

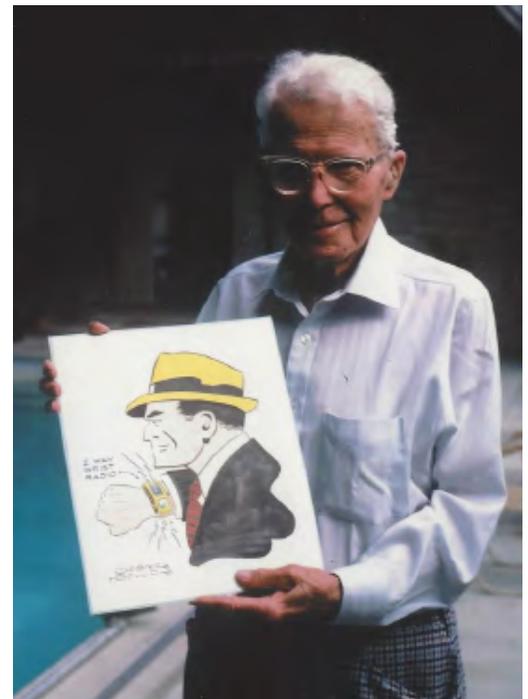
DICK TRACY



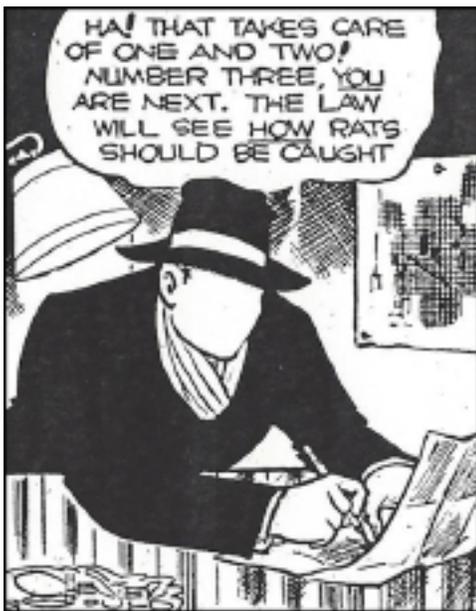
How Chester Gould Created Characters

"Calling all cars!" "Calling all cars!" "Be on the lookout for a person of interest. Description as follows: flat head, hooded eyelids, pug-nosed, fish lips and freckles. Known as Flattop." A character fitting this description would be hard to miss by the police or by the readers of the Dick Tracy comic strip. Uniquely named characters appearing in exciting, pulse-pounding stories with the stories being the walls on which cartoonist Chester Gould hung his art. Foremost in this display of art were villains whose names fit bizarre images: Pruneface of the weathered, furrowed face; the Brow with a forehead resembling a stairway to evil; the Mole, a subterranean sewer scurrying creature; all boldly drawn as if by a nightmare bound police artist. And nightmares these pen and ink characters caused in the readers of the day.

From where did cartoonist Gould imagine these villains? Many started with a name. While listening to the war news on the radio in 1943, the cartoonist heard that a ..."Flattop went down in the Pacific". The nickname of the World War II aircraft carrier provided the spark for his most famous villain. But from where did the image come? Gould kept no notes, no preliminary sketches, no first drafts. When a character saw print in the newspaper, all character studies were discarded, and when a villain was eliminated by detective Tracy, he also was eliminated from the cartoonist's mind. Save for the classic villains, Gould had no memory of lesser creations. However, if shown a comic strip featuring a specific character, a story, a memory may materialize.



Chester Gould, October, 1984
Photo by Richard Pietrzyk



While his comic strip was known for its gallery of grotesques, the artist also created a type of villain, abstract in design - abstract in that the focus of the design was not the features but the lack of features. The appearance of the Blank (1937) a nightly phantom haunting the city, paved the way for these abstracts. His face, framed by a wide brimmed hat and broad collared trench coat, lacked eyes, nose and mouth, a blank canvas unnerving all who met him including the reader. Once apprehended, then unmasked by detective Dick Tracy, his face was revealed as a Lon Chaney Phantom of the Opera "travesty". The idea of a face hidden by a blank mask may have been suggested to Gould by images of returning veterans of the Great War, whose features were damaged in battle. Many of these men chose facial covering when trying to assimilate back into society. The French termed these the Gueules Cassee (smashed faces).



Later faces in Dick Tracy were covered with hair, hats or hoodies which served as masks. The rotund Oodles (1956) sported a black, cloud-like mass of hair which covered his eyes. A large cloche hat did the same for Mona the Mouthpiece (1961). The bald-headed Brush (1962) had a face full of fine hair which camouflaged his features. As he said "Have you ever seen anyone comb his face?" And the entire 52 members of the 52 Gang (1962) wore black hoods.

With these characters, Gould created two characters in one - the ones depicted with their various coverings and those the reader imagined behind the "masks". Were the eyes large and staring or locked tight in an eternal squint? Was the nose broad, beaklike or broken? The reader became Chester Gould's assistant creating all types of features on these hidden creatures. Once unmasked, many proved to be relatively normal, but this did not stop the viewer from imagining the most outrageous of faces.



However a few villains, when seen, didn't tease the imagination; they defied it. Wormy (1951) was a series of weaving, wiggling lines. How was the cartoonist inspired to create such a grotesque? While at the drawing board at his Woodstock Illinois home studio, Gould once demonstrated the use of his gillot's dip pen and how best to maintain the right amount of India ink. Before felt tip markers or computer generated art, pen points were dipped into little black bottles of liquid ink. Too little ink on the pen nib would produce a less dramatic line; too much and a pendulous drop may fall, splattering the art. During his demo, Gould weaved his pen back and forth creating a snaking line. Then a pair of snaking lines plus an addition of two specks for eyes and the notorious Wormy materialized. Was the simple task of removing excess ink from the artist's pen point the inspiration for the villain?



But faces were not the only things to be found covered in Chester Gould's Dick Tracy. Invariably, each winter, the vibrant colors of the Sunday page or the dramatic black shadows of the dailies would be blanketed by a snowstorm passing through the comic. With flakes swirling about as if in a crystal globe, Gould's snow sequences were examples of grace and design in contrast to the mayhem taking place.



The Aunt Soso story (1961) displays a classic example of Gould's "blizz art". The wealthy Soso, a caricature of the very theatrical Hollywood actress, Tallulah Bankhead, is locked in a plot of revenge against her niece and niece's baby. The two are trapped in a car on a block of ice floating into a vast horizonless lake as a blizzard rages. In Gould's hands, the art presents an almost tranquil feeling. The cartoonist created his snow scenes with a variety of techniques. Blank areas of the panel are covered with finely drawn circular shapes, while daubs of China white opaque speckle black areas, suggesting heavy moisture laden snow. Taking a razor blade, the artist then scraped a series of fine parallel lines, gouging through the surface of the 3-ply stratmore paper and the finished art to indicate wind gusts and hampered visibility - a dynamic sequence, with each panel a tight self-contained composition.

While the readers were in awe of his creative talents, Chester Gould was humble in the assessment of his work. Asked how he came to create such memorable characters and dynamic art, he replied "By working every day on Dick Tracy."

Richard Pietrzyk

(To meet the characters and enjoy the art mentioned in this essay see The Complete Dick Tracy #20, Published by IDW)

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