that the graphic artist uses to manipulate his reader's attention as well as to create beauty. There is objective and subjective color. The emotional states of the characters can change or influence the color from one panel to the next, as can place and time of day. Special study and attention must be paid to the language of color.

15) At the beginning of an artist's career, he should principally involve himself in the creation of very high quality short stories. He has a better chance (than with long format stories) of successfully completing them, while maintaining a high standard of quality. It will also be easier to place them in a book or sell them to a publisher.

16) There are times when we knowingly head down a path of failure, choosing the wrong theme or subject for our capabilities, or choosing a project that is too large, or an unsuitable technique. If this happens, you must not complain later.

17) When new work has been sent to an editor and it receives a rejection, you should always ask for and try to discover the reasons for the rejection. By studying the reasons for our failure, only then can we begin to learn. It is not about struggle with our limitations, with the public or with the publishers. One should treat it with more of an aikido approach. It is the very strength and power of our adversary that is used as the key to his defeat.

18) Now it is possible to expose our works to readers in every part of the planet. We must always keep aware of this. To begin with, drawing is a form of personal communication — but this does not mean that the artist should close himself off inside a bubble. His communication should be for those aesthetically, philosophically and geographically close to him, as well as for himself — but also for complete strangers. Drawing is a medium of communication for the great family we have not met, for the public and for the world.

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Jonathan Crow is a Los Angeles-based writer and filmmaker whose work has appeared in Yahoo!, The Hollywood Reporter, and other publications. You can follow him at @jonccrow. And check out his blog Veeptopus, featuring lots of pictures of badgers and even more pictures of vice presidents with octopuses on their heads. The Veeptopus store is here.

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Comments (29)

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Dan says:
March 5, 2015 at 12:21 am

Hi there,

Someone with a lot of mojo mentioned our post on their Facebook page. Does anyone happen to know who that was?

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Thanks in advance.
Dan (editor)

Reply

Billy says:
March 5, 2015 at 1:37 am

I followed the link after Shane Glines posted it :)

Reply

Brian Carroll says:
March 5, 2015 at 2:16 am

The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles

Reply

thasen says:
March 5, 2015 at 3:17 am

this is just beautiful….

Reply

Meysa says:
March 5, 2015 at 4:43 am

Ben Mauro posted it today ;)
Its a nice read, so thanks!

Reply

manuel says:
March 5, 2015 at 4:51 am

Its a great interview! I went to the source, the mexican article; let me say that the translation left some tasty details out,… like when moebious describes the american comic tecniques ("imitates gestures of fierceness, fighting, running"). By picturing him doing that, I picture him as a very accesible person, kind, truly able to help anyone with wise advice…

Reply

cheerios says:
March 5, 2015 at 5:51 am

Twas Ben Mauro for me as well :)
Thank you for the informative post, interesting perspective to another ones process.

Reply

MaeAnn says:
March 6, 2015 at 12:44 am

Most are great tips, but I do find it funny how he talks about consciousness and being aware of the world and its troubles, yet he misses some of his own slightly misogynistic notions – for example, guys can be flawed but for a female to be imperfect makes her annoying or off-putting. That statement almost made me want to stop reading halfway.

Reply

I cant says:
March 6, 2015 at 8:38 am

MaeAnn I believe his addition of "Then, no one buys your comic!" at the end of this misogynist (which it is) remark actually points the smoking gun at the reader and their demand towards the stringent depiction of women and how if he doesn't adhere to said depiction the comic doesn't sell. So maybe this remark was meant to stimulate a dialogue about gender bias expectations/demands in comics everywhere not just his own.

Reply

I can says:
March 6, 2015 at 8:11 pm

That comment wasn't misogynist at all.

Reply

Amin Fara says:
March 8, 2015 at 3:10 am

Amazing content, thank you very much for this. It made my day or maybe ruined it!

Reply

arndt says:
March 14, 2015 at 1:53 am

i love his work. but alien was done bei h.r.giger

Reply

Dave says:
March 14, 2015 at 5:24 pm

Dan, I dont know if you talking about this group.. (the thing is, that in there we are mostly spanishlanguage readers..)

https://www.facebook.com/groups/139920702804471/

Reply

vm says:
August 1, 2015 at 2:39 pm

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Inspiring! I think some of his advice can be a bit strange if not viewed in context, meaning as advice given by a BD/comic book artist, which is a specific kind of visual art.. It applies to all visual artists of course, but to understand what he meant and where the idea comes from, it has to be viewed from a BD artist's perspective.

Reply

Jessica says:
August 23, 2015 at 11:50 pm

He wouldn't get a job these days.

Reply

Dan says:
August 28, 2015 at 8:58 am

Moebius worked on Alien. Do your research.
http://www.letmegooglethatforyou.com

Reply

timothy says:
August 31, 2015 at 3:03 pm

Jessica, please explain comment?

Reply

JF says:
September 7, 2015 at 4:45 am

I think you missed the finer point. Please don't take this the wrong way… but… he's not saying that all females must be perfect, as in what is conventionally perceived by a male-dominant society. What he's really saying is that when one is to draw a female (could be fat, skinny, tall, short, whatever), the smallest shifts in a line can change the character's mood drastically, where as in a male, the artist can 'get away with it'. If you look at Robert Crumb's drawing of females, the ones with buck teeth and smells like onions, they are still very beautiful in a way. Yet each line plays their part and it's easier to mess those lines up and diminish that 'beauty' where as drawing a male it's easier to mask. Pardon me for the long explanation, actually I'm not even sure if that explains it but Moebius is not only a great artist, but a wonderful openminded human being and it pains me to see him taken in such way. Thanks for reading!

Reply

snakeappletree says:
November 24, 2015 at 2:48 pm

I first saw this artist on cover for zap mama album a ma zone. Great to learn more about him.

Reply

Robert V. says:
December 26, 2015 at 6:12 am

Jean Giraud was a great artist. As you can see in this video, he apparently also had an impact on Star Wars: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dK8B10_oY5g

Reply

Dru Cloud says:
March 6, 2016 at 1:24 pm

The first three change a great deal for me. I need a new sketchpad…

Reply

Buys comics about people says:
March 26, 2016 at 9:09 pm

I am also very annoyed by that remark: "With males…small imperfections can often add character. Your drawing of a woman, however, must be perfect; a single ill-placed line can dramatically age her or make her seem annoying or ugly. Then, no one buys your comic!"

But I guess you have to take it in context. In certain genres, we don't want females to have 'character', or be real people at all, for fear they may appear 'annoying, old or ugly'. Females, in these genres, are only beautiful men after all; you have the smart guy, the tough guy, the nerd guy, and the beautiful guy to name a few – but the beautiful guy has to be drawn like a female because men aren't allowed to be beautiful…apparently.

Reply

Non-Canon says:
April 14, 2016 at 11:59 am

Way to hyperfocus on one ill-phrased outdated notion and completely miss all the wisdom elsewhere.

Congrats you're a gadfly.

Reply

JD says:
November 11, 2016 at 1:02 am

My message to people who were offended: don't be. (I say this as a woman)

We must remember that Mobius was a product of his times. When you look at 20th century movies and comics, you will instantly notice that they have a very specific idea on what a beautiful woman looks like. In other words, conventional standards for beauty were very, very narrow, which means it was very easy to make an artistic mistake.

I remember while watching Twin Peaks (one of my favourite TV series of all time) I had an extremely hard time telling apart all the women at first. The reason? They were all stunning, so apart from the hairstyles, they looked identical.

We are slowly but surely expanding the line on what makes a woman beautiful.

Reply

Brian says:
November 16, 2016 at 6:24 pm

Love this article! Stay positive

Reply

Joséfine says:
March 10, 2017 at 2:10 am

This tresors'box tells all…!
Learn it, growing to it, all of it!
Merci 💫

Reply

Ky says:
May 11, 2018 at 3:12 am

Yes, MaeAnn, I completely agree with you – I wanted to share the comment with all my friends and laugh at the silliness of it, in amongst the wisdom.

Reply

Hannah says:
December 2, 2018 at 1:00 pm

Exactly! I did stop reading halfway because of that remark. The word I couldn't find was misogynistic, thanx.

Reply

Hannah says:
December 2, 2018 at 1:03 pm

And the women have to be straight, have long hair, wear heals etc etc. Luckily there are comics with women with character or that are not drawn to please the male gaze.

Reply

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