WAYNE BORING TO TAKE OFF IN THE 40s, DOZENS OF ARTISTS LIKE JOSE RIBERA, AL PLASTING, IRVIN HAMMER, IRV WRIGHT, AND GEORGE SORENTI PONTE TO PRODUCE HIS MAN OF ADVENTURES...

...BUT THE WORK OF WAYNE BORING EMERGES AS THE MOST NOTABLE OF THE STRONG ARTISTS. BORING'S MAN OF STEEL...

...CITIES BECAME SKYSCRAPERS, UTILIZATIONS OF VERTICAL LINES.

...BY TRANSFORMING HIM INTO A MASSIVE, MUSCLED VERSION OF KIRBY'S SUPERMAN... HIS EXPRESSIVE FACES AND TIGHT, INVENTIVE RENDERINGS BRED NEW LIFE INTO SUPERMAN'S TORN HUE...

...SUPERMAN BEGAN TO LOOK THE PART. BORING'S CLASSIC FIGURE REMAINS AS THE MODEL FOR TODAY'S SUPERMAN?

—JIM STERANKO, THE INTERNATIONAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1970
Curt Swan!

The Superman character evolved. More felt we could get a little more realistic in our portrayals. So we made him a little more believable. We wanted people to relate to him better.

Superman’s appeal is that he’s this ideal man, pure. The American way, still striving to do what’s right. Things right. Dope things right.

The Art History of Superman
By Arlen Schumer

When Fiona Russell, Curator-Director of Operations of the Words & Pictures Museum asked me to create a series of didactic panels about Superman’s graphic history for their Spotlight on Superman exhibit, the old saw, “Be careful what you wish for...you may well get it” sprang to mind. Just last year, I wrote and designed The Graphic History of Batman for Words & Pictures’ Batman Retrospective—10 55”x27” panels that fit into the 5 double-sided frames that hang suspended in the Museum’s Permanent Collection gallery—and, though they were a lot of work, I was pleased with how they turned out, and so confidently crowed to Ms. Russell that if Words & Pictures were ever to plan an exhibition on Superman, I would love to design a treatment of similar scope. “You may well get it” indeed! I’m thrilled and honored to be able to present my take on the art and artists that have shaped Superman over the past 60 years.

Though I would say Batman is my favorite comic book character, the iconic qualities of Superman—the primary colors he wears, the “S” shield (as recognizable as the swastika), the telescopic logotype by Ira Schnapp (as recognizable as the Coca-Cola logo)—are maybe more primal, and appeal to the graphic designer in me. And perhaps more importantly, the Weisinger-era Superman stories probably formed the basis of my moral upbringing, while Curt Swan was my first “favorite artist” (though I didn’t even
know his name at the time, thanks to DC’s no-credit policy). As a professional illustrator, I recently designed a couple of Superman 3-D diorama greeting cards for the Pop Shots company (for which I needed my pencil drawings approved by Joe Orlando, then DC’s overseer of licensed artwork). And most recently, I gave a slide show memorial retrospective on Curt Swan for the Connecticut chapter of the National Cartoonists Society.

I chose my title, The Art History of Superman, not only to differentiate it from my Batman title, but for the chance to design with the original, classic Action Comics logotype “A”, my favorite graphic “A.” I approach these panels as if I were creating giant double-page magazine spreads, highlighting the visual material and supplementing it with columns and captions of text. Unlike the Batman project, I only had 6 panels to work with this time around, so my selection and editing had to be judicious. After leading with Joe Shuster’s proto-Superman drawings and his original black and white newspaper panels (cut up and reconfigured to form page 1 of Action Comics #1), I titled panel #2 “Shuster and Company,” because some of the earliest and most iconic Superman images were created by Shuster “ghosts” like Fred Ray, who drew the first—and best—patriotic Superman cover, issue #14 (January-February 1941).

As a lifetime lover of the Superman cartoons by Max and Dave Fleischer—still the greatest realistic human figure cartoons ever made—I felt they deserved a panel of their own. Not only were they amazingly faithful to Shuster’s original model of the character, but their influence on today’s comic artists and animators is undeniably great: Frank Miller dedicated his Dark Knight in part to the Fleischer brothers, while the beautiful Batman: The Animated Series is a brilliant homage to the Superman cartoons; its creators, Bruce Timm and Co., also designed the recent Superman animated series, thus bringing the Fleischer look full circle.

Wayne Boring, the Superman artist of the 1950’s (though his career began as one of Shuster’s earliest assistants and continued through the 60’s), commands his own panel. To me, Boring is the equivalent of Batman’s Dick Sprang—the distinctive yet
uncredited Superman ghost artist who became known to the Baby Boom Generation as the “good” Superman artist, largely through the reprints in the Superman annuals of the 60’s.

But the Superman artist of that decade—and arguably the character’s definitive delineator—was Curt Swan, who drew Superman practically full-time from 1958 through ‘86. His body of work is so staggering—literally thousands of pages and covers (see Comic Book Marketplace #57, March ‘98, for a complete Swan checklist)—that to limit Swan to one panel is almost a disservice to the breadth of his career. To my eye, his best work divides roughly into that inked by the late George Klein (who was the Joe Sinnott to Swan’s Jack Kirby) in the 60’s, and the great Murphy Anderson in the early 70’s.

With only one panel left to sum up Superman’s post-Swan artistic history, I decided to turn the final panel into a triptych: Superman by Neal Adams (representing the 70’s, as he and writer Denny O’Neill were called in by Weisinger-successor Julius Schwartz to modernize the Man of Steel, as they had done to Batman prior), John Byrne (who in ‘86 revamped Superman’s entire history, while his drawing incorporated the feel of Christopher Reeve’s movie Superman), and Alex Ross, whose photo-realistic, painted Superman defines the character for the 90’s; not the aged Superman of his Kingdom Come series, but his most recent depiction of the short-haired, primary-colored, classic Superman. Ross’ Superman harkens back to Shuster’s, bookending my graphic retrospective.

The Words & Pictures Museum’s Spotlight on Superman exhibit opens on July 2, 1998 and runs through August.