

# THE ART OF DESIGNING MARVEL

BY LIZ STINSON

A comic book is the sum of its parts. Together the artwork, characters, logos, layouts, lettering, covers, and colors that comprise a comic book tell a narrative that none of these elements could accomplish on their own. Comics are often referred to as an art form, and while that's certainly true, they are also deeply tied to the world of design, where the arrangement of visual elements on a page is created to serve an explicit purpose. In the case of comics, that purpose is to tell a story—to excite, engross, and sometimes even enrage readers. In short, a comic is designed to entertain.

Comics do so through a distinctly graphic mode of storytelling. Unlike a novel, which is heavy with text, or a picture book that is mostly devoid of words, comic books combine both image and text to create a unique narrative format whose graphic elements, like onomatopoeia, word balloons, and logo lettering, bring the medium to life. With this book, we're celebrating the publisher's distinct visual language by looking at its vast universe of comic books through a graphic design lens for the first time ever.

Over the years, Marvel has inspired generations of creatives through the design of its comic books. Along the way, its influence has seeped into various facets of visual culture, including fine art, graphic design, advertising, gaming, and digital interfaces. The natural interplay between comics and visual culture at large set the stage for the book you're about to read.

In that spirit of expansiveness, this book is not a textbook on comics nor a how-to guide—credit must go to the masters of that art form, including Scott McCloud, Will Eisner, and many of the contributors whose voices you'll find in this book. Rather, it's a celebration of what has defined Marvel's approach to visual storytelling over the decades.

Throughout the book, we've created opportunities for you to pause and appreciate the minutiae of what makes Marvel's graphic language unique. The book is arranged to reflect that each major element of a comic book—be it the layout, logo, lettering, cover, or color palette—is a distinct craft with its own nuances, norms, and exceptions to established rules. But also that those individual elements are only as strong as their cumulative effect.

Take lettering, a discipline that is tied to both the art of hand lettering and digital typography. On the surface, lettering appears to exist squarely in the realm of typography and text, but it's also a form of layout design that must carefully balance the craft of lettering itself within the larger ecosystem of a comic book page. As the letterer Nate Piekos of Blambot smartly observed: "All letterers are graphic designers, whether they know it or not."

That attitude is pervasive throughout *Marvel By Design*. The best comic book artists, regardless of discipline, understand that the success of their own work relies on all of the disparate parts of a comic book coming together. For people who have never made a comic, it's often surprising to learn that most books are not the vision of a single artist, but rather a collective effort, where people lean on each other to fulfill their end of the creative bargain. In the Marvel Universe, this collaborative way of working was so foundational to the company's DNA that it earned an eponymous nickname—the Marvel Method.

As writer John Rhett Thomas explores in his piece on page 30, Marvel engineered a form of creative alchemy that allowed its team to bypass the constraints of limited money, time, and resources to create some of the most iconic storytelling moments of the 20th and 21st centuries. It did so through the ingenuity of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, whose mind-meld approach to comic book creation allowed them to dash off pages at an unprecedented clip. It's not an overstatement to say that Marvel's cross-disciplinary way of working has proven to be an example for generations of young artists and designers eager to explore their own creative capabilities, both inside and out of the comic book industry.

That connection is directly tied to the world of graphic design as well. In fact, designers Mike Essl and Paul Sahre, both of whom have essays in this book, recall how their early love of Marvel comics set the stage for them to become the designers they are today. Despite—or even because of—comic books' unabashed refusal to adhere to the canonical rules of "good" design, they have had an outsized impact on the way many designers think about communicating visually. Comic books are loud and brash. They play by their own rules, which has

