



# Landscapes in The Graphic Novels of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell and Adrian Tomine: Attributes Shared with Woodblock Prints of Kawase Hasui

**Res. Asst. Dr. Baris HASIRCI**

Mersin University, [barishasirci@mersin.edu.tr](mailto:barishasirci@mersin.edu.tr)

ORCID: 0000-0001-9117-4476

## Abstract

A common attribute of the graphic novels of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell and Adrian Tomine is panels, portraying landscapes that invoke melancholy. The illustration styles are cartoonish yet realistic which lends itself to comedy and tragedy. Some emotional scenes are relayed through illustrations of landscapes that show natural elements such as the sky and trees. They also include elements of modern life such as cars and buildings. By illustrating the timelessness of nature and modern living, these works remind of the woodblock prints of Kawase Hasui.

The Shin-hanga prints of Hasui are made with the influence of Impressionism which is influenced by Ukiyo-e. As with the Impressionists, the artists of Shin-hanga presented topics such as landscapes by reflecting fleeting light and the individual experiences they invoke. Hasui represents nature in its quiet glory, mixing it with the everyday which is also in the spirit of the mentioned graphic novelists' works.

This study uncovers the approaches that create the emotional landscape illustrations in graphic novels by determining their common attributes with Shin-hanga. Through the chosen artwork, this discussion aims to contribute to the existing discourse on graphic novels and provide a basis for further understanding of this art form.

**Keywords:** Graphic Novels, Illustration, Landscape Painting, Impressionism, Shin-hanga.

## **1. Introduction: Graphic Novels and Graphic Novel Illustrations**

Usually taken to mean long form narrative made up of comics content with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork aimed at mature audiences (Murray, 2022), the term “graphic novel”, coined by Richard Kyle in 1964 to mean “artistically serious ‘comic book strip’” (Kyle, 1964: 2), is said to have gained popularity following the publication of the famed comic creator Will Eisner’s “A Contract with God” in 1978 and the subsequent publication of works such as “L’Incal” (1980), “Akira” (1982), “V for Vendetta” (1982), “Ronin” (1984) and “Maus” (1986). Considered in some circles as a marketing term used to give credibility to the comic book (Kavanagh, 2000), a medium regularly thought of as a juvenile form of entertainment, allowing it to be considered as an art form used for personal artistic expression that is worthy of scholarly discussion, the meaning and use of “graphic novel” is a widely debated subject. Still, many agree that the term is used to describe works of comic art, also referred to as “sequential art” (Eisner, 2000: 5) or “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993: 9), that are created more with an artistic ambition free of the commercial demands of the market. What this usually entails is that the text is focused on reflecting with nuance the details of the human condition, with an ear for literary rhythms and the artwork is geared more towards artistic criteria used to classify fine art. What this means is that the images on the page may be created not to display explosive action with bright colors usually seen in widespread comics, but rather focus on providing mood, emotion and qualities more easily associated with the inner world of the human being. This may be achieved by the employment of classical and contemporary artistic tools of comic book creation or with tools usually associated with art that may be found in museums, such as painting, photography and sculpture. While these qualities may be observed in the works of numerous graphic novel creators, some tread the line between what is considered high-art and what is considered more as a product for mass consumption, namely the comic book. This paper focuses on the graphic novel art of three artists, namely Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell and Adrian Tomine, that have been able to carve themselves a place for their works to be considered both high-art and products with entertainment value to be consumed by the public due to the common nostalgic, melancholic vein that may be found among their works and more importantly among the way they create and use their illustrations. The similarity of the approach to illustration of the graphic novelists to the artworks of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century woodblock print artist Kawase Hasui aims to contribute to the discourse

on graphic novels and provide a source for further understanding of this art form.

## **2. Landscape Illustrations in the Graphic Novels of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell and Adrian Tomine**

Although art that is concerned with depicting elements of nature may be found in the earliest of times, the tradition of landscape painting that evokes emotion and atmosphere may be traced back to Minoan frescos of around 1500 B.C. and the ink Shan-shui (mountain-water) paintings of 5<sup>th</sup> century China. Within these artworks the depiction of vast, real or imaginary panoramas that contain mountains, waterfalls, the sea or a lake where the hint of human existence is usually indicated by a small human figure or a living situation such as a small house may be found. A similarity between the view towards landscape painting in the East and the West is the acknowledgment of an emotional and fairly spiritual component in landscape painting that draws upon Daoism in Asia and becomes overtly clear with Romanticism in Europe. It may be this exact quality that is captured within the panels portraying landscapes that invoke melancholy in the graphic novels of Ware, Bell and Tomine.

The illustration styles of the mentioned graphic novelists although widely dissimilar, may be considered to have a common strain in that they are composed of a blend of cartoon-like quality and realistic depiction, at times relying heavily on the accurate proportions of living beings and objects in order to convey them appropriately and at other times, taking flights of fancy in order to accentuate the emotion of a situation. This common quality of the illustration styles of these artists lends itself perfectly to both comedy and tragedy. Making use of their own personal styles, the artists present some emotional scenes through illustrations of landscapes that show natural elements such as the sky and trees. These scenes may also include elements of modern living such as cars and buildings. By illustrating the timelessness of nature and the specific time of modern living, it may be said that the artists achieve creating an atmosphere that is more in line with melancholy and nostalgia.

To understand the effect of the illustrations of the graphic novelists, one might try to understand their writing and more importantly their characters and their individual approaches. Franklin Christenson “Chris” Ware is known and well-regarded around the world (his work was awarded the Grand Prize in 2021 at the Angouleme comic book festival which held a retrospective of his work at the festival of 2022, a similar exhibition taking place at Centre Pompidou in Paris) for

being the American cartoonist that has meticulously crafted works of fine detailed illustration, writing, lettering, design and overall publication. Often focusing on childhood experiences, nostalgia and melancholy, as well as routinely including “peculiar and inscrutable devices, external to the comics narrative” which by their density reward those readers who are more committed (Ball, Kuhlman, 2010: 90), Charles Schulz’s Peanuts, as well as George Herriman’s Krazy Kat may be included among Ware’s artistic influences. Ware notes that he views drawings as a visual analog to the way human beings remember and conceptualize the world and describes it by stating that he sees the black outlines of cartoons as visual approximations of the way humans remember general ideas and goes by saying “I try to use naturalistic color underneath them to simultaneously suggest a perceptual experience, which I think is more or less the way we actually experience the world as adults” (Bengal, 2006). He describes this view as meaning that people do not really “see” the world any more after a certain age but rather name, categorize, identify and try to figure out how things fit together.

Using traditional, manual art tools such as paper, ink and rulers to create geometric works that have the precise appearance of having been created with the use of a vector-based application on a computer (Fig. 1), Ware puts forth the idea that comics are not illustration due to illustration being “the application of artistic technique or style to suit a commercial or ancillary purpose” whereas according to him, comics do not illustrate anything but rather tell a story (Brownlee, 2007).

About Ware’s personality, his wife Marnie notes that the artist “has the particular skill of describing or reflecting on the beauty of life, noticing the connections and patterns between time and space and how human relationships exist” (Braithwaite, 2017: 191). She goes on to describe her husband as being “so nostalgic and sentimental” that he is inclined to crying about a thing that might have happened five minutes ago and that he “deeply misses people and things from his childhood that he loved, as well as things from the more recent past” which leads her to believe that it is his love for people and things and the knowledge that they are impermanent that make him “so sad” (Braithwaite, 2017: 192).



Figure 1. A panel from Chris Ware's "Rusty Brown". (Ware, C. (2019). *Rusty Brown*. New York City: Pantheon.)

While Ware has developed, a self-proclaimed “deliberately synthetic” way of cartooning over time, that aims to create a visual language that makes it clear for the reader that they are reading fiction and not a biography (Bengal, 2006), Gabrielle Bell’s sequential artistic output it composed mainly of autobiographical comics which she describes as feeling truer than fiction and perhaps is a way of working out issues and doing therapy on one’s own self (Oksman, 2020). This may be evidenced in one of her comics from *Lucky* (Fig. 2), a collection of her short stories, where in one panel, her comics avatar crawls through a small door where the caption declares that an artist once told her that to be creative, one needs to go into “a place inside yourself”, also the name given to the book about Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell’s works titled “*The Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell: A Place Inside Yourself*”, and that to be able to do that, one needs to be alone (Bell, 2006: 7). It seems like, unlike Ware, Bell views the past as being “very vague” and the future as “vague and fuzzy” therefore tries to concentrate on being present by practicing meditation, trying to keep herself in the moment which she describes as being “very intense and acute” (Dueben, 2017). This feeling of intense acuteness and the feeling that “everything can just go at any moment” may be likened to Ware’s particular skill in noticing and reflecting on the beauty of life and also his sadness at the impermanence of the people and things he loves. Of Bell’s graphic novel “*The Voyeurs*”, Ware notes that it is “the work of a mature writer, if not one of the most sincere voices of her literary generation” before adding that he has loved it (Bell, 2012: back cover).

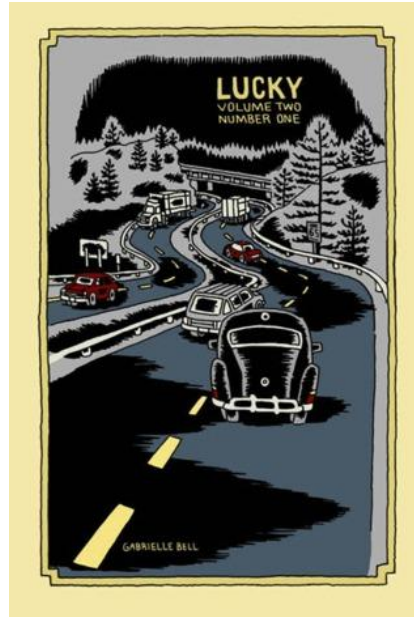


Figure 2. The cover to Gabrielle Bell's "Lucky: Volume Two, Number One". (Bell, G. (2007). Lucky: Volume Two, Number One. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.)

Adrian Tomine, like Gabrielle Bell, is an American graphic novelist, "one of the most gifted graphic novelists of our time" (Tomine, 2015: back cover) according to Wired magazine, who along with creating fictional comics content, often does autobiographical comics as well. With a drawing style somewhat reminiscent of the artists of the "ligne claire" (clear line) (Fig 3.) movement of European comics pioneered by Hergé, which is said to have been influenced both by American comics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Japan's Shin-hanga woodblock prints, Tomine creates stories that often blend melancholy with comedy. Tomine has noted in 2015 that when one has little children like he did then, one is constantly reminded of melancholy and comedy since one goes through these extremes of human emotion and experience all the time (Gagliano, 2015). Tomine, as with Ware and Bell, makes acute observations into the colors of nature, making great use of it in his artwork, sometimes making unexpected choices in order to create realism or invoke a feeling or mood. Of Tomine's book "Killing and Dying", a name relating to a stand-up comic either "killing" a comic set with their successful jokes or "dying" on stage, Ware has stated that it is a work that he is "amazed and heartened by" and defines it as "That Book" which "is developed enough in its attitude, humanity and complexity that it speaks maturely for itself" (Tomine, 2015: back cover).

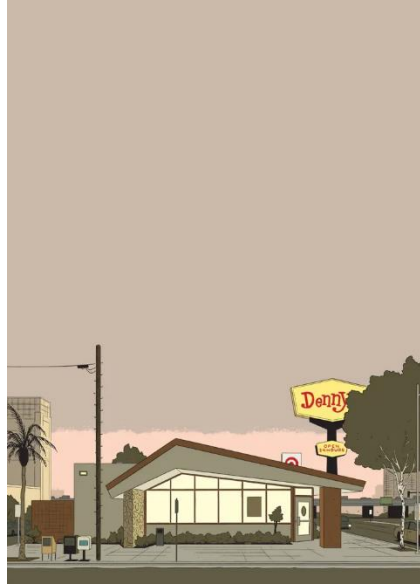


Figure 3. The cover art of Adrian Tomine's "Killing and Dying". (Tomine, A. (2015). Killing and Dying. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.)

While Ware works in a tightly controlled style, depicting well thought out landscapes within works carefully constructed and designed, Bell represents scenes and landscapes in a freer form and thus may be considered stylistically a little more expressive in her depictions. On the other hand, Tomine's work carries characteristics from both and is more focused on modern cityscapes. Despite their individual approaches, all three graphic novelists use elements of landscapes and their representation akin to Kawase Hasui's woodblock prints to depict an enriched sense of emotion through their work.

### **3. Landscape Depictions in the Woodblock Prints of Kawase Hasui**

It is mainly the woodblock prints of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), well-known for his work titled "Great Wave Off Kanagawa", and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) that have brought the focus of ukiyo-e, the Japanese woodblock print art of 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, from courtesans and famous people to landscapes (Harris, 2010: 191). Unlike the landscape prints of earlier times that abstractions of imaginary places using natural elements such as the Sun and the mountains as decorative devices, Hokusai and Hiroshige's landscapes depict particular places with the use of creative compositions and vibrant colors. While Hokusai's art reflects his various influences including Chinese and Western art that made him a world-renowned artist, Hiroshige's landscapes were instrumental in the shaping of the style of the European Impressionists as well as Vincent van Gogh. After the passing of Hokusai and Hiroshige, art dealer and publisher Shozaburo

Watanabe, recognizing the interest for Japanese prints in Europe and North America, turns his attention to commissioning artists for the production of original prints that feature a more traditional Japan in a style similar to Western watercolor painting. This action leads to the birth of the “Shin-hanga”, the “new woodblock prints” movement of which Kawase Hasui is a major part. Hasui, who almost exclusively works on landscape and townscape prints with seasonal themes such as “spring blossoms, summer rains, autumn foliage and gentle snowfalls” (Harris, 2010: 199), not only works on prints of well-known places, but also on prints developed through his sketches made during his travels to calm and relaxing locales either away from or at the edge of a modern metropolis.

The Shin-hanga of Hasui, based on his watercolors made during his travels (Fig. 4), reflects his background in both traditional Japanese painting and Western painting in that, within the prints, one may observe both a focus on the depiction of landscapes and a striving towards capturing their poetry as in Japanese art as well as representing fleeting light, a foregoing of the black line and flat color of traditional printing and the expression of individual mood as is the custom in Western, especially Impressionist painting which itself was shaped by the Japanese ukiyo-e.



Figure 4. Watercolor (left) and woodblock print (right) of “Full Moon at Matsuyama Castle” by Kawase Hasui. (Hasui, K. (1953). Full Moon at Matsuyama Castle. <http://shinhanga.net/hasuiwc.htm>)

With his works, Kawase Hasui represents nature in its quiet, poetic glory, combining it with the everyday living of the people, which is in line with the spirit of the aforementioned graphic novelists’ works. Hasui’s Shin-hanga, admired for their soothing effects, are rich in poetic sentiment and offer a moment of calm, depicting landscapes and townscapes that are tranquil and



obscure in urbanizing Japan (Sompo Museum, 2021).

#### **4. The Effects of Impressionism and Ukiyo-e on Landscape Painting**

As artists associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century art movement that focused on ordinary, everyday subjects and the accurate depiction of the changing qualities of natural light with the creative usage of color to reproduce light and shadow, the Impressionists (the participants of the movement that gains its name from Claude Monet's painting of 1872 titled "Impression, soleil levant" which comes to mean "Impression, Sunrise") often used wet paint on wet paint in short, thick strokes, without mixing colors but rather using them side by side and generally foregoing the use of the color black. It is widely accepted that the germ of the ideas for Impressionism were rooted in the rise to prominence of photography that led painters to turn towards reflecting subjectivity and their individual impressions of nature in their works through the exploitation of the medium of painting (Levinson, 1997: 81) and the influence of Japanese art, especially ukiyo-e prints imported from Japan after the reopening of the Japanese ports in 1854 to trade with the West following the self-isolation period that had commenced in 1639 (Gunn, 2003: 151) (Fig. 5). Photography inspires Impressionists to represent momentary action, not only in the fleeting lights of a landscape, but in the day-to-day lives of people. The artists focus on the one thing they can do better than a photograph; introduce and augment subjectivity in the conception of an image (Brodskaja, 2010: 27). Ukiyo-e, that literally means "pictures of the floating world", has been described as the "spiritual rendering of the realism and naturalness of the daily life" (Jarves, 2018: 77), is more than an art of printing. This is the name given to "a peculiar kind of design" (Fenollosa, 1901: 12) brought about by the requirements of the printing technology and the aesthetic sensibilities of the time. Some characteristics of Impressionist painting incorporated through the Japanese influence, also called "Japonisme" may be described as flat compositions as well as flat use of color, meaning solid planes of vibrant color separated by bold lines. As was discussed earlier, Shin-hanga artists like Kawase Hasui veer towards a different approach closer to that of the Impressionist artists in that color, effects of light, perspective and depth and softer lines became a part of the new prints, foregoing the Eastern and Western sensibilities so as to appeal to both audiences and markets. This middle ground of sometimes employing flat yet realistic color, attention to the effects of light, line thickness and density, a wide-angle approach to perspective may often be observed in the works of the mentioned graphic novelists.



Figure 5. Whistler, J. M. (1875). *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*. 68.3 × 51.2 cm, Oil on Canvas. Tate Britain, London.

### **5. Nostalgic and Melancholic Landscapes in Graphic Novels and Shin-hanga Compared**

The works of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell and Adrian Tomine, along with the works of Kawase Hasui share some similar traits in that they try to reflect moments of calm, tranquility, silence where scenes of nature, empty cityscapes, night time, the changing of natural light, snow, rain and similar elements play a key role. Here, it can be stated that what is reflected is calm and tranquility in what is usually a bustling urban environment. The much-required silence found within the city or the modern life allows both the characters within the work and the viewers/readers to be present in the present moment. This calm and silence are sometimes achieved by illustrations which are like snapshots taken with a camera and the use of compositions with large negative spaces (Fig. 6).

*Landscapes In The Graphic Novels Of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell And Adrian Tomine: Attributes Shared With Woodblock Prints Of Kawase Hasui*



Figure 6. “Konjikido in Snow, Hiraizumi” (1957) by Kawase Hasui (left) and a panel similar in approach from Chris Ware's “Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth” (right), (Ware, C. (2003). Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth. New York City: Pantheon).

As with ukiyo-e, impressionism and Shin-hanga after it, the subject of the woodblock prints and the graphic novels often deal with everyday life, opting to put forth its beauty. Houses, vehicles, in the case of graphic novels, places such as shopping malls that are observable and may be accepted as a common part of people’s lives, become part of the pictures in order to represent the beauty in the common place and thing (Fig. 7).

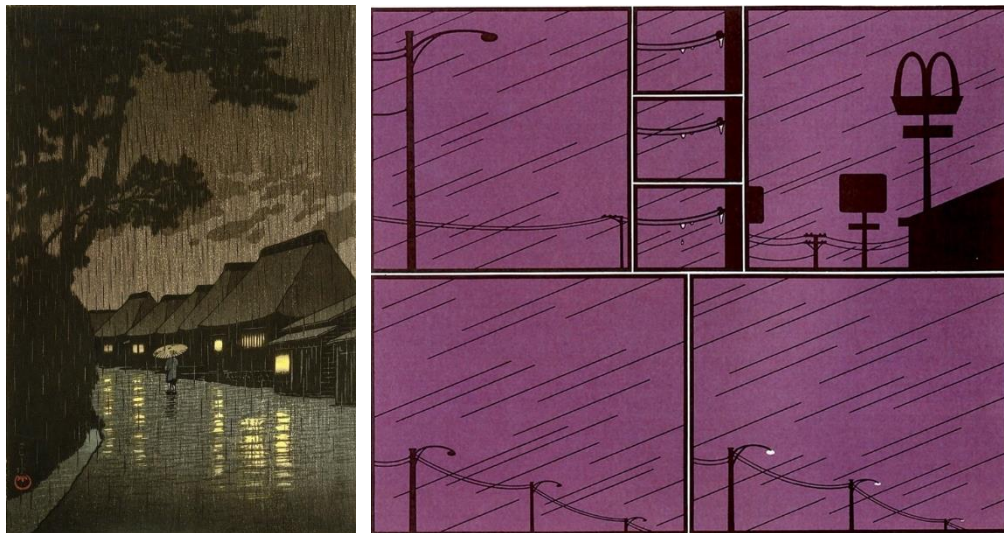


Figure 7. “Rain at Maekawa in Sagami Province” (1932) (left) and 7 panels including the specific atmosphere of rain from “Building Stories” by Chris Ware (right), (Ware, C. (2012). Building Stories. New York City: Pantheon).

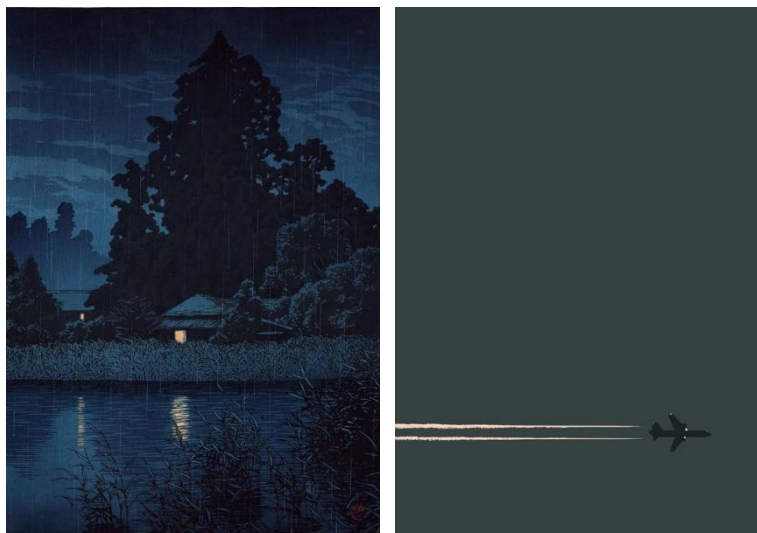
The representation of fleeting lights of a landscape depicted sometimes by the realistic and other times by the unexpected use of color is effective in creating mood and a relatable representation

of nature and the topic illustrated (Fig. 8). Close observation and representation of the many different colors, angles and effects of light plays a key role in these works.



Figure 8. "The Road to Nikko" (1930) (left) and a panel from "Green Verses" by Gabrielle Bell (right), (Bell, G. (2010). Green Verses. GabrielleBell.com. <https://gabriellebell.com/2010/05/10/green-verses/>)

The styles of representation of the artist serve to achieve a feeling of the sadness brought about by the notion of transience as with nostalgia and melancholy. The photographic snapshot-like representation of the beauty of nature and the common everyday living may create longing in the viewer since what is depicted is not everlasting and will cease to exist with time. The depiction of the beauty of life alongside its fleeting nature is among the common qualities and strengths of these artists' works (Fig. 9).



*Landscapes In The Graphic Novels Of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell And Adrian Tomine: Attributes Shared With Woodblock Prints Of Kawase Hasui*

Figure 9. “Night Rain at Omiya” (1930) (left) and a page from Adrian Tomine’s “Killing and Dying” (right), (Tomine, A. (2020). *Killing and Dying*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly).

## 6. Conclusion

This study aims to uncover the approaches that are employed in the creation of the emotionally impactful landscape representations in graphic novels by determining their common attributes with the Shin-hanga of Kawase Hasui. The displayed artwork is chosen to contribute to the existing discourse on the validity of graphic novels as a viable art form capable of an elevated level of communication with the audience and provide a basis for further understanding of this medium. The beauty and nostalgic, melancholic nature of the works of Chris Ware, Gabrielle Bell, and Adrian Tomine, carry common characteristics with the Shin-hanga of Kawase Hasui although they are created at very different times and places. This connection between the artists, their artworks and their audience seems to confirm that both with graphic novels and the Shin-hanga, an emotional nerve has been hit within the public sensibility. The expressed awareness of the beauty and the finite nature of life through these landscapes urge the viewers to connect with the beauty of their own lives and its transience, which make the works even more powerful.

## References

- Ball, D. M; Kuhlman, M. B. (2010). *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Bell, G. (2012). *The Voyeurs*. Minneapolis: Uncivilized Books.
- Bell, G. (2006). *Lucky*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- Bengal, R. (2006). *Interviews: On Cartooning*. POV/American Documentary. <http://archive.pov.org/tintinandi/interview-on-cartooning/7/>
- Braithwaite, J. (2017). *Chris Ware: Conversations (Conversations with Comic Artists Series)*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Brodskaja, N. (2010). *Impressionism*. New York City: Parkstone Press International.
- Brownlee, J. (2007). *Chris Ware on Cartooning*. Wired.com. <https://www.wired.com/2007/04/chris-ware-on-c/>
- Dueben, A. (2017). *A Quiet Conflagration: An Interview with Gabrielle Bell*. LARB: Los Angeles Review of Books. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-quiet-conflagration-an-interview-with-gabrielle-bell/>
- Eisner, W. (2000). *Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner*. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press.
- Fenollosa, E. F. (1901). *An Outline of the History of Ukiyo-e*. Kobayashi: Tokyo.
- Gagliano, R. (2015). *Adrian Tomine on Schlubby Dads and Melancholy Comedy*. The Dinner Party Download. <https://www.dinnerpartydownload.org/adrian-tomine/>

Gunn, G. C. (2003). *First globalization: the Eurasian exchange, 1500 to 1800*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Harris, F. (2011). *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing.

Jarves, J. J. (2018). *A Glimpse of the Art of Japan*. London: Forgotten Books.

Kavanagh, B. (2000). *The Alan Moore Interview: Northampton / "Graphic Novel"*.

Blather.net. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140226072653/http://www.blather.net/articles/amoore/northampton.html>

Levinson, P. (1997) *The Soft Edge; a Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution*. New York City: Routledge.

McCloud, S. (1993): *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York City: Kitchen Sink Press.

Murray, C. (2022). *Graphic Novel: Literature*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

Oksman, T. (2020) *An Interview with Gabrielle Bell*. *The Believer*, Culture.org.

<https://culture.org/logger/an-interview-with-gabrielle-bell/>

Kyle, R. (1964). *The Future of "Comics"*. *TheComicBooks.com /*

*TheGraphicNovels.com*. <https://www.thecomickbooks.com/misc/Richard%20Kyle%20The%20Future%20of%20Comics.pdf>

Sompo Museum. (2021). *Kawase Hasui: Travel and Nostalgic Landscape*. *Sompomuseum.org*.

<https://www.sompo-museum.org/en/exhibitions/2021/kawasehasui/>

Tomine, A. (2020). *Killing and Dying*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.