

THE CRAFT OF A COVER

GRAPHIC DESIGNER PAUL SAHRE EXPLORES HOW A COVER IS THE DOORWAY TO A COMIC BOOK.

BY PAUL SAHRE

What is a Marvel cover? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to start with what it is not. A Marvel cover is not timid. It is not dull. It is not shy, self-serious, or elitist. And like all comic book covers, a Marvel cover is also not art—though it is an *art form*, and one that Marvel has perfected and reinvented time and time again.

It's a curious distinction—art and art form—but an important one. After all, a comic book cover is not created for its own purpose. It has a job to do: a cover must differentiate itself on comic book racks filled with colorful artwork. It has to create anticipation, grab your attention, and set the stage for the story that follows. Most importantly, a comic book cover has to sell. Every Marvel cover is a response to an ever-changing mix of factors, all in the pursuit of capturing the reader's eye. In that way, comic book covers are more closely associated with design than art.

I design book covers, for literary authors mostly. I am also a life-long member of the FOOM (Friends of Ol' Marvel). While it's true that comic and fiction covers use very different visual languages and address very different subject matters, once you get past the superficial differences, a comic book and a book cover function in a similar way. All covers act as a doorway to draw readers in and give them a sense of what they should expect if they choose to enter. Before a comic can be bought and read, it has to create its own gravity; it has to coax you to pick it up. Regardless of whether a reader sees it in a comic book shop or in a digital environment, the challenge is always the same: it needs to be noticed.

The basic layout of a cover is guided by constraints. Most comics follow a convention of title, logo, publisher, price, issue number, and date occupying the top third of the cover. On the cover of *Amazing Spider-Man* #2 (1963), Steve Ditko introduced the concept of the corner box, a small box in the upper-left corner of the page that featured a vignette of the main characters present in the book. This top-third branding developed from the need to help readers identify titles quickly from a distance. Traditionally, comics were displayed in store magazine racks with books overlapping so that only the top third of the comic was visible. The most ubiquitous example of this was the spinner rack, a rotating wire stand that held dozens of titles at mom-and-pop corner stores. These old-school displays are now mostly extinct due to the rise of the local comic book shop in the late '70s and early '80s.

But it's the bottom two-thirds of the page where a Marvel cover distinguishes itself. Everything about a Marvel cover is an exaggeration. It often focuses on creating the illusion of three-dimensional space out of the confines of the flat, printed page—think forced perspective, extreme size shifts, and direct eye contact with characters charging out from the page. Covers feature characters assuming heroic poses, surreal montages, and plenty of hand-to-hand combat. There are cliff-hanger scenarios involving bondage or entrapment of some kind or another, straight out of *Perils of Pauline* (although Pauline was never actually tied to railroad tracks). There are ticking time bombs, rooms filling with water, and characters who appear to be dead but probably aren't.

In short, a Marvel cover simply pushes everything further than the competition. While a DC cover might feature a group of colorfully costumed characters sitting around a table having a meeting, the Marvel cover would portray a similar meeting—only the table would be on fire, the characters would be engaged in combat with a giant green creature, and all around them arrows and callouts featuring hand-drawn typography blast hyperbolic messages at the reader urging them to pick up the issue or else.

Today, the same spirit applies, except Marvel covers are more streamlined. There are no advertisements, cover lines are subdued (if they're present at all), and the art has taken on a painterly quality, full of lifelike detail enabled by software. Still, Marvel's identity is tied to its ability to sell its comic books better than anyone else. It has perfected the art of linking action with the sales pitch. The way Marvel historically embraced the crass and the commercial defined the early aesthetics of the comic book and made it into a medium with true longevity.

So what is a Marvel cover? The answer to this question is obvious. A Marvel cover is STARTLING, SENSE SHATTERING, DAZZLING, FABULOUS, STRANGE, BREATHTAKING, UNCANNY, FANTASTIC, AND AMAZING. It says so, right there on the cover.

Paul Sahre is one of the most influential graphic designers working today. He has run his own practice since 1997 and is a frequent visual contributor to the *New York Times*. Sahre has designed book covers for authors such as Chuck Klosterman and Malcolm Gladwell, and has authored books including *Two-Dimensional Man: A Graphic Memoir*.

