

Comics and the TV Weather Report

Tracing the Visual Style of Contemporary Science's Most Popular Genre

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"Asking the Weatherman 'Why?' Is One of the Best Ways to Get a Free Meteorology Lesson of the Doctor Type!"

Comic Art: America's Common Visual Culture

Beginning in the 1890s, newspapers introduced comic art to audiences across the United States. Americans of every class loved comic strips, which made them a natural format for advertising. Cheap comic books, developed in the mid-1930s, became very popular with young readers.



Comic strips became a regular feature of American newspapers during the era of "yellow journalism." The popularity of strips like *The Yellow Kid* drove sales during the pitched circulation battles between Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* in the 1890s.



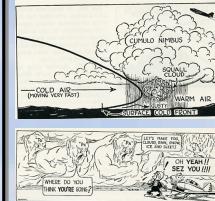
A 1931 survey by George Glavin helped advertisers recognize that the comics were the most read part of the newspaper, popular with doctors and lawyers as well as laborers and executives. Comic strips enabled advertisers to integrate dialogue, product information and a sequential narrative into static media like magazines and newspapers.



Adventure strips like *Tailspin Tommy*, begun in 1928, reflected popular interest in aviation in the decades after the Great War. Some artists strived to draw planes with technical accuracy.



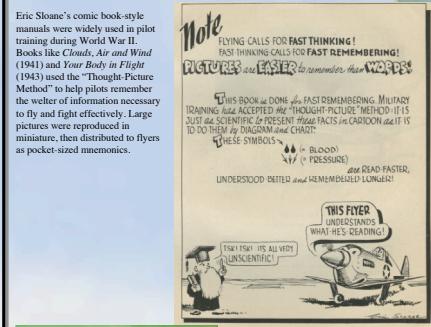
Introduced in 1934, comic books became a reading staple for younger readers. Barely beyond his own teenage years, Will Eisner drew *The Spirit*, a hit series that tapped into burgeoning interest in superheroes.



Asen Jordanoff's popular aviation books featured illustrations by comic strip artists like Larry O'Keefe (*Fritz Rita*) and Fred Meagher (*Tommy Tucker*) during the 1930s and 1940s. Some illustrations animated technical diagrams with comic conventions like motion lines or stylized clouds and rain, while others used caricature to satirize some pilots' attitudes towards hazards.



Eric Sloane's comic book-style materials were widely used in pilot training during World War II. Books like *Cards, Air and Wind* (1941) and *Your Body in Flight* (1943) used the "Thought-Picture Method" to help pilots remember the welter of information necessary to fly and fight effectively. Large pictures were reproduced in miniature, then distributed to flyers as pocket-sized mnemonics.



Aviation safety publications often personified storms as a powerful boxer, a looming adversary that needed to be dodged and outwitted, rather than fought directly.



After joining the Army, Will Eisner drew posters and comic strips featuring Private Joe Dope, whose continual screw-ups highlighted the virtues of preventative maintenance. Caricature creates emotional distance between the reader and the subject, here allowing readers to learn Dope's lessons without implying they might be "Dopey" themselves.

Mobilizing the Comics for Technical Training

In the late 1930s, some illustrators began to use comic art in educational books. When World War II required millions of draftees to learn novel technical tasks, the U.S. military drafted cartoonists to make lessons memorable and easier to understand. Illustrated manuals, posters and textbooks significantly reduced training times.

Drawing the Weather on TV

During the late 1940s, discharged military meteorologists invented the TV weather report. They developed a visual style that combined simplified maps with caricatures, pictographs, and anthropomorphic weather features. Station managers misread this educational strategy as entertainment, however, and began to hire cartoonists rather than meteorologists. While weather reports took on a more serious tone in the 1960s, they still use the graphical language of comic art.



Televuever Is Wilted by Wave of Weather Men, Pointing, Doodling and Spouting Temperatures

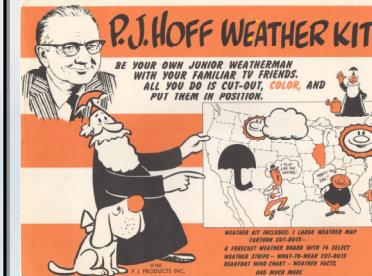


Beginning in 1948, former Army Air Force meteorologist Louis Allen drew simple weather maps live while broadcasting in Washington D.C. Interested in educational psychology, he sketched a "doodle" at the end of each show to represent tomorrow's conditions. Hundreds of viewers asked the station for his pictures.

Other stations noticed Allen's success, and hired comic weathermen of their own, like newspaper cartoonist Tex Antoine at WNBC in New York. Though he had no training in meteorology and considered the weather "a rather dull subject," Antoine's iconic sidekick "Unc Wethbee" allowed audience to read the weather from his changing mustache, hair and hat.

Although the New York Times snarked about the profusion of doodling weathercasters in 1952, station managers said the weather must be entertaining and required meteorologists to learn cartooning before hiring them. Meteorologist Don Woods created "Gusty" during a two-week course on the comics, prelude to a fifty-year career on Tulsa television.

Promotional materials reinforce the weather report's visual style even when the TV is off. This children's play set enabled kids to re-enact the presentations made by Chicago's beloved puppeteer weatherman P.J. Hoff.



As the weather report became pure entertainment, many stations hired "Weather Girls," like Tippy Stringer in Washington D.C., who were half of all TV weather presenters were actresses, models, and beauties with no meteorological training. The American Meteorological Society responded with a professional certification program that aimed to gender weathercasting as a male occupation.

The pictographs and simplified synoptic maps adapted for television's low-resolution screens in the late 1940s today appear in newspapers and on the Internet. The visual style of comic art permeates popular representations of the weather.

