

# A Journey of Discovery

MICHAEL KLUCKNER tells the Alcuin Society how his artwork has been influenced over time by geography, technology and medium.

MOST OF MY artwork has some kind of political purpose. Even though watercolours for books like *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012) seem to be, on the surface, “pretty” or “charmingly sentimental,” the selection of those subjects, their background narrative of impending doom and the focus on, for example, dappled light on a shingled wall have an emotional power for many viewers far more potent than any photograph or carefully worded rant. More didactic art like the chiaroscuro drawing of the high hoe perched atop the wreckage of a house did not engage viewers to the same extent, perhaps because its message was so blatant. Most people prefer nuance to propaganda.

The political edge goes back to my beginnings as a newspaper cartoonist when I was in my 20s. I was relatively successful by the late 1970s—the highlight being a full-page cover, “The Seventies,” marking the end of the decade for the *Vancouver Sun* on December 31, 1979. I didn’t quite have the touch, however. When the recession of the early 1980s hit, B.C. newspapers ceased to buy freelance art and I was cast out into the wilderness. Before long another idea emerged: to both illustrate and write books—painting watercolours to complement the text—first with *Vancouver, the Way It Was* (Whitecap, 1984), then with similar books on Victoria (1986) and Toronto (1988).

I began to realize during that period how closely a watercolour, lithographed onto matte-coat paper in a book, could resemble the original, with all of the paper texture and watermarks accurately reproduced. Unlike oil paintings, which may be a surface or a window, watercolours are invariably a window, with the illusion created by pigments absorbed into the surface rather than standing on top of it, as is the case with the impasto of many opaque-media works. Anyone who owns an art book containing reproductions of oil paintings knows that the book functions mainly as an *aide-mémoire*. Reproducing a painting



A chiaroscuro drawing of a demolition site in Vancouver (top); the front page of the *Vancouver Sun*, December 31, 1979.



*Watercolours from Vanishing Vancouver (2012).*

from canvas onto paper at a greatly reduced size loses the sense of the painting's surface, that tactile quality that can only be perceived from the original. Small watercolours, drawings and prints suffer much less from this compression.

This quest for a kind of authenticity within the constraints of a book (mainly due to its relatively small scale) led me to reduce the size of my original watercolours to get them as close as possible to their final reproduced size. (I've never been a fan of same-size reproductions, usually called "prints": the heavily marketed photo-mechanical, signed "limited editions" that purport to add value to what is essentially a poster. The democratic, mass-produced, open-edition quality of a book seems much more legitimate to me.)

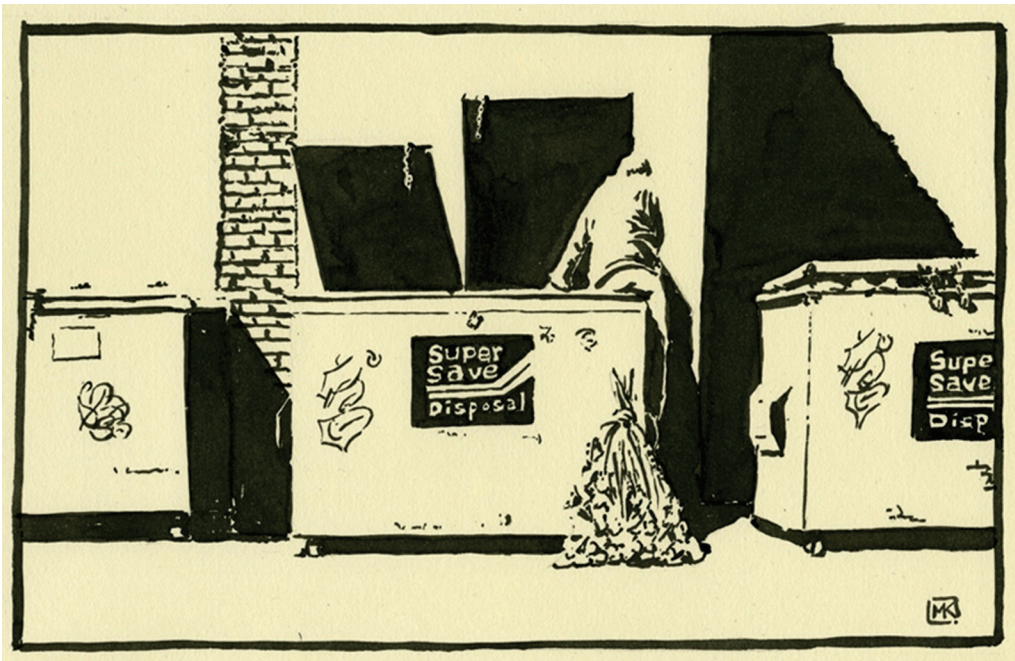
My various books during the '90s and '00s featured a lot of watercolours, some as vignettes, others in the conventional rectangular "window." *The Pullet Surprise* (Raincoast, 1997) incorporated artwork into a memoir of time spent living on a sheep farm in the Fraser Valley. *Canada: A Journey of Discovery* (Raincoast, 1998) came very close

to reproducing at original size the pages from a sketchbook I kept in extensive travels across the country. Technically, the digital scanning for these books was fairly successful, in spite of digital pre-press being at a relatively early stage.

By the time I completed *Vanishing British Columbia* (UBC Press, 2005), scanning technology had improved and the small watercolours from those sketchbooks reproduced beautifully. Later still, I painted the illustrations for my wife Christine Allen's book *A Year at Killara Farm* (Harbour, 2012) with quite intense colours to match a set of pressed flowers she had produced using a microwave flower press from Lee Valley Tools. When scanned, the flattened flowers had a jewel-like level of detail. I retouched the watercolour vignettes and flower scans so their ragged edges would float on the white paper.

#### CHIAROSCURO EXPERIMENTS

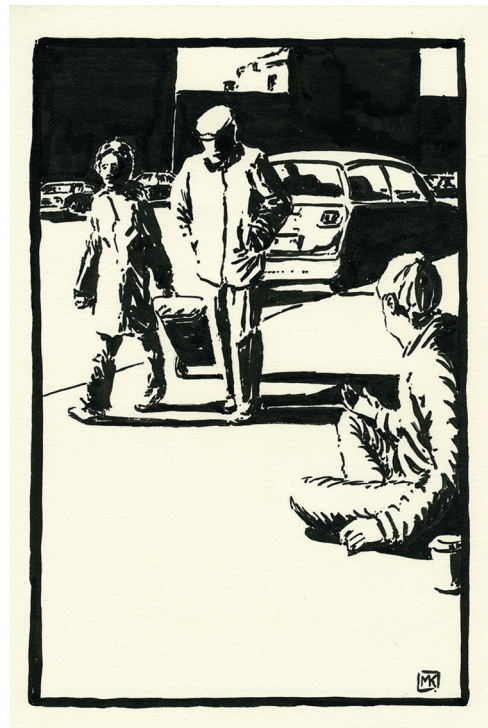
I had always been aware of the ability of angled light and strong shadows to add strength to the fleeting nature of watercolours. As David



Drawings from a series documenting the indigent of Vancouver.

Hockney remarked in his book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, the European art tradition is the only one where shadows are a structural part of representational artwork. Until the innovations of Impressionists like Claude Monet, much European oil painting had been “light over dark”—Rembrandt and Caravaggio being obvious examples—ensuring that shadows formed an essential part of compositions. Chiaroscuro (light-dark in Italian, implying nowadays no intermediate tones) begins to appear in European art with Leonardo da Vinci’s works.

Australia’s intense light and deep shadows further pushed me away from the soft tonal modelling of the West Coast. Even before I lived there, from 2006 to 2010, I had already begun to do art that was more graphic, especially with brush-and-Chinese-ink drawings and woodcuts, and had used them as illustrations for my second farm memoir, *Wise Acres: Free Range Reflections on the Rural Route* (Raincoast, 2000). As time went by, I realized I had little desire to make prints. It was the process of creating the images in brush and ink that appealed to me, although it



would have been an easy step to transfer any one of them onto a woodblock to carve and print.

The technical challenge with chiaroscuro images is to compose them almost entirely using shadows—that is, to define objects without any outlines. With a bit of reflection, you realize that

in nearly all traditional woodblock-type prints, and many drawings, space is defined by outlines, in contrast to most paintings, where the effect of space is achieved with patches of colour. The artist has only composition, including geometrical perspective, to define space, as opposed to the tones—the atmospheric perspective—of lithographs, paintings and wash drawings. I included several of these chiaroscuro drawings in *Vanishing Vancouver: The Last 25 Years* (Whitecap, 2012) after I returned to Canada. Their stark quality worked well in that book, and I began a series on street beggars, who represent the contemporary city as effectively as the charming dappled wooden house did a generation ago.

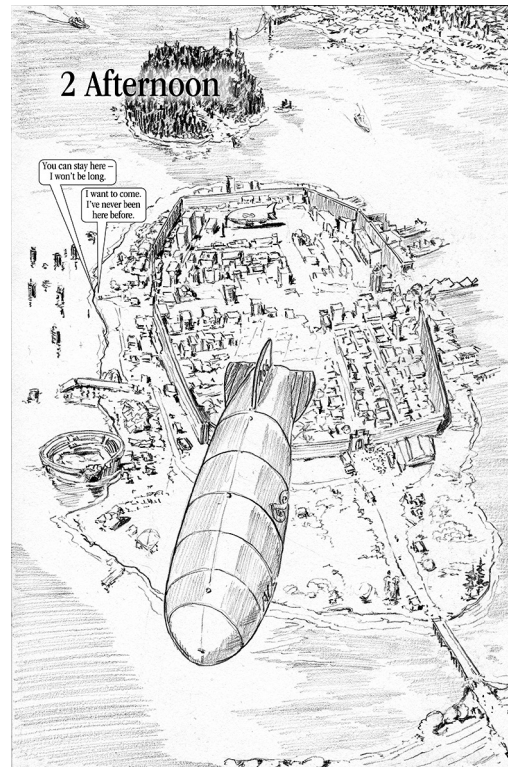
#### MIXING MEDIA IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

My current enthusiasm takes me almost full circle, back to my newspaper days of the 1970s. In the graphic novel mode of storytelling, I believe the artist/author ought to try to tell as much of the story as possible through the illustrations. What you lose is the potential of

beautiful descriptive and narrative passages that are the bread-and-butter of traditional novels. All you have is dialogue. However, there is the compensation of cinematic artwork, of wildly varied “camera angles” and close-ups, and a type of communication that seems pertinent in a society with so many English-language learners.

All of these were reasons for creating *Toshiko* (Midtown, 2015), a graphic novel that took as its theme the Japanese-Canadian internment during the Second World War. It was a timely issue due to the renewal of publicly expressed racism in North America and Europe. As with traditional novels, the challenge was to show, not tell, and to avoid having characters make little speeches, an especially annoying trait in some graphic novels, which seem to be nothing more than a series of talking heads. An additional challenge was designing the panels to accommodate a French translation of the dialogue balloons, which runs 20 to 30 percent longer than the English.

Set in what’s left of Vancouver, 2050: *A Post-Apocalyptic Murder Mystery* (Midtown, 2016)



Graphics for *Toshiko* (2015), left, and *2050* (2016), right.

Vancouver's booming economy faltered in the summer of 1907. The Asiatic Exclusion League capitalized on it to fan the flames of hatred of Vancouver's large Asian community, causing a riot on Saturday night, September 7 and these Monday headlines.



An image from a forthcoming graphic novel about the Victorian-era journalist Julia Henshaw.

was an opportunity to create graphically a ruined landscape rather than to write the laborious kind of descriptive narrative required in a standard dystopian novel. As with *Toshiko*, I worked in pencil on Bristol board to get tones and atmospheric effects, refining the finished drawings in Photoshop. My preference for small drawings, reduced only minimally in order to retain the spontaneity of the originals, had now extended from my earlier watercolours into this new medium.

One thing I have learned from Japanese manga, especially the work of Shigeru Mizuki, is the effect of mixing photographs and other graphic material with drawings. I am trying out this technique in my current project, a biography of the Victorian-era journalist/author Julia Henshaw. The graphic novel medium is flexible enough to incorporate old newspaper clippings, book covers and other material along with original drawings and dialogue in a way that's impossible with a traditional text-driven book. I am finding it an interesting experiment.

My earlier book illustrations stood alone as pieces of art, at least in the sense of being objects in frames purchased by people to hang on their walls—part of the art-commerce market. It was a good system: the paintings sold the book and the book sold the paintings. My current direction has much less value as a “work of art,” at least in my opinion. Drawings for a graphic novel are a necessary part of the mass-produced book, which to me is the work of art. The drawings themselves have little intrinsic value. Instead, they are what make the book—the graphic novel—the work of art it is.

~ Michael Kluckner is a Vancouver-based illustrator with an abiding interest in heritage issues. He is president of the Vancouver Historical Society and a member of the Vancouver Heritage Commission. This article is an edited version of a presentation to the Alcuin Society annual general meeting in Vancouver on June 5, 2017.