

Neal Adams

I wasn't around when we did the **Neal Adams** issue(s?), but since I'm such a huge fan of the guy, I thought I'd write about him anyway. As chronicled in a previous APA article, I now only collect "nostalgia" pieces – the stuff I read in my comic book heyday back when I was in my early to late teens. The exception to that rule is Neal Adams. He's the only artist that I still buy for sheer art WOW factor. I first discovered Neal doing covers for **DC** comics in the late 70's to early 80's, somewhat past his "peak" period. Though his best work was behind him, his influence could still be seen. He had clearly made an impact, and like all great artists, would affect his peers for years to come.

Guys like **Ross Andru**, **Jose Luis Garcia-Lopez**, and **Rich Buckler** to name but a few were all clearly influenced by Neal's style. These three talents, when paired with super-inker **Dick Giordano**, could channel Neal like nobody else. This is no surprise as Giordano himself worked closely with the Neal to create some of his best works, and clearly gained quite a lot from the experience. I have a certain fondness for DC covers of the late 70's because of the influence of Neal and the wonderful inking of Giordano. It was also my first exposure to comics in general, and I just loved the stuff. My cousin and I would sit around for hours reading and being introduced to all these incredibly diverse characters. Comic books, and specifically the artists, were probably the main force that influenced me to become an artist myself.

I have a single piece of art in my collection that represents that period to

me. It's pure nostalgia and takes me back to those days – ***World's Finest # 260*** by Rich Buckler and Dick Giordano. This cover just screams "Neal Adams", and like most of the covers from that period, you can really see what an impact Neal had in the industry. When I first started reading comics, it was mainly DC. At that time, Giordano was inking many of the covers for DC's big titles. I suppose this was done to give the books a uniform appearance, but whatever the reason, the stuff looked great. What a treat it must have been to have Giordano inking your pencils. Neal was still doing stuff for DC at this time, so I got to see some great work by him too. To my young eyes, he stood out among the other cover artists, but not too much. There was a certain quality about his work that was clearly better, but it wasn't a shocking difference. This was likely due to the fact that many others were aping him at that time. His stuff, while superior in ability, looked pretty much like anybody else doing covers at DC at that time (stylistically anyway).

To see a real contrast, and to get a sense of what kind of impact Neal had on the comic industry when he came onto the scene, you had to travel back in time a little. To around 1967 or so - the year I was born. But for me, the journey would actually be forward in time. After my casual affair with comics in the mid to late 70's, I stopped reading and didn't pick them up again until my younger brother started buying them. This would be around 1984 or so.



From my collection: World's Finest # 260 – Rich Buckler and Dick Giordano in the post-Adams DC world.

That's when I got hooked on comics and became a life long reader. Like everyone else at that time, I was reading, boarding, and bagging. This was when I really "discovered" Neal Adams.

It was through DC's reprints of Neal's work on Deadman that I was finally able to see the light. This stuff was AMAZING to me. It reprinted Neal's *Strange Adventures* work as well as his *Brave and the Bold* work. Simply called *Deadman*, the 6 issue run of reprints blew me away. Neal's incredible storytelling ability, his creative use of panel and page layouts, realism, and most of all, his inking, were things I had never seen before. It was a real eye opener for me, and I filled many a page in my sketchbook copying certain panels from the stories.

I still have the first piece of Adams art I ever purchased – *Strange Adventures*, issue 213, page 6. I picked this piece up at **San Diego Comicon** in 2003 (I think). I'd seen it on the wall in a booth for most of the show and nobody was buying it. I kept stopping by and admiring it and finally, on Sunday, as they were ushering people out the doors, former *APA* member **Ken Danker** and I were hanging out at this very booth talking. He asked me if I'd seen anything good at the show. I said "not much, but I like this page" and pointed to the Adams on the wall. He said "why don't you buy it?". I replied that it was a little too pricey to which he replied "make him an offer". I did, it was countered, and a deal was done. My first ever "live" art deal/negotiation. I think I probably overpaid a little, but I don't regret the decision at all.

The next piece of Adams art I picked up was also from *Strange Adventures* (issue 208, page 11). To this day, this is one of my favorite pieces in my collection. I saw it on ebay a few years ago, not long after I'd purchased my first Adams page. It had some water damage, which could be seen in the ebay scan, and I really believe this discouraged folks from bidding (I know 2 Adams collectors who told me so). I picked it up for what I thought was a great price and well under my maximum bid. The damage was negligible – the paper had merely been crinkled a bit. The art on the board was unaffected. I've been offered over \$4k for this page and turned it down. I think it might be the best Deadman page Neal has ever done.

To understand one of the reasons for this you have to know something about the character. Deadman is actually **Boston Brand** – a former circus acrobat who is murdered in mid-performance. He is given a chance by a mysterious deity to find his killer. He is invisible to living people, and has the power to "possess" other living things including people. As a result, he may only interact physically with the world while he is in possession of another person. There are several action scenes throughout the series, but what inevitably happens is – Deadman takes possession of a "normal" everyday person – NOT a superhero to engage the "bad guys". So fight scenes appear to be between 2 plainly clothed individuals (the person possessed by Deadman is generally shown "glowing" with lines around the figure to indicate this). Now I don't know about you, but I signed up to see men and women in tights fighting each other when I decided to read comics, so seeing 2 guys in button up



From my collection: A page from Neal's brief stint on Spectre. Neal's early comic work in the late 60's is, in my opinion, the best of his career. Spectre #3, page 16 (1968). Pencils and inks by Neal Adams.



From my collection: The first piece of Neal Adams art I ever purchased – Strange Adventures #213, page 6 (1968). Pencils and inks by Neal Adams.



From my collection: For my money, the best panel page Neal did on his Deadman work – Strange Adventures #208, page 11 (1968). Pencils and inks by Neal Adams.

shirts and jeans fighting each other is a bit of a disappointment. The great thing about my page is – Deadman has taken possession of his brother **Cleveland Brand** (where do they get these names from?) who has taken over his circus act, and he ends up fighting another circus performer – **The Sparrow** (also in costume). So, for a very brief moment in this series, you can actually see Deadman engaged in some kind of real “super-hero” type action.

The other reason this page is great is for the inking. While Neal is certainly one of the all time greats, even his work was “spotty”. The quality of the art on his pages can vary quite a bit – even from page to page within the same issue. The artwork on this page is as good as Neal has ever done. Aside from well-organized page and panel layouts, the most striking thing about it is the inking. You will not find better examples of Neal’s inking than on this page. (I’m such a big fan of Neal’s inking that I ONLY collect art that he’s inked himself.) Neal’s inks from this period (late 60’s), when good, were the finest he’s ever done. Clearly a master of the brush and quill, Neal put into play all the tricks he picked up while working in advertising for *Johnstone and Cushing*, and later on the *Ben Casey* daily strip. While Neal’s style might have been shocking when first seen in print in comics, it’s actually quite typical of the great strip artists that predated him in the 1950’s. Guys like **Stan Drake**, **Alex Kotzky**, **Ken Bald**, **Leonard Starr**, and of course the great **Alex Raymond** were all doing photo-realistic strips in the same style. Neal was clearly influenced by these great artists and eventually became their equals. When translated

into mainstream comics however, the results infused the comic world with an excitement and realism that hadn’t been seen before.

The next piece of Adams art I picked up was a page from his run on the Spectre (also late 60’s). Again, the inking is top notch. I love the large top panel. Even though there are no heroes in it, the inking and realism are a treat to see. While this page was done at Neal’s peak period, I don’t like it as much as my other pages simply because there is less quill or pen work on it than there is brush work. Don’t get me wrong, Neal was a genius with a brush, but what excites me most about his work is seeing what he does with a nib. There are some nice moments (see panel 2), but there isn’t as much to see here as on my other pages. This may sound like I’m talking the page “down”, but I’m not – I absolutely love it as it showcases Neal in his prime.

The final piece of Adams art I managed to get my hands on was page 13 from issue 251 of *Batman*. This is the crown jewel in my Adams collection (or maybe my entire collection). This page is simply jaw-dropping! Not only do you have one of the all time greatest comic artists, but you have him doing the character he is best known for on one of the best Batman stories he ever did (*The Joker’s Five Way Revenge* – **Denny O’Neil** script). Batman is in every panel, and that fourth panel just blows my mind!! That’s the kind of thing that only Neal could do – the drama, and the realism all done with amazing pen and brush work.



From my collection: Probably the most stunning Adams example in my collection from Batman 251, page 13 (1973). This is from the classic Denny O'Neil story "The Joker's Five Way Revenge". Pencils and inks by Neal Adams.

The most interesting thing to me about this page is how you can clearly see the change in Neal's inking style from his earlier work. While this page is absolutely killer, I have to say that I prefer Neal's inking style from the late 60's. This page was done in 1973 – about 6 years after my Deadman pages. That's clearly a long time in any artists

When the phrase “all time greats” is bandied about, I know 2 guys in the comic industry who for most people would top that list; one is **Jack Kirby**, the other is Neal Adams. I'm thrilled that I've been able to get such nice

career. I don't know if it was simply a natural evolution, but the cross-hatching in this later work looks a little flat to me in some places (see examples below). I think the later stuff has a stiffer line than the earlier. Some have called later work a more “illustrative” style, though I'm not sure what that means. I will simply say that I prefer the older “looser” style. examples from Neal's career. He's not only one of the all time greats, but he's also one of those artists whose artwork you can stare at and admire over and over again – there's so much to see in those inks. And believe me, I've spent a lot of time staring at those pages.



A comparison of Neal's inking styles. On the left is a section of a page from Strange Adventures done in 1968. On the right, is an example from his work on Batman done in 1973. The earlier ink work has a more organic approach to it while the later example has a more rigid or “harder” line. My preference is for the early “loose” inking style.



The Frank Miller issue was 2 issues ago but I didn't have this piece at that time. After years of searching, I was finally able to land a Dark Knight page!! I'm thrilled to own this half splash from book one - it's a page I have always admired; well before I began collecting original art. It's nice to be able to cross this one off the list! Now if anyone has a Killing Joke page they don't need...