Inspiration from the Peanuts Gallery

Ontario cartoonist and book designer GREGORY GALLANT —better known as SETH—counts many influences, perhaps none more important than Charles M. Schulz's famous comic strip.

SETH GRACED THE ALCUIN SOCIETY *with his presence twice in 2014, the first time in April as a judge for the Society's annual competition for excellence in book design in Canada, and the second as the featured guest when the award-winning books were honoured in Vancouver on September 11.*

With his profound respect for the design aesthetic of the 1930s to the 1960s, Seth can seem like a man out of time. Conversations with Society members revealed an erudite gentleman with firm views that hearken back to older notions of individual and national identity.

Which isn't to say he's old-fashioned or hidebound in those views, simply firm. And in conversation with Vancouver book designer Peter Cocking at the September awards ceremony, Seth indicated the breadth of his influences and the steady evolution of his personal aesthetic.

What follows is an edited and condensed transcript of his remarks, one that reveals a keen mind that sees parallels between the various visual arts that are part of the broader book arts.

~ Peter Mitham, editor

I AM A BOOK DESIGNER NOW, but primarily I am a cartoonist. I grew up in a small town in Ontario, a variety of small towns, in fact, and I liked a lot of bad stuff as a kid. But there was some stuff that was really meaningful. And for me, the primary influence that made me want to be a cartoonist was *Peanuts*. A lot of people nowadays, a lot of younger folk, I suspect that they just think of Snoopy when they think of *Peanuts*.

It had a really profound effect. It's funny. It was not really written for children but children responded to it well, essentially because Charlie Brown was an outsider character. It is particularly fascinating to me when I grew older to see the early versions of the characters, but the strip had a black-humour quality to it in the '60s that was very sophisticated, and I think by the time the 1980s arrived people had kind of forgotten that that was the heart of what *Peanuts* was. And as a child *Peanuts* was huge: I empathized with the characters. They had deep meaning to me, and the very style that Schulz drew in set the standard for how I wanted to work as an artist.

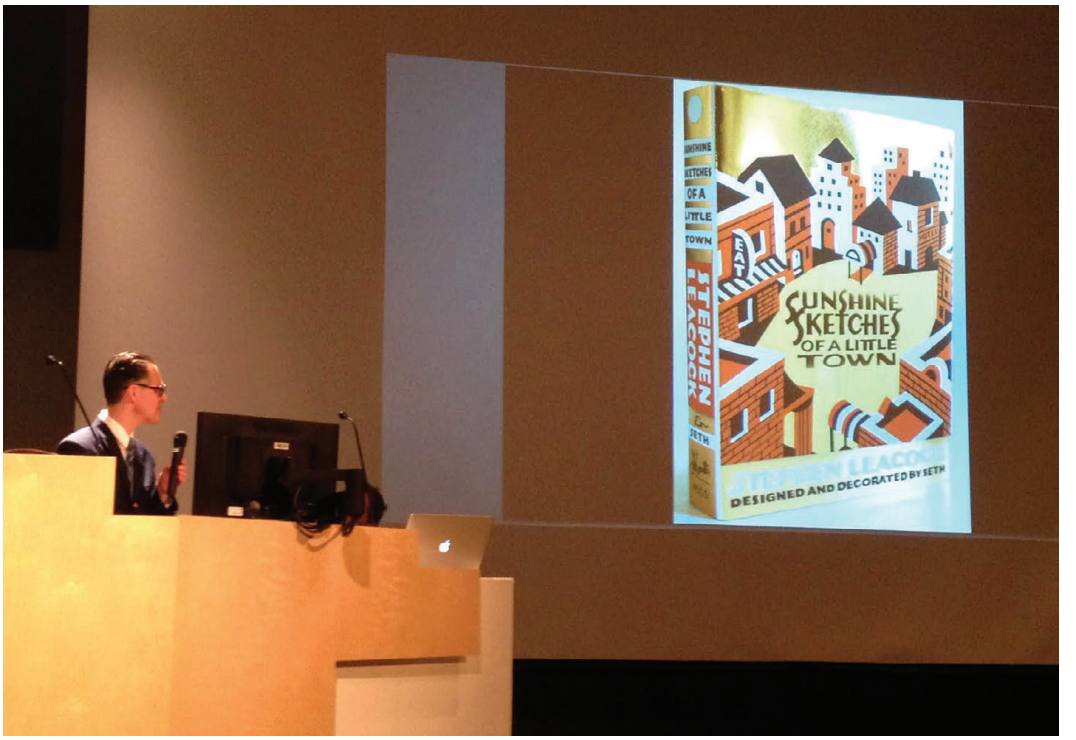
The cartooning was his handwriting. It's not about drawing, it's about an essential quality that is in you, that comes through in how you draw. And the lettering and the drawing and that, it's not design, it's not drawing, it's essential cartooning, which is personal image-making, which is about symbols.

This is the hardest thing that people have to understand about cartooning, is it's not about drawing; it's about creating symbols that people instantly recognize. Clearly, if you're drawing a house, it's a house; but it's more a symbol of a house than a drawing of a house. Drawings in cartooning are a little closer to the letters in typography than they are to sitting down and rendering things. Cartooning, the more detailed it gets, the less it works as a symbol language.

Jack Kirby was a great example of this. I never realized it as a kid, but the reason I liked him was because the work was designs. You could see that these were shapes moving around on the page, more than that they were drawings. And I still love Kirby, even though I'm not as interested in fantasy or superheroes or that kind of storytelling, but the drawing itself still has a tremendous compositional power when I look at it.

PORN AND PUNK

And then when I got a little older, when I went to art school, a little before that, I discovered Robert Crumb. And Crumb was, I think, the cartoonist who taught me that you could do anything you wanted with comics. He was the guy I think I saw him just a little too early, and he seemed gross to me. I found the cartoons were



Seth discusses his design for Stephen Leacock's Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town. (*Lumi Constantin photo*)

disturbingly like pornography more than comics. He had a very dirty mind, literally filthy, yet there was something really enticing in it at the same time beyond just its pornographic qualities.

I think what was great about Crumb and a few of the other filthiest cartoonists is that they could actually impart a genuine emotion of lust into the work. It wasn't just the drawings were dirty, but there was something genuine that expressed real human feeling that was different from so much commercial art.

Most of the history of cartooning is the history of junk. It was literally produced to make a buck. And there's only a handful of great practitioners. And Crumb was probably, along with a couple of the other underground cartoonists, [they were] the people who redefined the idea that it could be a personal medium. They were working through a lot of taboos.

But the other thing about Crumb was his work looked like it had come from some earlier era. And that was very deeply affecting for me, too: that realization that he was digging around in the past to find his inspiration. When I came across this, I was firmly living in the present, and that sense of digging into the past was something I was just starting to understand at the age of 18 or 19.

After that, one of my most important influences at the age of about 20 is when I discovered the Hernandez brothers, and that was because I was a punk rocker at the time. And these were two Hispanic brothers down in Southern California doing these stories about punk and about being young, and that lifestyle, and very much from a pure comic-book aesthetic: soap operas, superheroes, all that stuff. It really made me realize, wow, this can speak directly to me.

Even though Crumb was still working at that point, he was a bit of a museum figure to me—he was already somewhat in the past, part of that hippie subculture which I absolutely hated (but Crumb was the figure I forgave for being a hippie). But the Hernandez brothers really spoke directly to you at that point. I still find it strange . . . that this work is now so old that it's older than Crumb was

when I discovered him. But this work felt so utterly modern, right, like, speaking directly to me at that point—super-inspirational that you could write just about your own life.

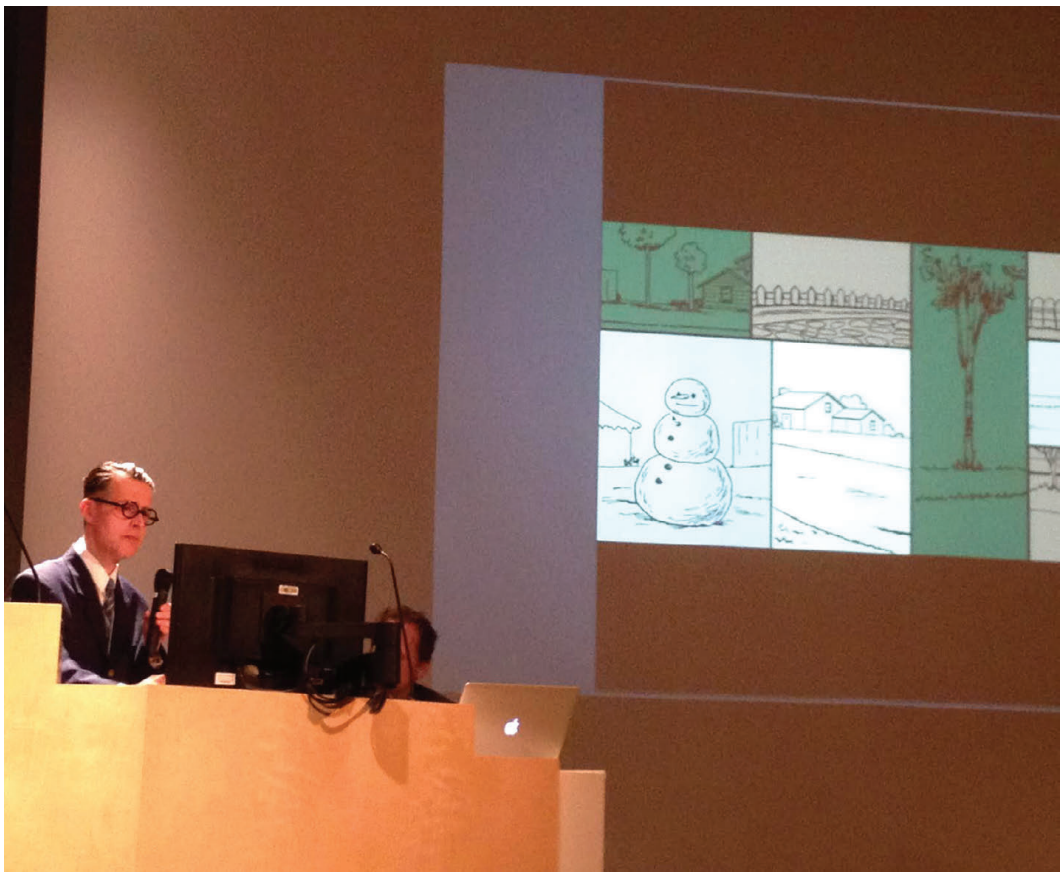
BOILING THINGS DOWN

Tintin is something that you think should have been earlier when I talk about influences. But I didn't read Hergé's work when I was a kid; I discovered it around the time I was in my 20s. It's a work that, stylistically, I was drawn to. I realized that this was where I saw the clear-line, figure style of drawing—what really I came to understand as the symbol language of comics—where the shapes are simple, you're not concerned with rendering. You can have lots of detail but it's all iconically drawn. And that set the standard for everything I did after that.

In retrospect, I realize that's the essential part of why cartooning appealed to me, because it was a designed language rather than about drawing. I remember when I was in first year of art school, there was some project where we were supposed to draw some people at a party. And when we put up our drawings to be critiqued, I remember one of the other students said it was so smart to draw it as a cartoon. And I remember thinking, "I didn't try to draw that as a cartoon." I was drawing that as realistically as I possibly could, but I thought in terms of cartoons.

And I think that's why I ended up a cartoonist, because I was interested in the design qualities of the language. There is something about the picture language of cartooning that is essentially a graphic language.

A lot of people talk about comics as possibly being a combination of film and literature, and I always thought that's a very poor idea of what cartooning is. Cartooning is really, I've come to realize, more a combination of



Simplified landscapes become icons for Seth, part of a cartoonist's visual language. (*Lumi Constantin photo*)

Seth with his interviewer, book designer Peter Cocking. (*Peter Mitham photo*)

graphic design and poetry, because poetry is all about that condensation, that boiling things down to essential language. Comics is about condensing things as well: it's about condensing time and action and words, and it's not about drawing, it's about design.

Schulz was one of the first post-war cartoonists who brought in the modern approach: simple, very few lines, and the work was meant to be reduced very small, too, so he was forced to keep things utterly simple. Charlie Brown is not the drawing of a child, he is Charlie Brown. He's not drawing anything. Charlie Brown comes out of the end of that pen—that's a thing that exists when Schulz draws him. This is not the iconic image of a child, that is Charlie Brown—that's the real thing that's on the page there.

There's something about that that has real power and it transmits to you, and that's because that's Schulz's actual hand. It was his handwriting. And you see that when he gets old, too, after he has his stroke, the strip becomes very shaky and there's something tender and meaningful in that that adds power to it as well.

The strip was always very human, which was different than all the strips around it. You could like the other strips—I liked *B.C.* as a kid, and I liked *Broom-Hilda* or whatever—but these strips were essentially just gag strips. Later on I started to think of them as the imitation of a joke: they weren't actually funny, but they had the form of a joke, that at the end you said, "I guess that was a joke." But with *Peanuts* you invested into the characters.

This is why Schulz knew he would never allow the strip to be drawn by anyone else after he died. It was impossible to imagine anyone else doing it without it being a complete travesty; he was too connected to the work itself. I really think he was the great poet of comics, even more than Herriman and *Krazy Kat*.

THE CANADIAN VERNACULAR

Thoreau MacDonald is probably the person that I've been most influenced by in book design. I came across his work quite by accident. He was the son of J.E.H. MacDonald, one of the Group of Seven, and he was probably Canada's premier book designer before the 1960s.[1] He did a tremendous amount of work through the '20s and then in the '40s and '50s and got tied up with a press called Ryerson Press, and he

did a lot of their work. He worked in pen and ink, and he did a lot of hand-drawn lettering.

And what struck me was, much as I was talking about with Schulz, there was a great earnestness to the work and you could feel his personality in it. You can see the beautiful integration between his drawings and his handwriting. And I felt it came up at just the right time in my life.

It connected around the same time I was starting to study Canadian vernacular design. I was gathering and collecting a lot of old pamphlets, and books, and records—anything Canadiana. I wanted to try and figure out some kind of Canadian design sensibility that I could be attracted to from past work. I wanted to brand myself with something that I was specifically interested in and dig deeper into it.

So I started to gather up a lot of stuff, and realized that they're all from around the same time. And even though the aesthetic is extremely different, the thing is, MacDonald's work felt Canadian to me—and I thought, "Why is it feeling Canadian to me?" And in the collecting, I thought, "I will study these works to try and boil it down to something more than the obvious of having a Mountie on them."

"A MARVELLOUS BORINGNESS"

Basically, there were three basic points it came down to. They are hardly brilliant points, and they're points you've heard before.[2] The number one element I discovered in old Canadian vernacular design is there is some desire to imagine that we're connecting ourselves to the landscape.

Two, there is some image that connects us to government, or heraldic symbols of Britain or France or something that has some feeling of officialdom to it—something about the Mother Corp handing things down, there's always a heraldic image somewhere.

Three, they're humble. There's something about them that is small. And you see this again and again through these works. The American versions of these will always be more impressive. They would always be a little bit more proud. It's interesting how these motifs come up again and again and again across all kinds of publications.

Some of us joke that there used to be a Ministry of Enforced Drabness. Right after the war, there's a marvellous boringness to Canadian design that appeals to me so deeply, there's something about it—it's a style that I've come to call Canadian National. It's based on art deco but it's distinctly Canadian in that it is almost always about landscape rather than about skyscrapers—occasionally it's about supertrains, but mostly it's about landscape.

The more I looked at this stuff, Thoreau's work spoke to me also. He had a cartoonist's eye. I remember reading once that Thoreau said he never drew anything from real life. He would go out in a field and he would walk around and he would see things and then he'd go home and draw what he'd call a "memory picture" of it, and obviously, working in pen and ink.

And drawing a memory picture is exactly what a cartoon is—it's a symbol of something, especially when you're just drawing it with black and white.

That really spoke to me and really made me look at his work, and I think it had a profound effect on how I put books together.

1. To learn more about Thoreau MacDonald, see Terry Stillman, *Thoreau MacDonald: Canada's Foremost Book Illustrator* (Alcuin Society, 2005).
2. See "Creating a Personal Vernacular Canadian Design Style," in *Devil's Artisan* 69 (Fall/Winter 2011).

Transcription by Wendy Massing.

Seth is creator of the long-running *Palookaville* comic as well as the designer of numerous books, including *The Complete Peanuts* and *The Collected Doug Wright*. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Walrus*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Canadian Notes & Queries*. He lives in Guelph, Ontario.