

# AN INTERVIEW WITH CONAN ARTIST JOHN BUSCEMA

Conducted by John Collier and John Wren

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** The following mini-interview appeared originally in the *Comic-Book Workshop Showcase* compiled by John B.'s students in the very first class of his *Comic Book Artists' Workshop*. In answer to many questions about Big John's life and career, we felt it deserved a wider audience. This is it. —R.T.

**Q:** To begin with, would you give us some background concerning your formal training?

**JOHN:** Sure. I attended the High School of Music and Art, located in Manhattan, and while in high school I spent about a year and a half at Pratt Institute at night, studying life drawing and design. I also had another year of life drawing, later, at the Brooklyn Museum.

Now, that was my *formal* training. But in addition to that, I also spent a great deal of time visiting museums and studying the works of the Old Masters, such as da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Rubens.

Still later, when I began professionally, I learned an awful lot from the works of the great illustrators of the forties and fifties, such as Robert Fawcett. The education of an artist never ceases.

I still read a great deal and subscribe to many art publications. I like to be aware of what's going on around me in the field of illustration and painting.

**Q:** Which brings up the point of your first professional work. You began in illustration and advertisement?

**JOHN:** Yes. I began doing paperback covers, illustrations for the various armed service mags, the American Legion mag, and textbook illos. For advertisement, I did a lot of layout work. I did Eastern Airlines, Seagrams' Whiskey—oh, a whole host of assignments.

**Q:** If we can jump up to the present, then, do you enjoy what you're working on now, in terms of your comic work?

**JOHN:** Oh, sure. I'm doing CONAN now and really prefer it to some of the things I've done in the past. I'm basically realistically oriented, and CONAN is the most realistic strip I've done so far. I guess it's a holdover from my advertising days. I really have a hard time relating to

characters who fly or crash thru buildings. I also prefer working on the black-and-white books, where we have a bigger panel size to work in.

**Q:** Does it make it easier for you as an artist if you have a job you can relate to?

**JOHN:** Of course. You have to be able to feel it and be comfortable with it. As I always try to impress upon you in class, "feel" the action. Act it out if you have to.

You have to be an *actor* to draw comics, as well as a *director*, so then, do it! If you can really feel it, the job is that much easier to do. You'd be surprised, but that feeling will come across in your finished artwork.

Also, the story has to be interesting; and if it isn't, drawing can really become a nightmare. I also enjoy drawing period pieces. I remember a job I did several years ago on the lives of the Presidents; the changes in fashion as time went by were just fascinating.

You know, this question reminds me of the hardest job I guess I ever did in comics. My first. I was on staff at the time and was working on a period piece about the robbers of Lincoln's tomb. Boy, I sweated on that one. I worked eight hours on four panels and the editor kept making me redraw it! It took me two weeks to do a six- or seven-page story. But I kept at it and here I am today!



**Q:** How fast do you work today?

**JOHN:** It's breakdowns, five or six pages a day. If it's finished pencil drawings with blacks, about three or three and a half pages.

**Q:** Wow! What type of schedule do you need for that?

**JOHN:** Well, it's a business and any person thinking about comics as a career should bear that in mind. Today, for example, I was at the board at four A.M. But usually I work from seven to five, five days a week. It's really just a matter of discipline.

**Q:** Would you like to be doing a complete strip—pencils and inks?

**JOHN:** Oh, no doubt about it! I'd love to, but unfortunately, in this business, no one has the time to do a complete job. There have been times when I haven't been completely happy with the inking job my work has received, but then it's very hard and probably impossible for any penciller to get the finished inks just the way he had envisioned.

**Q:** What about mistakes? Do you see any common mistakes among amateur artists?

**JOHN:** Mistakes? I think at some point we all make mistakes, the pro as well as the amateur. We all overlook training and practice. Of course, there are guys in the field who have never had any training. They have made it by practice and sheer concentration, but boy, that seems like a very hard way to do something. We can all teach ourselves up to a point, and then I really think some sort of instruction is necessary.

**Q:** Is that how you began your Comic Workshop?

**JOHN:** Yes. You know, I get a lot of letters from young people asking me how to enter the comic field. Years ago it was a lot easier. You had more companies and you had studios, which acted as a good training ground for young artists. That just doesn't exist anymore. So I felt a comic workshop would fill that void.

**Q:** Do you plan on continuing the Workshop next year?

**JOHN:** Definitely. Although, next year, I'm going to run things a bit differently. Not only will I be teaching, but I'm going to be joined by John Romita, Don Heck, and Marie Severin. The course will run twelve weeks and we're going to add a workshop on writing as well. Hopefully we'll have Stan Lee come down as well as Archie Goodwin, Len Wein, and Marv Wolfman. (ED. NOTE: And yes, Ye Editor R.T. may also drop by, on his visits back to NYC from his new pad on the West Coast, by special invitation of Mr. B!)

**Q:** Would you like to do any writing?

**JOHN:** No, I'm not a writer. I have no ability in that field. What I do have, I think, is a good sense of pacing and drama. And that is important to telling a good story.



**Q:** What do you consider your best piece of comic work to date?

**JOHN:** I would have to say the SILVER SURFER stories my brother Sal and I worked on. I had a lot of freedom on that job. I had a very sketchy plot outline to work from, which I prefer, and I just felt good doing it.

**Q:** One last question, John. What changes do you see in the future for comics? Do you see them strictly as entertainment or do you see them as becoming more educational?

**JOHN:** Well, I think that, as an educational medium, comics are still an untapped resource. The fact that they can be both entertaining and educational really makes them wide open as a medium.

Personally, I would love to see them become more realistic. I love to read about the lives of famous artists and I think it would be fantastic to do a comic adaptation of, let's say, Vincent van Gogh's life.

I guess I would also like to see more novels adapted to comics.

**END NOTE:** For more information about the Comic Book Artists' Workshop, write to: John Buscema, Box 394, East Setauket, N.Y. 11733.

