

# Secrets in the Shadows

The Art & Life of



# Gene Colan



by **Tom Field**

Introduction by Glen David Gold  
Afterword by Mark Staff Brandl

*Gene Colan*  
2/05



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## The Other G.C.

To Gene Colan, there never was anyone quite like the man who shared his initials: Gary Cooper.

Everybody's all-American. The original "strong, silent type" of classic film. Gary Cooper was the leading man among leading men in Hollywood's Golden Age. And from the time he was 10 years old and first saw Cooper as Wild Bill Hickok in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Plainsman* (1936), Colan idolized him.

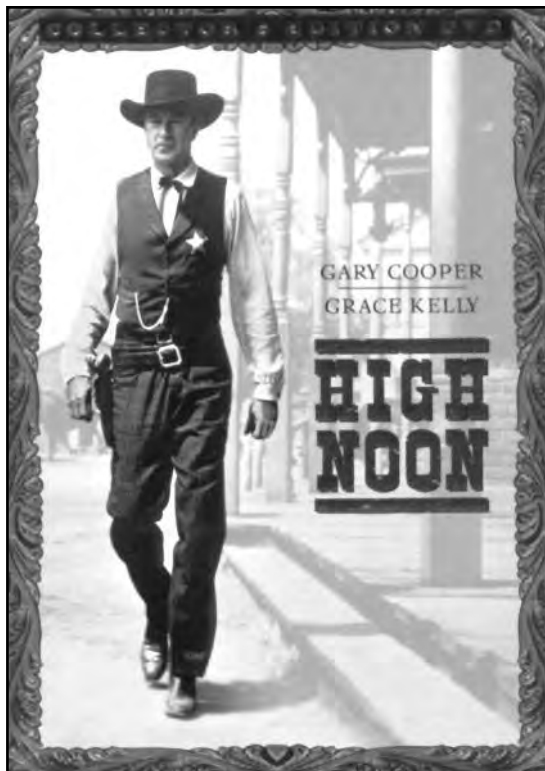
"There was just something about him," Colan says. "He represented the classic American face, and I think every young boy – even grown men – wanted to be very much like him."

Although never much of a student, Colan was always a diehard film buff, and he *studied* Cooper. "I learned as much about him as I could," he recalls. To Colan's delight, he learned that Cooper, born in Montana in 1901, started out just like him – as a cartoonist. "But he couldn't make it as an artist," Colan says. "A lot of his friends had gone out to Hollywood and got jobs as stunt people, so that's what he started to do."

Cooper landed his first lead role in 1926, went on to make memorable movies such as *The Virginian* (1929) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). By 1939, he was making just under \$500,000, which earned him the U.S. Treasury Department's distinction as the nation's top wage earner.

The more he learned about Cooper, the more Colan was impressed. "I used to pick up on little things that he did on screen," Colan says. "I tried to copy every single move. He had a way with his hands that no one else had. He did something with his fingers, wrapped around the stock of a rifle that was very special. I took note of what he did and how he walked, and I tried to do those things."

As an aspiring artist, he also tried to draw Cooper. "It was the



**Gary Cooper:** Colan's idol in one of his best-known films, *High Noon*.

most difficult thing I ever approached," Colan says, recalling how he worked from movie magazine photographs. "To get his likeness was very, very difficult. I concentrated on his eyes, and really didn't go about it in the proper way. My own eyes were extremely untrained at the time."

And then Colan tried to *meet* Cooper.

"It was 1939, I was 13, my parents had gone out to California on a business trip, and they took me with them," Colan says. "When we got there, I asked my father if we could find out where Cooper lived, and someone told us where he was up in Beverly Hills somewhere."

The Colans searched the streets fruitlessly for just a mailbox with Cooper's name on it. As they were about to pack it in, Gene spotted a red roof amidst a clump of trees – an area the Colans had not explored. They then drove up that street, found a beautiful private home – and that was it!

"I looked in the mailbox, where he had some letters, and there was his name on the envelopes," Colan says, chuckling at his youthful indiscretion. "Nobody was home, so I even peeked in the window! I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven."

Colan noted Cooper's address, and later, upon returning home, he penned a letter. "In no time flat, he answered it," Colan says. It was a short, polite response—"To Gene Colan, best wishes, Gary Cooper" – but Colan was blown away by the personal touch. "He wrote out everything in pencil in his own hand, including the envelope with my address on it."

Cooper, of course, went on to enjoy a glorious film career, winning best-actor Oscars for his performances in *Sergeant York* (1941) and *High Noon* (1952) before his death from cancer in 1961.

Colan, too, grew to enjoy a stellar career—as a comic book artist, developing a unique illustrative style, which he lent to the likes of *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Daredevil*, *Dracula* and *Batman*, entertaining generations of comics fans with his cinematic approach to storytelling.

Reflecting, Colan regrets that he never actually met his hero. “If it had been today [with the Internet and fan conventions], there would have been a much greater opportunity to meet him,” he says. “But at the time? No.”

If he *had* met Gary Cooper, what would Colan have done?

“Oh, my God! I’d probably have sat down and cried, he meant so much to me,” Colan says, thinking aloud. “He summed up what a man should be like. Everything he appeared to stand for on the screen sent a clear message about integrity.”

Colan pauses for a minute, then answers:

“I might have asked him if I could see his artwork.”



**Gene Colan:**  
Self-portrait drawn  
in 1970 for  
*Marvelmania*  
magazine.

## The Early Years

**P**icture: A mid-Manhattan town house in the 1930s. It's the boyhood home of Gene Colan, who cradles his father's box camera and walks slowly from room to room, framing his environment like he would a film on a movie screen. "It was like a pan shot," Colan says. "I enjoyed that sensation of seeing the images go by me as I walked from one room to another." And although no one knew so at the time, this exercise was the birth of Gene Colan's cinematic approach to comic book storytelling.

Eugene Jules Colan was born in the Bronx, NY, on Sept. 1, 1926, the only child of Harold and Winifred Levy Colan.

Harold, whose grandparents had emigrated from Germany and changed the family name from "Cohen" to the unique "Colan," was a musician at heart. A violinist, he played for a time in singer Sophie Tucker's band, but the group had broken up by the time Gene was born, and so Harold went to work at his father-in-law's ribbon factory. After the stock market crashed in 1929, signaling the start of the Great Depression, Harold lost his job and moved into the insurance business, where Gene says his dad enjoyed quick success. "He was a great salesman," Colan says. "My father was such a good communicator; he could have been a trial lawyer."

Winifred, in contrast, had the makings of a good field general. A strong-willed, decisive woman from a wealthy family, she had attended Columbia University at a time when many young women didn't pursue college educations—and she clearly headed the Colan household. After nursing young Gene through infancy, Winifred decided she wanted a business interest of her own. So, she began trading vintage German beer steins, which quickly grew into a self-supporting antiques business. Ultimately, Winifred opened her own antiques store, and Harold quit the insurance business to help support it. "She was very bossy—my mother kind of ruled the roost," Gene says. "My father always sort of gave in to her a lot as far as how things should be done. I realized that more and more as I got older, and I didn't always like it. But that's the way it was."

As a young boy, Gene had no interest in school, sports or even socializing with the neighborhood kids. He liked being alone with his imagination. And although he grew up in the heart of the Depression, moving from the Bronx to Manhattan as a toddler, Colan doesn't recall any sense of deprivation. He lived most of his

childhood in a well-to-do neighborhood at 88th and Broadway, and his family always employed a live-in maid. "I wasn't aware of any need for anything," he says. "My parents always saw to it that I had what I needed."

Which isn't to say he always got what he *wanted*.



**Gene as a toddler:** One of the earliest photos of young Eugene, probably about age two, complete with curly locks.





**Harold Colan:** Gene's father with the violin he played in Sophie Tucker's band.

"My mother being quite strict, she didn't give me very much of what I wanted in the way of toys; she thought they were a waste of time and money," Colan says. "She always wanted me to read more books, which of course I never did. I was not a good student; I hated school."

Although nominally raised Jewish, Colan was hardly devout. "I did go to temple [Temple Emmanuel on 5th Ave.]," he says, "and I did as badly if not worse there than I did at regular school." It was a humbling experience, too; attending temple with boys from families even more affluent than his own. When he showed up for his confirmation at age 13, for instance, "I was the only one who arrived by bus; everyone else came in a limo."

Despite his Jewish heritage, Colan was enchanted by the Christmas holiday. "Personally, I always celebrated Christmas," he says. "It was a magical time, and I still think of it as such."



**Mother and child:** Gene with his mother, Winifred.

Every year, Colan saved up his pocket money, and a couple of weeks before Christmas he'd go down to Macy's department store with his favorite aunt, his mother's sister Jewel, and come home with as many presents as he could afford for his family. "I loved doing it; it was such a big deal to me."



**Classic car:** This illustration of an automobile is from the 1930s. Note Colan's use of textured pencils even at that age.

## An Eye for Art

As early as age three, Colan was obsessed with art.

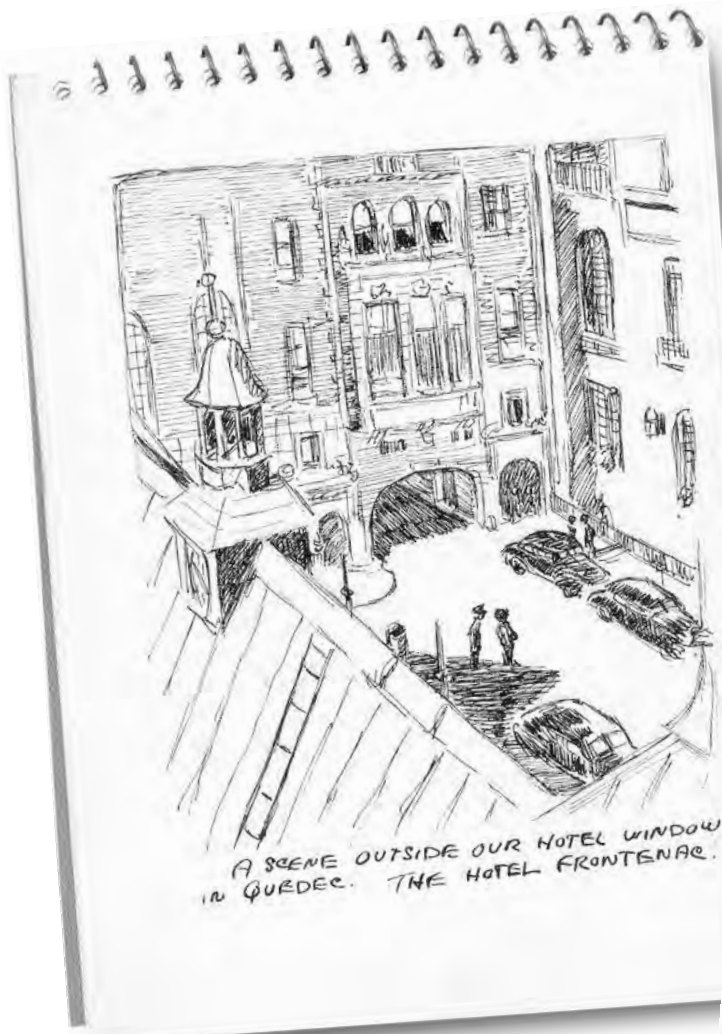
"I drew a lot—I was always drawing," Colan says. "My biggest joy was to be sick in bed, so I wouldn't have to go to school or any of those things, and I would plan out my day to just draw pictures, pictures, pictures. Always with a pencil and a pad that didn't have any lines in it."

Mostly, Colan would draw from magazines, working tirelessly to reproduce the famous Norman Rockwell covers to the *Saturday*

# Gene Colan Portfolio

## Travel Sketches

As a boy traveling with his parents in the 1930s, Gene Colan drew the following sketches on a trip to Quebec. These illustrations were drawn in pen on a small, unlined steno notebook, and reveal lots of hints about Colan's emerging style.



## Emerging Style

**P**icture: Gene Colan at the movies in the 1940s, wondering how he could depict with a pencil what he saw on-screen. How were the sequences staged? How were the night scenes lit? “I developed my drawing style from film,” Colan says. “I would always refer in my head to what I’d seen on the screen, and I would draw my stories that way. So many thematic scenes were shot in the evening, at sunset or in the rain. Warner’s, it seemed, was always staging dramatic scenes in the rain, with the pavement wet – they put a lot of weather in their stories. And I picked up on all that stuff.”

New York City had the perfect place for teen-aged Gene Colan: the School of Industrial Arts (later known as the School of Art and Design – the visual arts version of the performing arts school portrayed in the movie *Fame!*). This public school boasted the best art education in the city, and proved to be the training ground for many of Colan’s eventual contemporaries, including Carmine Infantino, Frank Giacoia and John Romita.

But, alas, Colan’s lackluster study habits betrayed him. “I passed the art test with no problem, but my academic scores were nowhere near high enough,” he recalls.

Having to settle for a traditional education at New York’s George Washington High School, Colan continued to draw, inspired by the movies, and he set his sights on an eventual career in comics.



**Profile:** Undated sketch of Gene’s grandfather.

Then came the war.

When the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, 15-year-old Colan was caught up in the same fervent wave of nationalism that flooded the rest of the country. And two years later, at 17, he even lied about his age and tried to enlist in the Marines.

“I thought it was a very romantic thing to do, very heroic,” Colan says. “But when my father heard about it, he came right down to the recruiter’s office with me and told them I was way underage and had no business enlisting. They took me off the list.”

The service setback did pay career dividends, though. After high school graduation in 1944, Colan was able to use his drawing



**Diploma:** Gene’s high school graduation diploma.



samples to secure his first professional comics work – a summer job as an artist at Fiction House, publisher of genre comics such as *Wings*, *Rangers* and *Fight*.

Working in a small art room at Fiction House's Manhattan office, Colan recalls being impressed by the pros he encountered. "I met Murphy Anderson there," Colan says. "George Tuska used to come up there with his work every now and again, and I was aghast at it, it was so great. Lee Elias would show up. He was almost identical to Milton Caniff. There were several women who worked there, too, as artists – a good mix of people."

And while most of the pros encouraged young Gene, at least one intimidated him: Howard Larsen, who drew steadily for *Jungle Comics* and *Wings*. "He was much older than most of us, and he was quite a cynic," Colan says. "He had a nasty streak in him, and I didn't much care for him."

Years later, when Colan established himself in Stan Lee's bullpen at Timely Comics, Larsen strolled in one day looking for work. "He came over and said hello to me – he knew right away who I was, and I knew who he was," Colan says, "but I didn't have much to say other than 'hello' in kind of a Mickey Mouse laugh. He didn't get the job. It was a shame in a way because he was an older man looking for work, but he didn't get it."

Colan drew only a handful of stories over that summer in Fiction House, among them a one-pager in *Wings Comics* #52 and some five-pagers in *Fight Comics* #23 and *Wings* #53. But the experience was enough to whet his appetite for more.

Alas, the job ended at Labor Day, and as of Sept. 1, 1944, Colan was 18 – old enough for active duty in the military. On Valentine's Day 1945, Colan was activated by the Air Force and prepared to go overseas as a tail gunner.

But before he even got into training, the war in Europe ended with Nazi Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945. "The announcement was made on the field," Colan says. "All the schools shut down, and eventually I was sent to the Pacific Theatre in Manila."

Before he shipped out, though, Colan caught a nasty case of pneumonia.

"I caught it on bivouac in Biloxi, Mississippi, and it hit me like a ton of bricks," Colan says. "I couldn't continue with the rest of the unit; I had to go to the field hospital."



**Grandfather:** Undated sketch of Gene's grandfather.

While recovering, Colan stumbled into a lucrative commercial art scheme.

**Colan:** I became friendly with all the nurses, and I would draw sketches of the GIs there in the hospital. They would send these sketches home to their families. One of the GIs said "Why are you doing these for nothing?" I said, "I don't know. It never occurred to me to charge." He said "You could make a few bucks! Don't do it for nothing." I began to charge \$3 or \$5 for a sketch – somewhere in there – and that kept me plenty busy. In fact, I wound up making more money at the end of the month than the government paid me!

Upon his release, Colan went overseas to the Philippines for an experience unlike any he'd ever encountered as a boy growing up in affluent New York. The actual war was virtually over – the Japanese finally surrendered in mid-August 1945 – but the Philippines remained within a war zone. Security was tight, tensions were high, and Colan got an up-close view of some of the

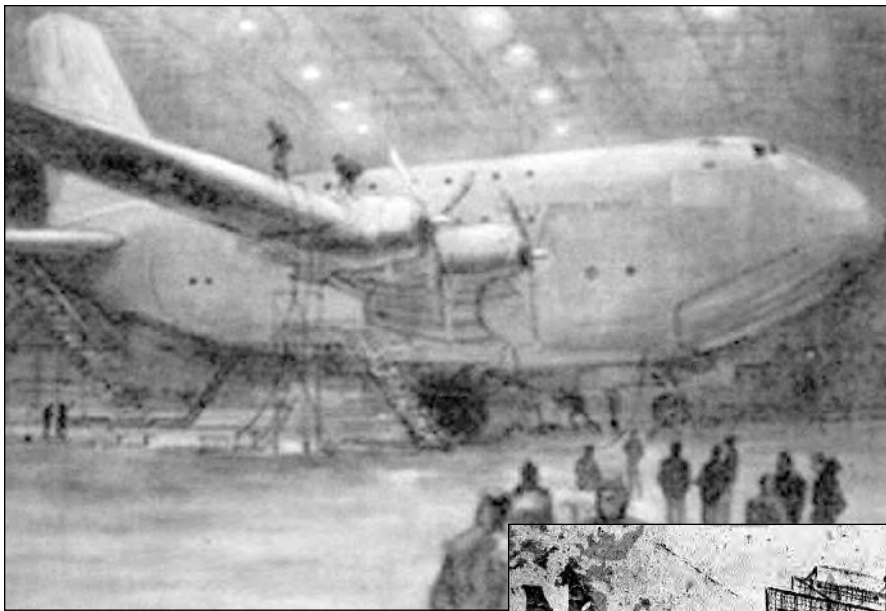
physical and psychological scars inflicted by the fighting in the Pacific. "I thought I was going into summer camp when I first went in," Colan says. "But I was naive and as green as you could get."

One time in Manila, Colan got caught up in the middle of someone else's bar fight – the type you'd see in a movie. "I'd never been in anything like that, but I was caught in the middle of this thing that was escalating big time," he says. "Some soldier came over to me and said "Look, keep your back to the wall, take your belt off, and don't let anyone get behind you!" When I heard that, I knew I was in deep doo-doo! But nothing happened; at that very moment, the MPs came and broke up the whole affair."

It didn't take long for Colan to realize he'd been thrust into a true melting pot of spirited young men – many of them aimless and angry and busting for a fight. It was an intimidating experience, and in the face of it Colan fell back into a familiar pattern. "I didn't make friends easily, so I reverted to having drawing be my companion," he says. "Drawing was something I liked to do, something I liked to be with, so I decided to do a cartoon diary of my experience in the service."

A little bit Bill Mauldin, a touch of Milton Caniff, Colan's service diary eased his transition into life overseas, and it gave him a bit of notoriety on base in Manila. By day, Colan was a truck driver in the motor pool; by night, he was an in-demand sketch artist.

"I would draw guys going overseas, draw the natives around our base," Colan says. "I remember drawing a Philippine girl by candlelight – I wanted to do it that way. And I also drew a picture of our tent boy. The major loved that drawing so much he said "I'll



**Kidd Stuff:** One of Steven Kidd's remarkable military paintings.

*give you my jeep for the day if you'll give me that picture!"*

Before long, Colan secured a part-time job with the *Manila Times* newspaper, contributing illustrations of Army life.

Then he met a man who completely changed his young professional life.

## A Kid Under Kidd

Colan's air base sponsored an art contest, and he quickly knew he wanted to enter with his cartoon diary. His entry caught the attention of the natives who worked on the base.

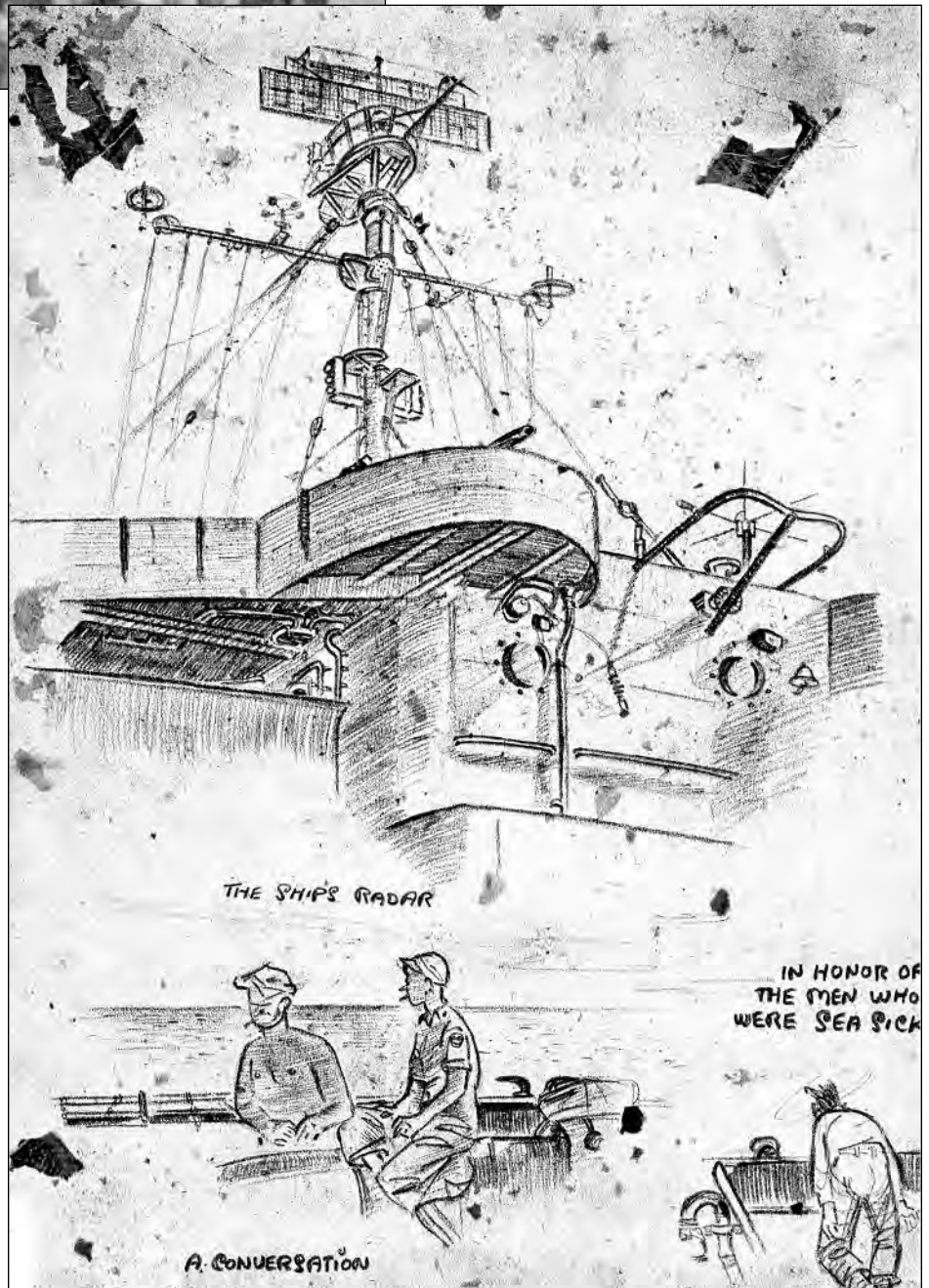
"They knew me pretty well, and some of them would ask, *"Would you like to win the contest?"* I'd say *"Of course!"* They'd smile and pat me on the back and say *"We think you're going to win..."*

What he didn't realize was that the Filipinos were *rigging* the contest for him to win! "I was aghast because I was really up against some top illustrators, and of course my work was nothing compared to what they were doing," Colan says. "They were older and more seasoned—I was a child! They were pissed!"

One of the runners-up paid more than passing attention to Colan's work. His name was Steven Kidd – a painter and illustrator from Illinois who was 15 years older than

Gene, and who already had done a lot of professional work for *Life* and other leading magazines of the day. Kidd, who specialized in military illustration and eventually became the official U.S. war artist assigned to the Korean conflict, quickly took an interest in Colan.

"He was a great eye-opener to me," Colan says. "Everything I drew at that time was on small pieces of paper – the size of a published comic book – and he said to me *"Why do you draw so small all the time? Think in bigger terms."* He got me thinking bigger, on bigger sheets of paper."



**Dear Diary:** Sample of Gene's wartime diary.

# Gene Colan Art Studies

These are life studies from Gene Colan's days at the Art Students League of New York in the 1940s. Even then, he had an eye for expression *and* a pretty lady!





## The 1950s: High Hopes and Hard Times

**P**icture: The first meeting between Gene Colan and Stan Lee, 1947. Colan, determined to break into comics professionally, prepares art samples and drops in unannounced at Timely Comics. The art director, Al Sulman, is impressed and takes the samples to show Timely's editor, young Stan Lee. Minutes later, Colan is summoned to an inner office. "I walk into this office, and there is Stan Lee, playing cards and wearing this beanie cap with a propeller on it!" Colan says. "Stan is boyish, very charming. He says to me, 'So, you want to be in comics, eh? Sit down!'"

Nothing like first impressions.

Colan distinctly remembers discovering Timely Comics' location in the Empire State Building (he looked up the address in the indicia of a comic book); preparing a sample war story ("I even inked and lettered those pages," he says); the anticipation of how editor Stan Lee would receive his work; and then his actual audience with the man in the beanie cap.

"A big stiff wind was blowing through the window and would take that propeller on his cap and give it a twirl," Colan says, "He was certainly a departure from what I thought he'd be like!"

Departure, indeed. Colan left Lee's office with his first staff job – igniting the spark that thrust Colan headlong into his comics career. For the next decade, Colan would hone his skills in genre comics, at Timely and elsewhere in the industry, experiencing the highs and lows of the business – from the collegial atmosphere of Lee's Timely bullpen to the raging outbursts of editor Bob Kanigher at DC. And from the peaks to the valleys, his personal life kept pace.

### The Time of His Life at Timely

*All-True Crime, Justice Comics, Lawbreakers Always Lose, Amazing Mysteries, Marvel Tales.* These were some of the Timely Comics for which Colan drew in those formative years. Horror stories, war, western, humor – he worked all the genres, honing



**Barn Dance:** Archie-style teen comics clearly were on Gene Colan's mind with this undated 'Barn Dance' illustration from the 1940s.



**Timely Debuts:** Among some of Gene Colan's earliest superhero stories are these tales from *Human Torch* #31, (1948), and *Captain America* #72, (1949).

his versatility and storytelling skills. All he lacked was an ongoing assignment – a single character like a Captain America or a Sub-Mariner that he could embrace and evolve with over time. “I really wanted to get a character that I could work with – not just to get a four- or five-page story,” Colan says. “I wanted to get to know a character, get comfortable with it, call it my own.”

But Timely's big-name characters – those that were still published in the late 1940s, after the initial bubble had contracted, if not burst – were mainly reserved for the company's big-name artists, although Colan *did* get a shot or two at drawing the Human Torch and Captain America.

Syd Shores, Dan DeCarlo, Vince Alascia, Mike Sekowsky, John Buscema. These were among the luminaries who worked alongside Colan in the Timely bullpen, schooling him daily on art, comics and life. “We had one riotous time – oh, my God!” Colan says. “We were always telling jokes, laughing about something. The guys up front would get heavy into politics. Then around 5:30 or so, we'd punch out on the time clock and go home.”

Colan distinctly remembers the physical layout of the art room:



There were rows of eight or nine desks in neat lines from the door to the window as you walked into the room. Syd Shores' desk was the very last before the window. Over the course of a week, as artists would move in and out of their seats, Colan recalls, the desks would slowly creep back from the door to the window. “By Friday, Syd was practically out the window,” Colan says. “Good thing we didn't work Saturdays!”

Home, at the time, was still his parents' house at 88th and Broadway. Although in his 20s and a military veteran, Colan had no desire to move out on his own. “I was not a person to be by myself,” he says. “I had to have the comfort of a family.”

In a lot of ways, Colan's fellow artists became surrogate family members. Sekowsky was like a big brother to Gene, impressing him with his style, versatility and pure speed. “His pencils were something to behold,” Colan says. “Very loose, but so beautifully done. At that time, there was no one like him.”

Shores, the defacto dean of the bullpen, was a father figure, showing Colan how to render, how to ink – how to draw horses, even! “At one point, I even tried to imitate Syd's drawing style,” Colan says.

Bob Stuart, an inker whose name isn't as well-known as Sekowsky's or Shores', also was a major influence. "He took me under his wing," Colan says. "He knew I was green as grass about everything, so he tried to be a big brother or a father to me."

Unbeknownst to Colan, even his earliest comics work, its cinematic inspiration evident, inspired his fellow artists. John Romita, a colleague who broke into comics a few years after Colan (and who later became famous drawing *Spider-Man* in the 1960s and 70s), recalls his first impressions of Gene's work:

**Romita:** I knew his work before I ever connected it to his face. He amazed me. He did a couple of South Pacific war stories with pilots. I remember one in particular: he did a panel – I'm talking 1949, 1950 – he did an aerial shot of a plane crash landing in the ocean, and he did the whole thing black with just a little splash. And I was amazed. I remember saying "I don't have the guts to do that!" But he made it believable. Y'know, there are guys who can use space very well, and there are those who can't use space – they don't know all the ways to use it. He was one of those guys who could – I guess it was his natural instinct to use space. I couldn't get over it.

Romita also recalls being impressed by the human expressions Colan could capture in his characters. "I was aware that [Colan] would use a photograph as a guide on some faces," Romita says. "I was amazed at that because I barely had time to get my work done, let alone look for photographs! But his stuff was always so sharp, and so convincing."

At a time when contemporaries such as Romita were still searching for their own styles, Colan clearly was honing his. "The one thing you knew immediately about Gene, there were no generic qualities about his stuff. He was very distinctively an individual stylist."

Colan, naturally, is more self-critical in his appraisal. "I wasn't really all that great," he says. "Looking back on some of that old stuff, I want to run!"

Still, he is grateful for having been thrown straight into the Timely bullpen and being forced to produce comics from day one. "It was definitely a baptism by fire, which to me is the best way to learn," Colan says. "I'm not good with school and learning in that manner. I'd rather be out there and be shown something, then get through that and be shown something else."

One of the biggest lessons Colan learned early on was to treat every freelance job like it was his last – because someday he would be right! As diverse as it was, the comic book marketplace was volatile in the 1950s. Genres went in and out of favor; publishers went in and out of business.

At the end of 1949, beginning of 1950, Colan had a couple of years of professional work under his belt, and he wanted to diversify a bit. Getting word through his network that there was freelance work to be had at rival publishers such as Ace, St. John and Ziff-Davis, Colan set

out on a Friday to line up some new accounts. When he got back to work at Timely the next Monday, he was stunned to learn that he and all his colleagues had just been laid off. The publisher, Martin Goodman, had instructed Stan Lee to get rid off all of the staff



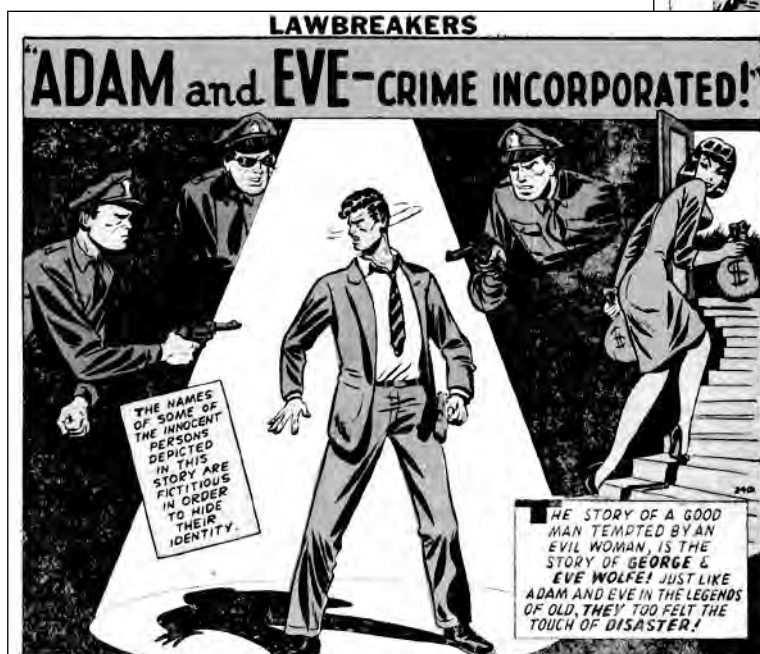
**First Blood?:** Check out this early vampire story from *Strange Tales* #7, (1952). Shades of Dracula comics to come?



## A Historical Perspective on Gene Colan's Timely Comics Work

By Dr. Michael J. Vassallo

Gene Colan's debut at Timely Comics coincides with yet another expansion by Martin Goodman of his burgeoning comic book line. Never a leader, always a follower, in 1948 Timely introduced new genres (crime, romance, western) and titles across the board and even made a last-ditch effort to inject life into its hero line with titles like *Blackstone*,



**R**USHVILLE, INDIANA IN 1921, A FURNITURE FINISHER WAS RESPECTED FOR HIS INDUSTRIOUS, LAW-ABIDING CHARACTER. BUT ONE DAY, A WOMAN CAME INTO HIS PLACE OF WORK...



FIRST OF ALL, I'M **NOT** MISS TO YOU! I'M EVE! AND DON'T LOOK SO UNEASY. THE OLD WINDBAG IS OUT OF EAKSHOT! YOU'RE TOO GOOD-LOOKING TO BE EVERETT'S ERRAND BOY! ALL YOU NEED IS THE RIGHT MANAGEMENT AND YOU'LL GET PLACES!



SEVEN GREEDY, VICIOUS MEN AND A BEAUTIFUL GIRL WITH A LUST FOR A **QUARTER MILLION DOLLARS!** WOULD YOU GAMBLE AS THEY DID WITH LIFE AND HONOR FOR A PRIZE WHICH PAID OFF IN GOLD OR DEATH? HERE IS THE STORY OF SEVEN WHO DARED DEFY NG IN THEIR MAD, ANIMAL-LIKE BATTLE FOR WHAT THE BIBLE CALLED OF ALL EVIL... **MONEY!** PUT YOURSELF IN THE PLACE OF ONE OF WON'T MATTER WHOM, AS YOU'LL DISCOVER, AND SEE HOW YOU'D HAVE ACTED IN THIS SURVIVAL OF THE UNFITTEST!

ROLL OFFICE AT GLENTOWN, N.Y.

DOPE'S ASLEEP. WHY I'LL HELP SPIKES GREEN STUFF!



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3 GUNMEN STEAL QUARTER MILLION DOLLARS! POLICE ON TRAIL! GET YER PAPER!



**Genre Colan: Splash to Complete Mystery #1, August 1948**

*Namora, Sun Girl, Venus and The Witness*. It was into this milieu that Gene's first published Timely work seems to have appeared, in the Spring '48, #1 issue of *Lawbreakers Always Lose*, in a story titled "Adam and Eve - Crime Incorporated". This job was Gene's very first story for Stan Lee at Timely.

Colan debuted as a penciler, and almost without exception his earliest work in 1948 was penciling for the crime comics line in titles such as *Lawbreakers Always Lose*, *All-True Crime*, *Crimefighters*, *Justice Comics* and *Complete Mystery*. One exception was a *Human Torch* story in the July '48 issue (#31), and I wouldn't be surprised if a full

**Timely First?:** Is this Gene Colan's first Timely Comics work, a story from *Lawbreakers Always Lose* #1, spring 1948?

## A Love Story

**P**icture: A singles-night social at a Poconos resort in Pennsylvania in 1962. All of the hopeful attendees – Gene Colan among them – stand outside on a stone patio, when all of a sudden, just before dinner, people start pairing up for the evening. “I am so startled by the suddenness of it that I can’t move quickly enough,” Colan says. “And I didn’t know what to do anyway; I was very shy about these things.” And then he spots her: “Absolutely the most beautiful woman I ever saw before in my life.”

By 1962, Gene Colan was almost completely discouraged.

His marriage was over.

His comics career was hopelessly stalled, following the collapse at Timely/Atlas and his own firing at DC.

At age 35, Colan lived with his parents, worked at a no-brain illustration job, and he wondered ‘*When will things finally turn around?*’

Then it happened, starting with a suggestion from his cousin Helene that he go away for a week to the Tamiment Resort in the Poconos. “I never liked to travel anywhere, and certainly not by myself – I was not used to that type of thing,” Colan says. “But I went to this place – didn’t know a soul – and thought ‘Let’s see what happens...’”

“What happened” was that Colan attended a fateful singles-night dinner, where he spotted 19-year-old Adrienne Gail Brickman of Fairlawn, NJ. And that was it.

**Colan:** There was Adrienne with a friend of hers, sitting sort of on the stone fence. She was absolutely the most beautiful woman I ever saw before in my life. She was very young, maybe 19 or 20. I couldn’t believe that our eyes met, and there seemed to be a mutual attraction. I started to walk toward her, and yet I was walking off in a different direction at the same time. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to start up with her, but at the same time I felt sort of embarrassed about the whole affair. Somehow it worked out, and we did get together that very moment. She was just wonderful to me.

Starting that night, Colan and young Adrienne were inseparable. For the remainder of the vacation, they swam and strolled by

day, dined and danced by night. “There was an immediate connection,” Colan says. “I was even wondering if I ever got married to her, what would the children look like? She was so beautiful; I couldn’t believe it was happening to me. I thought I’d met a movie star.”

Colan drove Adrienne home to Fairlawn at the end of their stay, and from then on they kept in constant communication. Late at night, not wanting his parents to know his personal business, Colan would walk downstairs to the neighborhood candy store, where he’d use the pay phone to call Adrienne at home. “I’d speak to her for hours on end,” Colan says. “In fact, I spoke to her so late one night that the operator on the other end of the line fell asleep and forgot to bill us!”

Before long, the talk turned to marriage – a topic unpopular in both the Colan and Brickman households. “My family was like, ‘*What are you jumping back into it for? You just got out of one marriage, and now you want to get into another?*’” Colan says. “Her family didn’t like that there was such an age difference, and that I’d been married.”

Despite the families’ concerns, on Valentine’s Day 1963 Eugene Jules Colan and Adrienne Gail Brickman presented themselves to be married at New York City Hall. It was a weekend, but they found a judge who would marry them. And Gene convinced one of his colleagues at Sherry Studios to stand in as a witness. After a quick honeymoon, the young couple settled into a modest apartment in Queens.

And then, after settling down Gene personally, Adrienne set about helping him re-establish himself professionally.

The rehab began one day soon after the marriage, when

Adrienne popped in unannounced at Gene's office. "It was the most boring job I ever had – I even fell asleep at the art board, it was so bad," Colan says. And Adrienne picked up on the bad vibes right away.

**Colan:** She said to me "You've got to get out of here," so easy like that. "To work without artistic challenge will destroy your soul, your passion for life," she said. And I said 'Go where?' She says, "We're going to leave here –

*we don't need this place – and you're going to get work elsewhere. You really shouldn't be here."* I kind of went against her at first because I had nothing to leave for – at least there was an income coming in. She said "To heck with the income; don't worry." The way she acted, she could sell you a house on swamp water! I let her lead the way. I really didn't have the courage to do it, but she had the courage for two of us. So off I went with her. Took my art board, packed it into a cab, and off we went.



In fact, they brought that art table home to their Queens apartment, setting it up in a corner of the bedroom. Gene would work all day, all night and into the early hours of the next morning. When Adrienne would grow tired, she'd climb into bed and listen to talk radio with Gene until she fell asleep. Sometime later, Gene would retire to bed for a few hours before arising and renewing his daily routine.

Looking back, Colan recognizes now that Adrienne's leadership qualities were emerging even then. "Adrienne is very strong-minded; she knows what she wants and what she doesn't want," Colan says. "She can't stand injustice, and when sees it – she takes control."

In Gene's case, someone else looking after his best interests is a good thing. It frees him to focus on the artwork at hand. In this way, truly, the Colans complement one another.

"We've had a lot of ups and downs like every marriage has, but it's held together," Gene says. "Miraculously, it's held together."

And soon after Adrienne convinced Gene to quit his dead-end job, Stan Lee called with work.

**The Colans:** Mr. and Mrs. Eugene and Adrienne Colan, married Feb. 14, 1963.



## The Early 1960s: Make Mine Marvel

**P**icture: Sometime in the late 1960s, early '70s, at a New York hotel – maybe the Taft. The time and place aren't nearly as important as the event, which is Gene Colan's first comics convention. It's a dizzying experience, all the fans, the energy, the attention paid to Colan, who not so many years earlier couldn't even get a job in comics. "I was wearing a suit coat and tie, I remember, and by the end of the day my shirttail was hanging out," Colan says. "The fans – one of them even followed me into the bathroom and asked if I would sign his book! I was overwhelmed by it."

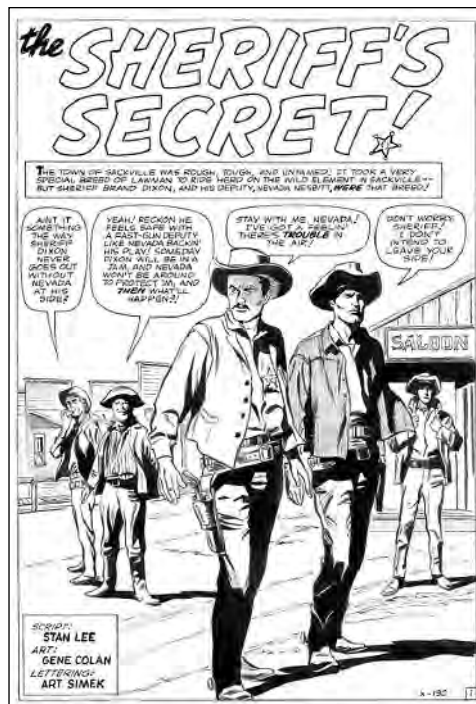
What a difference a few years make.

While Gene Colan was toiling outside of comics in the early 1960s, his old boss Stan Lee was firing off a revolution within the dormant medium. Beginning with the debut of *The Fantastic Four* in 1961, Lee and primary co-creators Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko inaugurated a whole new era: The Marvel Age of Comics, whose superheroes emphasized personality over platitudes, and whose creators were encouraged to showcase storytelling and style over conservatism and conformity.

Colan's path back to Marvel began shortly after his Feb. 14, 1963, marriage when young wife Adrienne encouraged him to quit his job at Sherry Studios and renew his efforts to get back into comics.

It was slow going at first. Colan was able to get a little work from the romance department at DC, where the Kanigher conflict had more-or-less been forgotten. And then in 1963 he scored a steady assignment at Dell, illustrating the tie-in to the TV series *Ben Casey*.

Also in 1963, Colan began to pick up work again from Stan Lee. A mystery story here and there as back-up in *Journey into Mystery*; the occasional western story for *Kid Colt Outlaw*.



**Early Marvel:** Splash to *Gunsmoke Western* #65, July 1961 – months before the Marvel era began with the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1.

Then, in 1965, as Marvel's comics were bursting with more characters than Kirby and Ditko could handle – Spider-Man, the Hulk, Thor, the X-Men, the Avengers, Daredevil... Stan called Gene and asked him to come back full-time.

But Gene was skeptical. "There was something about Marvel that I didn't like. It seemed looser than I cared for," Colan says. "DC was extremely structured and, I thought, maybe the better of the two places."

Colan recalls visiting with Lee at his home while delivering the latest pages to a western story. That was when Lee asked Colan to quit DC and work full-time for Marvel.

**Colan:** I told Stan, "If I'm going to leave one place, it's got to be for a good reason – not just because you want me to come over." At first he didn't offer anything to make me want to switch. I said, "How much more can you pay me than I'm getting from DC?" He didn't want to pay me anything. So I shook his hand – I was at his house when this happened – and I said, "Well, Stan, I understand how you feel, but you have to understand how I

feel. If you don't care enough to pay me more than I'm getting now, then what's the point of coming over?" I said "Thank you very much," got up and shook his hand and left. The very next day, he called me back and said "Come on in and let's talk." That's how I got back in. I had to call his bluff.

John Romita, who'd worked alongside Colan in the romance dept. at DC, jumped ship and joined Marvel a few months earlier, and recalls Gene seeking his counsel about whether he should accept Stan's offer.



**Early Marvel II:** Colan stories from *Tales of Suspense* #39, left, (the debut issue of Iron Man, by the way) and *Journey into Mystery* #82, right. Is that a self-portrait of Colan?

**Romita:** He said to me "I want to ask you a question. You know I've been stung a couple of times by these layoffs. Do you think there's any chance this could happen again?" As 1967 approached, he said "I'm conscious that there were collapses in '47 [actually, '49] and '57. I'm afraid if I stay here until '67 there will be another collapse." I told him "Gene, I don't really know; I'm not a businessman. But this doesn't look anything like the market of the '40s and '50s. To me, I don't feel any danger of anything collapsing, Certainly not in '67. Down the road, who knows?" But he was ready to find another source of income because he didn't trust the industry. I had to allay his fears so that he would stay.

Even so, Colan refused to let go of his DC assignments when he first rejoined Marvel, and he also held onto his name. Fearful of repercussions if DC's editors found out he was moonlighting, Colan drew his initial Marvel superhero stories under the pseudonym of "Adam Austin" – a name made up by Stan Lee, who found alliterative names such as "Bruce Banner" (the Hulk's secret identity) and "Peter Parker" (Spider-Man's) easier to remember.

Not that Colan's style wasn't instantly recognizable to anyone who cared to notice. But at least he wasn't openly rubbing his moonlighting into his DC editors' faces. And at Marvel in the mid-'60s, pseudonyms were the norm. Penciler Gil Kane debuted at Marvel as "Scott Edwards," and inkers Mike Esposito, Jack Abel, and Frank Giacoia initially appeared as "Mickey Demeo," "Gary Michaels" and "Frankie Ray" respectively. Few artists who'd lived through comics' tough times in the 1950s were willing to stake their real names to such a risky venture as Marvel in the early-to-mid-'60s.

## Subby and Shellhead

With the August 1965 issue of *Tales to Astonish*, Gene Colan made his Marvel Age debut, drawing the first 1960s solo

appearance of the revived 1940s character, the Sub-Mariner – a short-tempered, super-strengthened, water-breathing, half-breed prince who lorded over an undersea nation of warriors, and who constantly waged battle with the surface world. The Sub-Mariner, created by stylist Bill Everett in the late 1930s, was a prototype comics character – one of Timely's "big three" of the 1940s, alongside the Human Torch and Captain America. With Timely's rebirth as Marvel, the Sub-Mariner was revived by Lee & Kirby as an anti-hero in *Fantastic Four*, guest-starred in other comics in the early '60s,



and received enough favorable response to warrant a shot as a 12-page monthly co-feature alongside the Incredible Hulk in *Tales to Astonish*.

The Sub-Mariner's debut story was entitled "The Start of the Quest," and it applied equally to the character and to Gene Colan's career at Marvel.

Ironically, Colan's first Marvel superhero assignment was the one he liked least.

"I didn't enjoy the Sub-Mariner," Colan recalls. He remembered the character from his stint at Timely in the 1940s, and certainly he respected the work of Sub-Mariner creator Everett.

But he wasn't comfortable with the character's settings or style. "There was a lot of underwater stuff, which was all right in and of itself. But [Sub-Mariner] comes from this place called Atlantis, and that meant a lot of work on a lot of stuff that I didn't want to get into. It was almost like a science fiction thing, and I just didn't relate to it all that strongly."

Then there was the flat-head, Frankenstein-like appearance Everett had given the character. "I just couldn't do the flat head," Colan says. "It looked like the top of his head had been lopped off! That just worked against my grain."

Still, an assignment was an assignment,

Created by Lee and artist Don Heck in 1963, "Iron Man" combined all the classic elements of early Marvel: character, conflict, and a healthy dose of Commie-bashing. The "iron man" was Tony Stark, a millionaire weapons manufacturer who's wounded and imprisoned in Vietnam. Dying from a piece of shrapnel stuck too close to his heart, Stark creates a transistorized iron armor that empowers him – while also keeping his heart beating.

Taking over the character roughly three years after its debut, Colan was challenged at once to bring out the expression in a hero



**When Titans Clash:** Iron Man and Sub-Mariner square off on this cover from *Tales of Suspense* #79.

and Colan gladly took the job. He made the character his own, rounding off the Sub-Mariner's head so that he looked more akin to Star Trek's Mr. Spock. The stories also quickly took on the Colan style, exploding with full-page action scenes, and engaging the readers with unique character expression. Where Stan Lee had succeeded at writing superheroes with believable human qualities, Colan was the master at illustrating these facets.

Five months after his debut on "Sub-Mariner," Colan was given his second big assignment: drawing the monthly, 12-page adventures of Iron Man in *Tales of Suspense*.



**Splash Page:** Colan/Colletta artwork from *Tales to Astonish* #76, April 1966.



who wore an expressionless iron mask.

**Colan:** I didn't have to worry about the details in a face for one thing, which allowed me to work more speedily. The only thing I tried to figure out was how to capture emotion in his mask. Eventually I got the thought that this was all artistic license, and you could draw things that in real life wouldn't happen, so I got it into my head that maybe this mask is made out special steel that could flex, so if he smiled you would know it, or if he got angry or sorrowful it would show because he could make that suit

move a little. It had to be subtle. I enjoyed it; I really did. I liked Iron Man.

So did the fans and Gene's contemporaries. Roy Thomas, a prominent comics fan in the early '60s and Marvel's #2 writer by the middle of the decade, recalls Colan's immediate impact at Marvel. "When Gene's work first started coming out at Marvel as 'Adam Austin,' I was still teaching school, so I was seeing it as a fan. And I liked it," Thomas says. "It had a different look, but it was dynamic. I liked that about it."

Thomas actually scripted Colan's first Iron Man story in *Tales of Suspense* #73, but the credits for that issue leave the reader wondering who exactly did what. As opposed to most Marvel Comics of the day, which clearly spell out who wrote, penciled, inked, and lettered a particular story, this issue's credit box reads: "All these Bullpen buddies had a hand in this one: Stan Lee, Roy Thomas, Adam Austin, Gary Michaels, Sol Brodsky, Flo Steinberg and merrie ol' Marie Severin!"



**IM in Action:** At left, Iron Man battles the Freak in a Jack Abel-inked page from *TOS* #75, March 1966. At right, see a multi-paneled end page from *TOS* #86.



"Stan asked me to dialogue [that story] after it had already been penciled," Thomas recalls. "Of course, it was beautiful stuff, and I had a lot of fun with it. It was one of the first superhero stories I did."

Ultimately, Lee ended up rewriting about half of the script, Thomas recalls – hence the long list of credits. But Roy remains puzzled about why Colan's debut

## Stan Lee and Gene Colan

In mid-December 2004, Stan Lee and Gene Colan were reunited via telephone for a conversation that spanned decades of collaboration, friendship and merriment.

To paraphrase a Stan Lee caption from the Colan-illustrated *Daredevil* #33:

“If anyone else can write an introduction that will do justice to this great exchange between Lee & Colan – be the author’s guest!”

**Stan Lee:** Y’know, don’t tell anyone, but we used to fight all the time!

**Gene Colan:** No, we did not!

**Lee:** He used to say, “How do you expect me to draw all that stupid stuff you keep writing?” And I kept telling him “Will you stop ruining my great stories?” We were at each other’s throats all the time.

**Colan:** [laughing] No, we were not! The only thing I remember us at odds over was the car chase that ate up about six pages of story (in *Captain America* #116), and you said “What did you do here? You could do this in two panels, but you take up six pages of story to tell it?!”

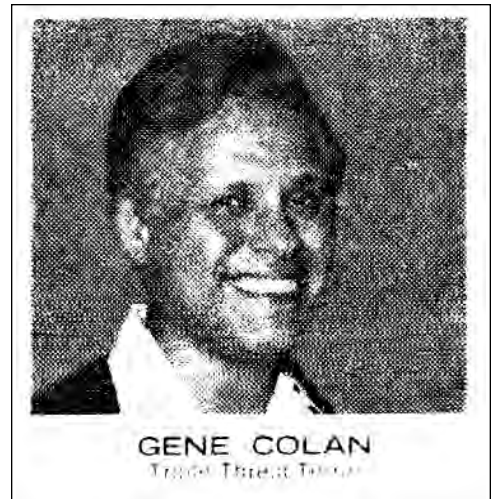
**Lee:** [laughing] You hear about writers who get paid by the word? Gene got paid by the panel! (To Colan) The one real masterpiece I thought you did – I’ve probably mentioned this before – was in a *Captain America* story (issue #122) where you just had him walking down the street for, I don’t know, three pages – it seemed like 100 pages! – doing nothing in particular. And the way you drew it was so *interesting* – each panel was like watching a movie. It was such a pleasure to write that. I’ll never forget it.

**Colan:** Everything to me was a movie. Every story I ever got, I would pretend that I was watching it on the screen. I was highly influenced by the films.

**Lee:** You were the first guy who ever told me that you used to save video cassettes of all the movies.

**Colan:** I still do. I’m into it up to my neck!

**Lee:** You must live in one closet, and the rest of the house is all full of video cassettes!



**Gene and Stan:** Photos as printed in *Fantastic Four Annual* #7, 1969.

**Tom Field: When did you two first meet?**

**Lee:** I have no memory of what year it was.

**Colan:** It was 1946.

**Lee:** Really?

**Colan:** That's right. It was called Timely Comics, then. Al Sulman was the art editor, and I just came in cold off the street. I had some samples, and I was determined to get a position somewhere in the business. And Al went into your office to show them to you. The longer I waited out there, the more opportunity I felt I had to be hired. I waited 10 or 15 minutes, and then finally Al came back and called me in. You were playing cards, and you had a beanie cap on.

**Lee:** Playing cards?

**Colan:** Yes. It was lunch hour. You had a beanie cap with a propeller on it.

**Lee:** Of course! What else would a fellow wear?

**Colan:** Well, I have to say you were very young at the time! Anything goes in your early 20s!

**Lee:** I can picture the beanie cap, I just can't remember the cards. I never was a card player. Maybe we were playing with trading cards?

**Colan:** Could be; I don't know. But I think you were with someone else. So, that's how we met, and that was the beginning of my career – thanks to you.



**The Car Chase:** Famous *Bullitt* inspired car chase from *Captain America* #116. Inks by Joe Sinnott.



**Soulful Stroll:** Stan Lee and the readers were blown away by this powerful scene of Captain America on soul-searching stroll. From *Captain America* #116, February 1970.



## Glory Days with DD and Doc

**P**icture: Midtown Manhattan in the late 1960s. Gene Colan strolls purposefully, his Polaroid camera in tow, snapping photos of people, places and things. Images. He's creating visual context for his *Daredevil* and *Doctor Strange* comics. "I loved the research," he says. "It wasn't something anyone asked me to do. I took it on myself because it made the work in the end look good to me."

To Colan, this legwork represented his commitment to Marvel, which made a commitment to him by finally giving him ongoing series of his own – characters he could get to know and bring to life. "Just living with the character, it became real to me – a real person," he says. "I liked that."

In a sense, Gene Colan has Steve Ditko to thank for Daredevil.

When Ditko, the enigmatic co-creator and illustrator of Spider-Man and Doctor Strange, abruptly quit Marvel in 1966, his assignments were quickly doled out to emergency replacements. Bill Everett, the creator of Sub-Mariner (and co-creator of Daredevil), inherited Doctor Strange, while Spider-Man – which was quickly becoming Marvel's most popular character – was entrusted to John Romita, a slick stylist whose only real superhero experience was drawing *Daredevil* from issues #12 through #19, just prior to the Spidey assignment. When Romita shifted to Spidey, DD was offered... to Colan.

Daredevil was unique – a blind superhero who overcame his disability to fight crime as both a costumed hero and a top-notch attorney. Created by Stan Lee and Bill Everett in 1964, the *Daredevil* comic book had plugged along ever since under the guidance of Lee and artists Joe Orlando, Wallace Wood, Bob Powell and Romita.



**DD Sketch:** a 1998 sketch of Daredevil – the character with whom Gene Colan is most fondly associated.

For Colan to be offered *Daredevil* was a heady experience. Up to this point at Marvel, he had been given major characters to draw, true – Sub-Mariner and Iron Man were among Marvel's "A list" of heroes, and they remain popular even today. But each character *shared* its respective comic book with a co-star, hence the stories were only 10-to-12 pages long. Half a standard comic book. *Daredevil* was a feature-length assignment, presenting Colan with 20 full pages to dig in and really tell a story.

"I said 'Oh, God, let me have it!'" Colan says, recalling his response to Stan Lee when offered the *DD* job. "I didn't know how long it would

run,” he says. “But I could’ve stayed with *Daredevil* forever.”

Romita has always maintained that he felt like a temporary replacement on *Spider-Man* – that Ditko would resolve his differences with Marvel, then return and reclaim the book. So, as best he could, Romita tried to simulate Ditko’s unique style, as though he were “ghosting” the book during a leave of absence.

**Romita:** I didn’t want to go on *Spider-Man*; I wanted to stay on *Daredevil*. I did [*Spider-Man*] to be a good soldier. I felt constrained to make it look like Ditko, but if [I] did not put that shackle on [myself], then that would have opened up all sorts of possibilities.

Exactly.

When Colan took over *DD*, he had no sense of how long the assignment might last. But he also felt no compulsion to ape Romita’s style. Although he initially followed Romita’s visual cues in depicting Daredevil, Colan immediately settled in and made the book his own, injecting it with what quickly was becoming his signature style: Cinematic pacing, realistic expression, full-page illustrations and non-traditional page layouts wherever he could get away with them.

There’s a famous page in Colan’s very first *DD* issue (#20), in fact. On page five, where writer Stan Lee no doubt described in the briefest detail “Three bad guys break into Matt (Daredevil) Murdock’s apartment,” Colan turns that moment into a full-page scene. In an inset panel, one bad guy turns a pass key in the lock of Murdock’s door, and we’re focusing solely on the hand and the doorknob. Then the page explodes into an up-shot of the three shadow-eyed, gun-wielding hoods bursting into Murdock’s apartment, looking for trouble. A quiet scene brought totally to life, announcing the arrival of Gene Colan.

To take a bit of a geeky diversion... Colan’s initial depiction of Daredevil is much like Romita’s and Wally Wood’s before him. The character’s trademark horns appear distinctly on each side of DD’s mask. But even as early as his second issue, Colan starts to shift the horns more toward the front of the mask, giving the character a subtly more dramatic appearance. Before long, Colan infuses the series with three other distinct elements:

**Glamour** – Karen Page, DD’s love interest, morphs from a nondescript comic book woman into a stylish, mid-’60s aspiring actress.

**Humor** – Foggy Nelson, Matt Murdock’s overweight, under-achieving partner, is given a lot more character expression, as well as more of a Sancho Panza role (that’s Sancho Panza the character

from *Don Quixote*, not Sancho Panza the Cuban cigar).

**Choreography** – Never one to draw the same fight scene twice, Colan got totally caught up in directing Daredevil’s battles with bad guys. Leveraging the character’s natural gymnastic ability, Colan would draw complex fight scenes drawn from multiple angles and including matchless moves.

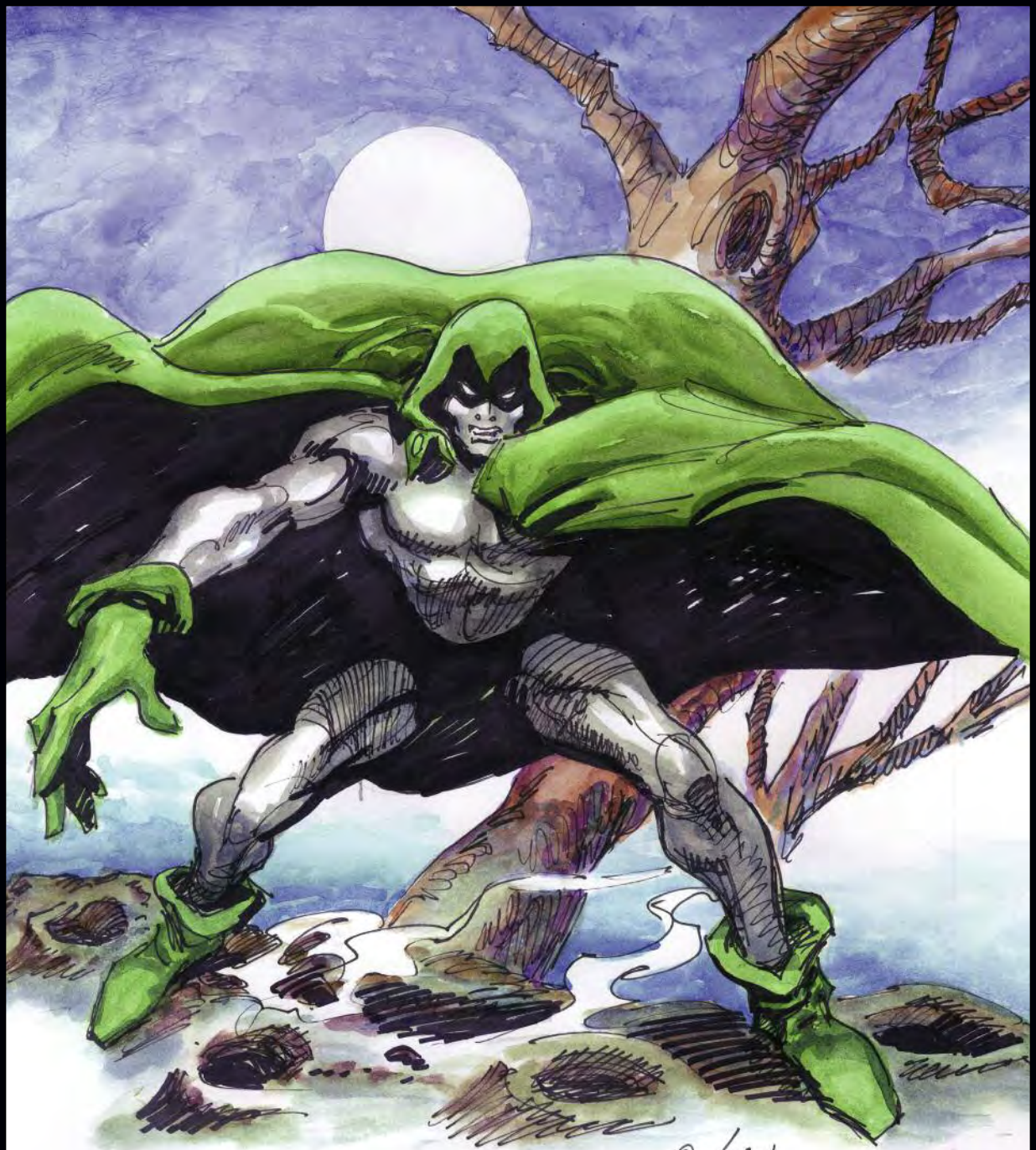


**The Doorknob Scene?:** Stan Lee loves to tell a story about Colan drawing a whole page focused on a hand turning a doorknob – but he never identifies the story. Could this page from *Daredevil* #20 be it? Inks by Mike Esposito.

And he got to do all of this over the course of 20 pages – a wide-open canvas for this artist to paint. “I had a lot of story to deal with, which made me happy,” Colan says. “The longer, the better.”

As he got used to the characters, the settings, the pace, Colan





**Spectre**  
**Collab:** 1990s  
commissioned  
illo of the  
Spectre. Pencils  
by Colan, inks  
by Ernie Chan.





**Black Magic:**  
Psychedelic  
1970s black  
light posters  
adapted from  
Colan & Tom  
Palmer's Dr.  
Strange  
stories from  
the 1960s.



# Secrets #2: Inking Gene



**Colan solo:** Ink/wash page from one of Gene Colan's mid-'60s Warren Magazine stories.

Inking.

It sounds like a down 'n dirty production term, and at its most fundamental level that's true.

In comic art, the term "inking" is used to describe the process by which an artist embellishes a penciled page with black ink (from a brush or a pen) to define the images distinctly for publication. Today's production techniques are more sophisticated and can pick up the subtleties of a penciled page, but in the old days – before the mid-'80s – inking was a necessity.

Sometimes in comics the original pencil artist inks his own work, but most often, for expediency's sake, the penciled pages are handed off, as if on an assembly line, to a second artist, who inevitably brings a bit of his own style to the finished drawing.

Gene Colan, never a speedy penciler to begin with, rarely inked his own comic book work. For one thing, he didn't *like* inking. "Inking made me very nervous," he says. "I could not handle a brush well. A pencil is the most familiar tool I have. I'm in full control of it, whereas I never feel like I have full control of a brush."

But as a distinct stylist and storyteller, he also was more valuable to his publishers penciling *several* stories per month, versus penciling and inking only one or two.

Which isn't to say Colan never experimented with inking. Even in his early days at Timely Comics in the 1940s and '50s, he penciled and inked the occasional story or cover. But he was never satisfied with the work – or the time it took him to complete it.

## Gene Colan and Tom Palmer

Gene Colan and Tom Palmer.

Their names are inextricably linked by more than 30 years of comic books – literally thousands of individual pages – drawn by the Colan/Palmer duo.

Individually, these artists are superstars who come from separate generations, but share common roots. Colan got his formal training under Frank Reilly at the Art Students League in the 1940s, then went on to forge a brilliant 50-year comics career with his unique “painting with a pencil” style. Palmer, who also studied under Reilly until the mentor’s death in 1967, broke into comics at a time when a new generation of artists was breaking all the old comics molds. Quickly, this hot-shot young illustrator found himself inking such distinct stylists as Neal Adams, John Buscema, Jim Steranko... and Gene Colan.

Together, Colan and Palmer are a super team. Revered as one of the premier art teams in comics history, they started out on *Dr. Strange* in the late 1960s, hit their prime with *Tomb of Dracula* and a host of horror hits in the 1970s, crafted a memorable Black Panther serial in the 1980s, and then have reunited in recent years for the occasional Batman or Daredevil story.



**The Beginning:** A Colan/Palmer page from their very first story – *Doctor Strange* #172, 1968.

Just as longtime comics fans have come to look upon the Colan/Palmer team as old friends, so, too, have the artists themselves formed a strong friendship – one built upon shared influences, experiences and mutual respect.

On Nov. 21, 2004, at The National comics convention in New York City, Gene Colan and Tom Palmer sat down with the author for a broad, memorable discussion about their lives and times together.

**Tom Field:** Gene, what did you think of Tom Palmer’s work over your pencils?

**Colan:** The best. He was the best. My stuff is never easy to do, I know. A lot of inkers have had a lot of trouble with it.

**TF:** What specifically did he bring to your work?

**Colan:** Weight. A lot of good shadow work, darks, heavy stuff – a lot like Caniff. I always admired Caniff, and [Palmer’s] work reminded me of it.

**Palmer:** And I didn’t even know about Caniff at the time! I was fresh out of art school. Alex Raymond, Caniff – any of those guys, I just hadn’t been exposed to their work yet. I saw it later, of course, but not when I first started inking Gene.





**Try-out:** The audition piece that won the *Dracula* assignment for Colan.

**Colan:** You made my work look good. A bad inker can take a good pencil job and wreck it. On the other hand, a good inker can take a bad pencil job and make it look great.

**TF:** What had bad inkers done to your work?

**Colan:** They didn't follow it. They drew whatever they wanted to draw. Vincent Colletta, I hate to say it: when he wanted to he could do very good work, but he didn't take his time with my stuff.

**TF:** Tom, is there anything you ever wanted to ask Gene about the work you did together?

**Palmer:** No, I think Gene knows that he's a terrific artist. I respect him and his work. I worked hard on it.

[To Gene] Y'know, the first comic book I ever colored was with you on *Dr. Strange*. I forget which issue I was working on at the time, but I went in to Marvel and asked John Verpoorten "Can I color *Dr. Strange*?" He said sure. So I took that issue. I forget the number, but it was the Sons of the Satannish issue. I asked how long it would take to color. John said "Oh, a day – eight hours." That's how long it was taking guys. Two days later, I hadn't even gone to bed! I worked two days around the clock, sitting there doing watercolors for that comic. And it's because I saw the production

of a comic book as something worthwhile and artistic. The publishers weren't paying a lot of money, so in order to do comics you had to have a personal feeling for the artwork. That's all I can say.

**Colan:** You were expressing yourself, no matter what they paid.

**Palmer:** Yes, I respected the artwork.

**Colan:** Your work is on that page – nobody else's. Regardless of what they're paying, it's still your work, and you want it to look as good as it can. You have to satisfy yourself.

**Palmer:** You said it all! My name was on there. But even if they hadn't printed my name...

**Colan:** You would have done it anyway.

**Palmer:** That's right.

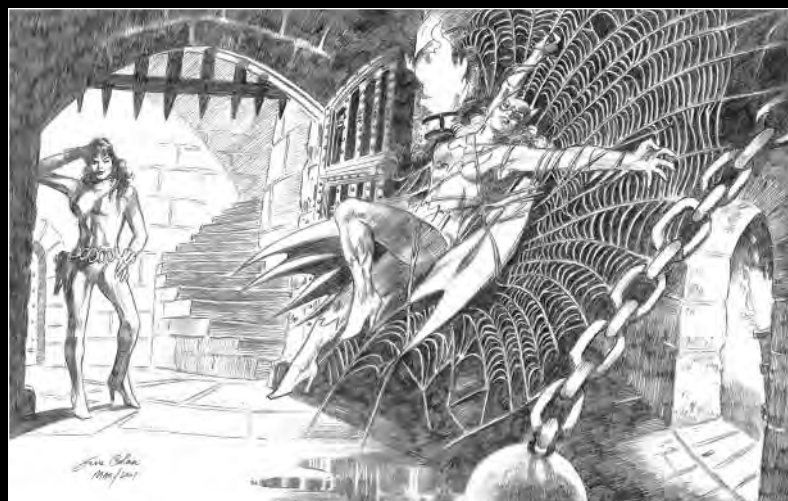
**Colan:** And maybe without even thinking about it, you were improving all the time.

**Palmer:** Oh, I was. Like on *Tomb of Dracula*, which we did



**Colan/Palmer Reunited:** The two artists who drew accolades for drawing *Doctor Strange* reunited for a long run on *Tomb of Dracula* starting with issue #3, 1972.

# Gene Colan Portfolio



## Dream Teams

### Gene Colan's Pencils Interpreted by Comics Superstars

By Glen David Gold



I've heard athletes say that marathons are good for proving yourself, but if you want a glimpse into your soul, try competing in an Iron Man triathlon. That's what I imagine inking Colan is like. There are so many ways to ruin a Colan page and, when it's done right, so many different ways it can be right – think of Sinnott versus Palmer, for instance. That's what inspired me to get some non-traditional inkers on Gene's commissioned pieces.

When I saw Gene's pencils of the Black Widow/Batgirl piece, I immediately thought of George Pérez, who took on the commission enthusiastically... and without reading the letter I'd enclosed, which suggested he ink it with a brush. By the time he'd finished – inking the entire thing with a pen, which he uses exclusively, as he has double-jointed fingers – and looked at the note, he thought I might hate what he'd done. He told me that at times he worried he would never actually finish the obsessive detail of the stairs, the bricks, the iron ball, etc. He did a magnificent job adding his sense of order and precision to Gene's impressionistic dungeon.

## Dracula Lives!

*Note: A longer version of this chapter originally appeared in Back Issue magazine #6, October 2004.*

Nobody knew.

Not Marvel Comics Editor Stan Lee, who decided in 1971 that Dracula should be the first monster in comics history to star in his own ongoing series, nor writers Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway, who crafted the vampire lord's heralded debut.

Certainly not Gene Colan, who wanted the Dracula assignment so badly he auditioned for it. Nor even Marv Wolfman, the young, unproven writer who reluctantly took the reins with issue #7, but then saw the book – and his career – take off like the proverbial Hell-bat.

No one knew that *Tomb of Dracula* [TOD], which began as just another trendy horror comic, would last eight years and 70 issues, spawning a host of memorable characters, four spin-off films and a devoted fan base that today celebrates TOD as the best horror title of the Seventies. Maybe the best comic of the decade, *period*.

Daredevil is the *character* that always will be most associated with Colan. But TOD is Colan's signature *series*. This chapter presents a brief history of the comic book that *made* history.



**Remake:** Neal Adams drew the *original* cover to *Tomb of Dracula* #1. But in 2004, Colan fan Dave Gutierrez commissioned Gene to draw his *own* version – inks by Gutierrez.

### The Birth of Dracula

*Savage Tales looks like such a howlin' hit that we're following it up with a ghoulish 50-cent goodie called The Tomb of Dracula (or The House of Dracula. We haven't decided yet). It's a wholly new concept, starring Dracula himself, as he is – was – and perhaps will be. With art by Gene Colan, Berni Wrightson and Gray Morrow among others, and a team of the world's most titanic scripters, headed by Marvel's merry masters, Smilin' Stan and Rascally Roy themselves! May we modestly say – it ain't to be missed!*

– “Item” from July 1971  
Marvel Bullpen Bulletins page

Strange but true, *Tomb of Dracula* owes its life to the Comics Code Authority. When the restrictive code of the 1950s was liberalized in 1971, vampires, werewolves and other man-monsters were freed to star in mainstream comics. Marvel tested the market with Morbius, the Living Vampire, introduced as a villain in *Amazing Spider-Man* #101. When this “real” bloodsucker proved popular, Stan Lee – ever

eager to anticipate the next big trend – quickly ordered an entire *line* of monster comics featuring the usual stalkers: the Frankenstein Monster, a Werewolf... and Dracula.

Although the Werewolf struck first – his debut in *Marvel*



In establishing Marvel's Dracula, Thomas clearly recalled the Universal monster movies of his 1940s youth. His basic plot for *TOD #1*: Frank Drake, ne'er-do-well descendant of the legendary Count, inherits Dracula's Castle (shades of "Son of Frankenstein"). Frank's "friend," Clifton Graves, schemes to turn the castle into a tourist attraction, and the two of them – along with Frank's fiancé Jeanie, who also happens to be Clifton's ex – travel to Transylvania to tackle the fixer-upper. There, while plotting to kill Frank, win back Jeanie and get rich quick with

agreement, but to no avail; the job was now Everett's. Devastated, Colan resigned himself to the loss. But his wife Adrienne didn't. Inspired by the stories about Marlon Brando, who famously stuffed cotton in his cheeks and auditioned for the lead in *The Godfather* after being told the studio heads "didn't see him in the role," Adrienne urged Gene to try-out for Dracula. So, he did. He worked up a full-page, pencil & ink/wash character study of a raven-haired, bearded Dracula, including a portrait of the Count, and a montage of the vampire king in different poses. He based his interpretation not on any of the classic Bela Lugosi or



# Secrets #3: Writing for Gene

Blame Stan Lee.

Ever since Gene Colan returned to Marvel Comics in the mid-1960s and started working “Marvel-style” with the company’s prolific head writer – with Lee giving his artists just the barest-bones plots with which to pace and draw their stories – he’s developed a unique storytelling style that both delights and challenges his collaborators.

Understand up-front: Colan never reads a plot or script beginning-to-end before he draws a story. And he never breaks down a story page-by-page before sitting down to render.

Instead, he takes each page as it comes, one-by-one, as a reader would encounter a story, and then he makes decisions along the way about where to speed things up and where to slow things down with a full-page spread. If he gets toward the end of a story and starts to run out of room, he either crams a lot of action panels into the final page or two, or he fashions an argument for why the story *really* ought to end sooner than the writer intended.

Roy Thomas, veteran writer/editor/ comics historian, broke in at Marvel in the mid-’60s and remembers his boss’ good-humored frustration with his Colan collaborations.

**Thomas:** Stan would just get a little upset when Gene would take a whole page to open a door, or when he would spend page after page in car races! Those would drive Stan nuts, but on the other hand they’re the things that people remember about his work. You want people to have an individual style. Marvel, if not in 1965 but in the next couple of years, was big enough and established enough to let people do their own thing a little more, as long as they took care of the basic dynamism we were looking for. Gene could certainly do that.

And how.

Over the course of his career from the mid-’60s onward, Colan established himself as a brilliantly expressive storyteller. He wouldn’t necessarily stick to the letter of a story plot, but he would stay true to – and enhance – its spirit. And he would bring life and expression to the characters in ways that no other artist could match.

Marv Wolfman, who collaborated with Colan for over a decade on

Marvel’s *Tomb of Dracula* and DC’s *Night Force* (and later *Curse of Dracula* at Dark Horse in the 1990s), says their working relationship evolved primarily on “Trust, as well as knowing that Gene drew incredible strong faces with real emotion. When you know that, you aim your stories to take advantage of his strengths.”

For his part, Colan never much cared *who* wrote the stories he drew. “I would’ve taken on the Pope if he’d wanted to write a story,” Colan says. “It didn’t matter to me who wrote anything. It was an assignment, so I would simply take it and do it.”

But that said, he did prefer writers such as Lee, Thomas, Wolfman, etc., who would give him both clear direction and total freedom. “I’ll take the story as it is,” he says, “and if I have the opportunity to do something special with it that the writer might not have had in mind, I’ll do it. So long as it doesn’t veer too far from the plot.”

Colan even has a pair of comics scripts to his own credit: two short Archie tales from *Life With Archie* in 1989 and 1990.

But mostly Colan’s career is distinguished by his collaboration with writers who – when successful – have leveraged his unique rendering and storytelling to create some memorable comics stories.

## Writers on Colan

Over the course of a 60-year career, Colan has worked with scores of writers. But he’s developed *special* relationships with a select few. Here some of Gene’s favorite collaborators discuss the challenges and rewards of writing for the Dean.

**Roy Thomas** co-wrote one of the first Marvel superhero stories Colan drew, the Iron Man feature in *Tales of Suspense* #73, Jan. 1966. Later, they worked together on *Daredevil*, *Wonder Woman* and even a single issue of the black-and-white sword & sorcery magazine *Savage Sword of Conan*. But likely their most memorable collaboration is the run of *Doctor Strange* they crafted with inker Tom Palmer beginning in 1968.

“I worked with him just the same way as with anybody,” Thomas says. “Sometimes we maybe talked over the phone, but most of the time I’d type out a brief plot of a couple of pages and send it off to him, and he worked from that.”

## Gene Colan and Steve Gerber

They've taken Dracula to the Vatican, Daredevil to San Francisco, Superman to the Phantom Zone and, of course, Howard the Duck to a world he never made.

Their body of work was relatively compact – all of it published between 1974 and 1982 – but the magic is such that not only are the stories memorable, but writer Steve Gerber and artist Gene Colan remain friends and fans of one another's craft.

In January 2005, Gerber and Colan reminisced about their unique collaboration.

**Tom Field:** I was trying to remember... what was the first thing you worked on together – *Daredevil*?

**Steve Gerber:** It was either *Daredevil* or a *Dracula* story, one of those two.

**Gene Colan:** First thing I remember, of course, is *Howard the Duck*, the most outstanding project I've ever been a part of. The rest just fades into the background.

**Gerber:** I bet you *do* remember that *Dracula* story. It was done for one of the black-and-white *Dracula* books, and we had Dracula trapped in the Vatican. Do you remember that story?

**Colan:** No...



**Holy Bats!:** First Steve Gerber/Gene Colan collaboration, *Dracula* meets the Vatican from *Dracula Lives!* Inks by Ernie Chan.

**Gerber:** It's absolutely one of the most gorgeous things you ever drew! It was terrific.

**Colan:** No, I don't remember [laughs]. I'm sorry.

**Field:** Steve, what was it like for you when you first got the opportunity to work with Gene?

**Gerber:** The first time I actually worked over Gene's artwork, I wasn't truly working with Gene. It was on *Daredevil*, and the plots had been created by Gerry Conway. I was somewhat removed from it. I was just handed this stuff that was really beautiful, and told to make a story of it! [laughs] It was astonishing. Interestingly – and Gene, there's no way you possibly could know this – but the very first thing I ever wrote for Marvel, my writer's test for Marvel, was a *Daredevil* sequence Gene had drawn.

**Colan:** Oh, my god!

**Gerber:** Yeah! They sent me six pages of a *Daredevil* story, also plotted by Gerry, that was a kind of a takeoff on a car chase from [the movie] *Bullitt*.

**Colan:** Yes!

**Gerber:** You remember that? I didn't write the actual story, but they sent me photocopies of those six pages when I was still living in St. Louis...

**Colan:** So, you were kind of auditioning?



## Marvel - The Last Years

**P**icture: The late 1970s, a long car ride from New York to Connecticut. Gene Colan and Marvel's newest editor-in-chief, Jim Shooter, are enroute to a live radio interview, and what should be a pleasant drive becomes an unbearable experience for Colan.

"Shooter never had a word to say to me," Colan recalls. "I tried to make conversation, but he'd just answer briefly. He had something on his mind – there was something wrong, something terribly wrong. But he was not friendly, not outgoing."

That day, haunted by the uncomfortable car ride, Colan returns home to Adrienne and confesses his fear: The rise of Jim Shooter just might signal the end of Gene Colan at Marvel.

*Tomb of Dracula* was hardly Gene Colan's only comics job in the 1970s.

After establishing himself as one of Marvel's most distinct stylists in the 1960s, Colan spent much of the '70s displaying his versatility on such diverse characters as Daredevil, Dr. Doom, Killraven, the Son of Satan, and Brother Voodoo. Who else, after all, could prove equally adept at drawing romance, horror, humor, and heroic adventure? At one time, in fact, Colan held the distinction of concurrently illustrating three of Marvel's most distinctly different titles:

*Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts*;

*Tomb of Dracula, Lord of the Vampires*;

*Howard the Duck*, the anthropomorphic fowl trapped in a world he never made (and the basis of a 1986 George Lucas film that *he* might wish he never made!).

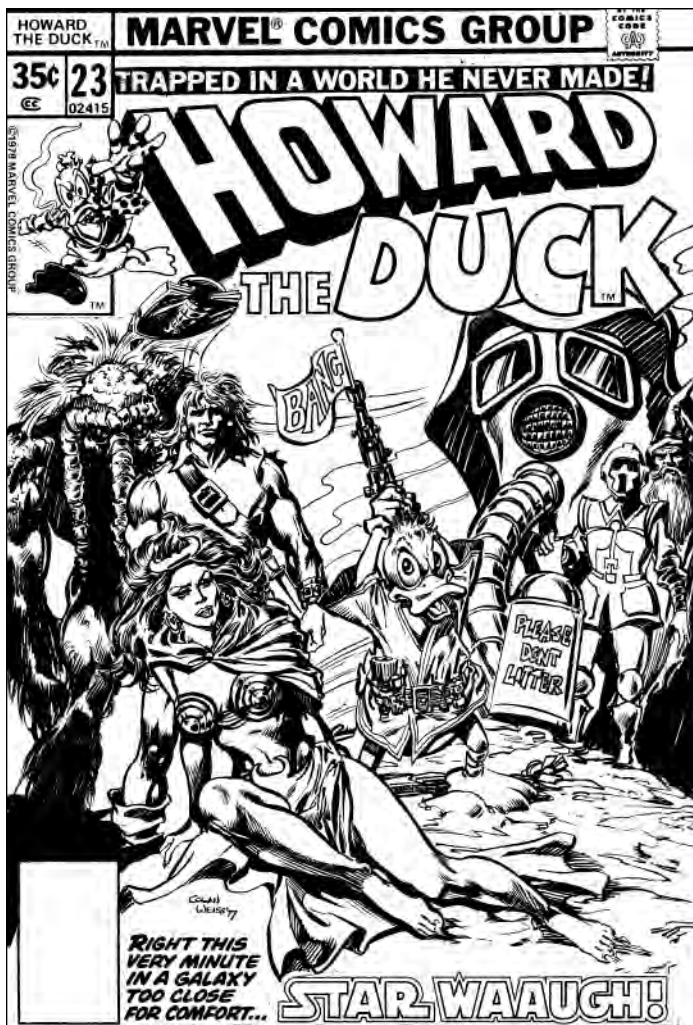
The latter may well have been Colan's favorite assignment of the mid-'70s. Created as a walk-on character by writer Steve Gerber and artist Val Mayerik in the pages of the monster comic *Man-Thing*, Howard the Duck was just that – a cigar-smoking, sharp-tongued drake who got plucked from his own world and tossed unceremoniously into ours. Equal parts Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny and, well, maybe Lenny Bruce, Howard was a sharp-eyed social critic who quickly caught comics' fans fancy and saw himself promoted from bit part to back-up stories to his own eponymous comic book in late 1975.

Initially, the *Howard the Duck* (HTD) comic was drawn by young artist Frank Brunner. But Brunner left the book after just two issues, with Marvel veteran John Buscema handling the third. Then, with issue #4, the series fell into Colan's lap.

Colan didn't know what to think. Was he being demoted – assigned to draw a kids' funny-animal comic? But as soon as he read Gerber's sophisticated,



**Doom Lore:** Splash page to the Dr. Doom story in *Astonishing Tales* #8, Oct. 1971 – a classic story about Doom trying to rescue his mother's damned soul from Hell. Inks by Tom Palmer.



**Star Waaugh:** Parody cover from 1977 by Colan and Al Weiss.

satirical script about a sleep-walking vigilante named “Winky Man,” Colan knew he wasn’t exactly in Disneyland.

**Colan:** At first, I said, ‘How can you claim this is your own? Howard the Duck, this is Donald Duck here!’ Didn’t matter that he smoked a cigar, had a little hat on, that was enough! But if no one else questioned it, why should I? I enjoyed it, because Howard was the easiest thing to do, and it was such a chance to make things funny and lighten up a little bit. I enjoyed humor, and Steve [Gerber] was so funny. I’d just sit there and laugh my head off just reading the script, and I’d call him and say so.

Typically, Colan didn’t read ahead in a script – he just read each individual page as he sat down to draw it. But Gerber’s wildly inventive and clever scripts enchanted him. He couldn’t get enough of these stories, which revolved around monstrous gingerbread men, presidential campaigns, mental institutions, and a recurring character known only as “The Kidney Lady.”

“Whatever he had on every page was funny, it was just hilarious,” Colan says of Gerber’s work. “I had a good rapport with Steve.”

And Colan clearly had an affinity for the stories. His storytelling,

his expressionism, his ability to juxtapose the real and the unreal – these qualities made Colan the perfect artist to depict *HTD*’s imperfect world.

As the *HTD* stories got wilder and wackier – i.e. running Howard for President in 1976, guest-starring the band KISS in 1977, and then turning mild-mannered newspaper columnist Bob Greene into the malevolent villain Dr. Bong – the character evolved from cult favorite to cultural phenomenon. In 1978, Howard even became the star of his own syndicated newspaper strip, which Gene drew in *addition* to his regular comics work, thinking the comic strip would be his ticket to big bucks.

In fact, Colan remembers a call from Marvel publisher Stan Lee, encouraging him to draw the *HTD* strip. “Oh, you’ll retire on what you make on [the syndicated strip]. Just keep going,” Lee said.

“We didn’t make it, though, with the syndicated strip, because things weren’t coming in on time,” Colan says. “I couldn’t keep up the pace between regular comic work and *Howard*, and so the whole damn thing fell apart.”

**Adrienne Colan:** I remember when the call from Stan came, and we were all in the kitchen, including the kids, and Gene picked up the phone, said it’s Stan, and he said, “How would



**Brother Voodoo:** Origin of a character who could have only come from the 1970s! Inks by Dan Adkins.

# HOWARD THE DUCK!

By STEVE GERBER and GENE COLAN



**HTD Strip:** A Colan penciled/inked daily newspaper strip from 1977.

you like to make \$100,000 a year?" And we just thought, "Oh, my God, our ship has come in!" and we started jumping around the kitchen. Seven months later, we're flat-broke, to the point where we had to sell the only car we had and borrow my parents' car. What a mess!

Ultimately, Gerber's relationship with Marvel deteriorated to the point where he quit *HTD* and left the company – left comics altogether for a time, working instead in TV animation. Colan hung in with *HTD* through a succession of writers, but the stories and the series never again packed the punch they had under Gerber's guidance.

Like *Tomb of Dracula*, the *HTD* color comic was canceled in 1979, then replaced with a black-and-white magazine illustrated mainly by Colan. But again like *TOD*, the *HTD* magazine was short-lived, and its cancellation left Colan wondering "What next?"

## Final Straws

In some ways, the *TOD* and *HTD* series were like a long, overseas tour of duty for Colan. When they ended, he was sent back home to mainstream Marvel, wondering "OK, what do I do now?"

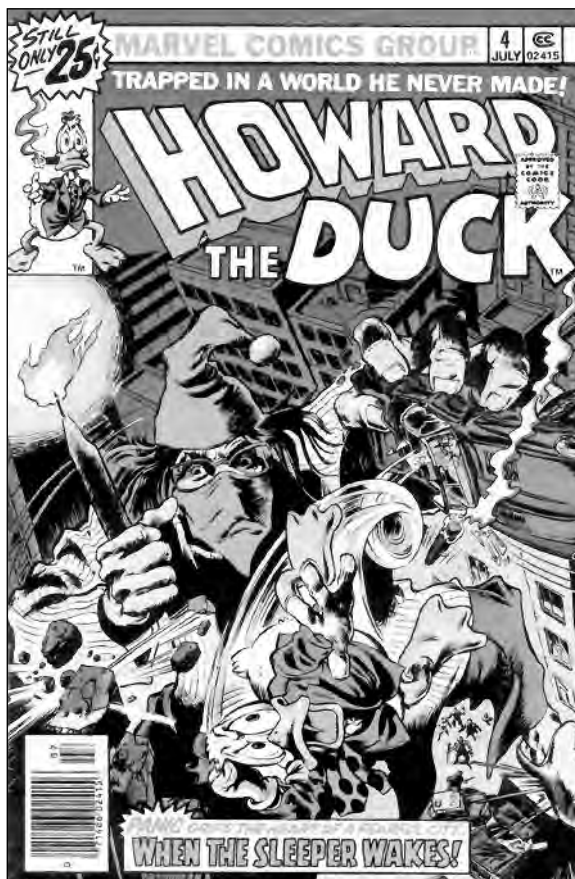
Marvel wasn't as easy a fit as it once had been. While Colan had been one of the superstars of Stan's Bullpen in the 1960s, Stan was pretty much out of the comic book picture by the late '70s, and the hotshot artists of Gene's generation – Kirby, Buscema, Romita, and Tuska – had mostly moved on or been displaced by the up-and-coming superstars.

Byrne, Pérez, and Starlin were the new fan faves handling the A-list books, and a rookie named Miller was about to take Gene's signature character, Daredevil, to even greater creative heights.

So, what was available for Colan? He returned briefly to *Dr. Strange*, puttered around on odd jobs such as movie adaptations (*Meteor* and *Jaws II*), fill-ins (*Marvel Team-Up* #37, *Captain America* #256 and *Annual* #5) and the occasional special project (*Marvel Super Special* #10, featuring Star-Lord). But then the only regular assignment he could score was on the black-and-white *Hulk* magazine, a TV tie-in that was about two years past its prime, starring a character that Colan never particularly embraced. "He was ugly as sin, big and clumsy, didn't look good on the page, and I couldn't relate to him," Colan says. "He was more like a big dumb Lenny (from *Of Mice and Men*) than anything else, and I couldn't deal with him."

But just as Colan suspected from that fateful car ride to Connecticut, there *was* something on Jim Shooter's mind: a growing sense that, just as Colan couldn't deal with the Hulk, maybe Marvel – Shooter's Marvel – could no longer deal with Colan.

Jim Shooter is at once one of comics' most celebrated and controversial figures. He broke into the business in the 1960s at age 13, helping to support his family by writing *Legion of Superheroes* stories for DC Comics. He left the business briefly and returned in the mid-'70s as a writer, then an editor at Marvel. He became editor-in-chief at Marvel in the late 1970s, establishing himself as



**Last Hurrah?:** Colan began drawing *Howard the Duck* with issue #4 in 1976. This was one of the last assignments he truly enjoyed before things soured for him at Marvel.

in the mid-'70s as a writer, then an editor at Marvel. He became editor-in-chief at Marvel in the late 1970s, establishing himself as





**Rampaging Hulk:** TV-inspired advertisement illo penciled by Colan circa 1980.

# DC and the Ups & Downs of the Eighties

**P**icture: A panel discussion at the Dallas Fantasy Fair, June 1982. Moderated (and occasionally egged on) by Gary Groth, founder and editor of *The Comics Journal*, comics creators John Byrne, Kerry Gammill and Jan Strnad discuss contemporary comics. Byrne, amidst his memorable run as writer/artist on the *Fantastic Four*, launches into a defense of controversial Marvel editor Jim Shooter – a defense that soon devolves into offensive comments about Gene Colan. “Shooter wouldn’t let Gene Colan do the kind of crap – banana feet and duck hands – that he’s been giving us for the last five years,” Byrne says. “Shooter wouldn’t let him do that, so he went over to DC where they said ‘Sure. Come and do garbage. We’ll pay you for it.’”

It was big.

When Gene Colan quit Marvel in 1981, moving across town to set up shop at arch-rival DC, the news was huge. Fanzines buzzed with gossip about what had and had not been said between Colan and Marvel editor Jim Shooter. The comics news magazines tripped over one another to get to the latest information or photocopies from Colan’s first assignments.

And he was given some plum assignments. Knowing they’d snagged a major talent – and had the makings of a major marketing campaign – DC executives immediately assigned Colan to draw the company’s two top characters: Batman and Superman.

Colan’s DC debut was in *Batman* #340, Oct. 1981, a 25-page story written by Marvel ex-pats Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas, and inked ably by Filipino artist Adrian Gonzales. Although Colan didn’t draw the cover, his name was promoted prominently upon it, and the first story page was devoted to a single illustration of Batman and an announcement from DC heralding Gene’s premiere. The story, about a prison escapee-turned-monster named the “Mole,” was a fun mystery with references aplenty to the EC horror comics of the 1950s.

“It was a riff on the old Bill Elder/Harvey Kurtzman Mole character,” says co-writer Thomas, who’d recently moved to DC himself and was delighted by the reunion with *Dr. Strange* collaborator Colan. “It was neat to see Gene draw Batman.”

Colan, too, was thrilled to finally illustrate the adventures of the hero he’d admired so many years earlier. “Oh, and how!” Colan says when asked if he enjoyed Batman. “It was exciting to draw Batman. I never had done it before, so this was my first opportunity.”



**Bat Splash:** Penciled version of one of Colan’s first Batman stories, from *Batman* #345, 1982.



**DC Debuts:** Colan made a big splash at DC with two of his first assignments: drawing Steve Gerber's Superman mini-series, the *Phantom Zone* and Roy Thomas' *Wonder Woman* re-launch. *PZ* cover inked by Dick Giordano; *WW* by Romeo Tanghal.

On the heels of his Batman debut, Colan drew Superman in the four-issue *Phantom Zone* mini-series written by former *Howard the Duck* scribe Steve Gerber and inked by Tony DeZuniga, who'd also worked with Gene at Marvel. A tie-in to the film *Superman II*, which was in theaters in 1981, *Phantom Zone* pitted Superman against the most famous Kryptonian villains, and gave Colan the chance to draw a bevy of big-name DC characters, including Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern and Supergirl.

Upon *Phantom Zone*'s completion, Colan was the recipient of two high-profile assignments:

**Wonder Woman** – One of DC's best-known characters and worst-selling series, *WW* was designated for a big-time revival in late '81. Under the auspices of Roy Thomas, Colan and inker Romeo Tanghal, the "sensational new" *WW* debuted in Feb. 1982.

**Night Force** – A new & different horror comic conceived by Colan and former *Tomb of Dracula* writer Marv Wolfman.

Whereas *TOD* had at times read like a good novel, *Night Force* was designed from the outset to be one – to be a series of discrete horror novels, actually, within the context of an ongoing comics series. The one recurring character, Baron Winters, was an occult master (with an uncanny resemblance to actor Jonathan Frid, who portrayed TV's "Barnabas Collins" in *Dark Shadows*) who led a *Mission: Impossible* cast of heroes into battle against the forces of evil. Debuting in August 1982, *Night Force* was a commercial risk, but an artistic triumph, unleashing Wolfman and Colan to create new magic in collaboration with inker Bob Smith.

From afar, Colan's colleagues and fans alike saw a new spark in his work – they felt he'd been re-energized by his move from Marvel to DC.

"I think Gene *was* revitalized a bit by being somewhere where people respected him and weren't trying to fit him into a predetermined mold," says Thomas. "If you're using Gene Colan, don't try to make him into somebody else."

But Colan, ever sensitive to vibrations from people around him, felt something was amiss. Yes, he had high-profile assignments, and





# Gene Colan Portfolio



Double-page  
spread to  
*Batman*  
#344, 1982.

## Secrets: Gene Colan Unplugged (or at least uninked)

Unlike, say, colleague Jack Kirby, Gene Colan never saved photocopies of his penciled comic book pages before they were sent off to be lettered and inked by his publishers. So there are few surviving samples of his classic 1960s and '70s penciled work for collectors to ogle today.

## The 18-Panel Page

This chapter represents a perfect Gene Colan moment.

Just as Colan, throughout his career, would pace a story by happenstance – huge spreads and long scenes at the beginning and middle of a story, 18-panel pages (slight exaggeration) at the very end, when suddenly he discovered he'd run out of pages before he'd run out of story...

... We're approaching the end of this book, and yet still have so much to say about Colan's life and career in the 1990s and beyond.

So, in true Gene Colan style, let's try to pack two decades into two pages (or so) and review some highlights of the past 20 years, including:

### Teaching Art

While still under contract at DC Comics in the mid-'80s, Colan found himself short of story assignments – but heavy with the usual financial obligations. So in an effort to generate new income – and give something back to the art and comics communities – he started teaching part-time at New York's School of Visual Arts and Fashion Institute of Technology. Never a fan of academic settings, Colan didn't feel entirely comfortable as a teacher, but he nevertheless devoted a solid eight years to the endeavor.

### Drawing Archie Comics?

Can you imagine a more incongruous pairing than Gene Colan and Archie Comics? The man known for drawing shadowy stories about rotting corpses and hell-spawned demons drawing the simple adventures of a



**Archie?:** Colan indeed did a stint at Archie Comics, as evidenced by this page from *Jughead's Time Police* #4, 1990.

freckle-faced, girl-crazy teen from Riverdale High?

That's exactly what happened in 1987, when Colan – again struggling to get regular assignments at DC – heeded wife Adrienne's suggestion to give Archie a try. After all, one of his best friends, Rudy LaPuck, worked there and spoke highly of the company. And with *Howard the Duck* Colan had already proven he could draw in a cartoony style.

Starting with *Archie's Pals and Gals* #186, March 1987, Colan embarked on a three-year-plus stint drawing – and even occasionally writing – the light-hearted adventures of Archie, Jughead, Hotdog, and the Riverdale gang.

### Return to Marvel

With the departure of nemesis Jim Shooter from Marvel Comics in 1987, the door opened for Colan to consider a return to the site of his greatest glories. And in 1989 he did just that, reuniting with writer Don McGregor and inker Tom Palmer for a 25-part Black Panther serial in the biweekly anthology comic *Marvel Comics Presents*. Beyond the Panther, Colan freelanced all

through the Marvel universe for the next several years, drawing a variety of comics including some *Iron Man* fill-ins, a pair of Wolverine stories, a Wolverine/Nightcrawler serial in *Marvel Comics Presents* and a Clive Barker-related horror series called *The Harrowers*. Among the highlights of Colan's return to Marvel:

*Doctor Strange (third series)* #19, July 1990 – a one-shot reunion on Doc with writer Roy Thomas. No Tom Palmer, though – Colan inked this one himself.

## Gene and Adrienne Colan

Throughout this book, we've looked for opportunities to spotlight some of Gene Colan's most famous partnerships. When talking about Marvel, we spoke with Colan and Stan Lee. When discussing inking, we roped in Tom Palmer. For writing, it was Steve Gerber.

It's only natural, then, that as we transition into Colan's semi-retirement and relocation to Florida in 2003, that we sit down for a discussion with him and his greatest partner – the person who's been there with him every step of the way since 1963: his wife, Adrienne Colan.

The following discussion with Gene & Adrienne Colan was conducted in April 2005.

### On Teaching

**TF:** When did you start teaching, and why?

**Gene:** As soon as we moved to New York City, Adrienne strongly encouraged me to take advantage of the proximity to School of Visual Arts and the Fashion Institute of Technology. Teaching would be a way to share my knowledge with the younger generation of artists, and provide a basis for a stable income to offset the instability of my comic book career at that time. She drew up a proposal of what I'd teach and how I'd teach. It set up appointments with the presidents of these schools, and then I was immediately on-board.

**TF:** Did you do this after you got off contract at DC?

**Adrienne:** It was when we moved to New York in the early '80s. He was at DC... but it was never a very secure feeling. In fact, Gene's perceptions of some of the more successful titles he worked on, like *Batman*, is that – nothing was ever secure. It just didn't feel that way. Of course, *Night Force* flopped – it was just a very insecure time. I had suggested to Gene that he teach at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) for two reasons: 1) He was getting on, and 2) for the foundation of financial security. Also, from an altruistic standpoint, to give back and pass on what he knew. I remember he contacted the school, made an appointment with the president, and he went



**Fantasy Commission:** It's a fun game: name one character Colan never got the chance to draw – but should have. The Demon was one fan's answer. Commissioned drawing inked by Bob McLeod.



# Secret #4: How Gene Draws

## Inside the Reinterpretation of Tomb of Dracula #1

By Dave Gutierrez

The idea for the Tomb of Dracula #1 Cover recreation was probably two or three years in the making. I tortured myself trying to come up with a worthy commission idea for Gene to tackle. It's a big commitment. So what would it be? Daredevil? Captain America? Iron Man? I could never decide.

Suddenly one day I was looking at the TOD #1 comic thinking to myself "I wish Gene had done all the TOD covers, especially this one. It's #1 and it's not Gene."

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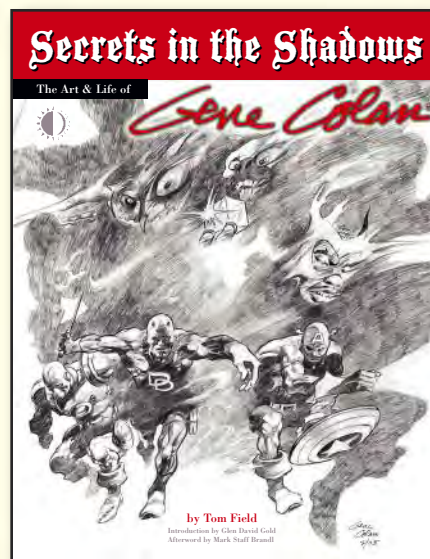
### Secrets In The Shadows: GENE COLAN

From Daredevil to Dracula, from Batman to Brother Voodoo, from Howard the Duck to Stewart the Rat, *Secrets in the Shadows: The Art & Life of Gene Colan* is the ultimate retrospective on one of comics' all-time unique artists. Featuring rare childhood drawings, photos, recently-discovered wartime illustrations, and original art and sketches from throughout his nearly 60-year career, this book offers new insight on the inspirations, challenges and successes that shaped Gene 'the Dean' Colan.

Among the highlights are: A comprehensive overview of Gene's glory days at Marvel Comics! Marv Wolfman, Don McGregor and other favorite writers share plot/script samples and anecdotes of their Colan collaborations! Tom Palmer, Steve Leialoha and other noted artists show how they approached the daunting task of inking Colan's famously nuanced penciled pages! Plus: a new portfolio of never-before-seen collaborations between Gene and such masters as John Byrne, Michael Kaluta and George Perez, and all-new artwork created specifically for this book by Gene Colan, who is still inspired by the "Secrets in the Shadows." This Digital Edition features 16 extra black-and-white pages and 8 extra color pages. Written by award-winning journalist Tom Field, who was given unprecedented access to the Colan family's insights and archives, this book paints an intimate portrait of one of comics' most inimitable talents!

(192-page Digital Edition) \$6.95

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**The Stages of a Colan Drawing:** Ever wonder how Gene Colan constructs an illustration? Take a look at these images captured along the way as he drew his own interpretation of the *Tomb of Dracula* #1 cover – from rough beginnings to finished work.