

A Genealogy of Style:
Artistic Touchstones of the Graphic Novel *Red Hood*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Illustration Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Savannah College of Art and Design

By

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Atlanta, Georgia
March 2011

This thesis project is dedicated to the art professors
of my undergraduate and graduate careers.
Julie Mueller-Brown, Rick Lovell and Mike Lowery
at the Savannah College of Art and Design have all readied me for my next step,
and Tanja Butler, Bruce Herman, Jim Zingarelli and Tim Ferguson-Sauder are the artistic
parents who raised me.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents for their continuous support and encouragement, bryan parys for bringing his incredible mind to my brainstorming process, and my beautiful models Christopher and Sandee for lending their likenesses to my pages.

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A Genealogy of Style:
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This thesis provides an analysis of the author's artistic style through an exploration of the cultures and art movements that have shaped it. The illustrated portion of the thesis is then analyzed in terms of these styles.

Introduction

The illustrated portion of my M. F. A. thesis is my own retelling of the Grimm's fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, titled *Red Hood*. I chose this story for reinterpretation because although it is simple and familiar, it is populated by Jungian archetypes—the maiden, the crone, the monster and the hero, found respectively in the main characters of Red Riding Hood (here renamed Clara), her grandmother, the wolf and the woodsman—which lend themselves well to symbolic exploration and deconstruction. In creating this illustrated book, my aims were to hone my visual vocabulary by defining and exploring its visual parents, and to achieve a unity of text and image throughout the work. It is presented as a series of illustrated pages, each page containing one or two paragraphs of hand-drawn type and a corresponding illustration. Interactive devices like mazes and paper-craft models are used throughout as a way to encourage viewer engagement.

Style in *Red Hood*

My overall aesthetic can be reduced to several concerns: a focus on line and linear description over form and three-dimensional description; a representation of natural forms as idealized and abstracted shapes and patterns, and the reduction of deep pictorial space into shallow space characterized by flattened layers and patterns. These elements are all present in the three main sources of my artistic inspiration: the traditional decorative work of Thailand, where I grew up, which is characterized by pervasive Buddhist symbolism; the European Art Nouveau movement at the turn of the 19th century; and Japanese *ukiyo-e* art, which in turn had a profound effect on Art Nouveau in its simplification of line and its shallow but complex space.

In addition to exploring these artistic influences and synthesizing them into a style of my own, I designed my master's thesis project to include my love of story and plot; to explore the idea of completely integrated text and image; and to represent my desire to create immersive worlds which stem from an individual imagination rather than being rooted in reality, thus inviting the viewer to explore something which is completely new to them.

My main artistic influences stem from the decorative arts. The main visual elements of my art are the abstraction, simplification or embellishment of forms, which I ultimately trace back to my formative years living in Thailand, where a strong historical tradition of design and decoration is felt in all aspects of life. From architecture to food presentation to the designs on official currency, Thai motifs are everywhere (Figs 1, 2).

The most popular and universal designs are those involving flowers and foliage. These designs, known collectively as *lai thai* or Thai designs, are based on repeating

systems of curves and branchings which can be embellished upon to a considerable degree while still maintaining their essential structure (Fig. 3). This early saturation with floral motifs is, I believe, a major element in my later interest in Art Nouveau and Japanese art, where these themes are also prevalent.

When I was introduced to Art Nouveau and the work of Alphonse Mucha as a teenager, I was immediately drawn to its presentation of idealized natural forms being put through a series of graphic transformations, as this style resonated with the Thai designs. At the same time, its realistic treatment of detail and “ornamental naturalism” appealed to me in a way that Thai art lacked.¹ Thai design remains resolutely symbolic, with motifs based on, but barely resembling specific species. For example, the herb *Asclepius acida* can be represented by “a bulbous vase-like or jewel-shaped form...but also by sinuous vine shapes,”² while birds, plants and animals intertwining in a dense pattern can be barely distinguishable from each other (Fig. 4). Such confusions are in fact preferable to the Thai, because by “transforming natural forms, Thai artists interchanged plant and animal parts” in significantly symbolic ways,³ creating complex iconographies like that of the Buddha, whose “proportions have the symmetry of the banyan-tree” and who “moves like the flight of the goose.”⁴ The aim of Thai decoration is not to “portray nature in a realistic, direct manner,” but often to be “deliberately obscure,” providing the viewer with a multiplicity of interpretations.⁵ This is because “traditionally, art in Thailand is religious art” and as such, though graphically classifiable as ‘decorative’ does not exist

¹ Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 297

² Pamela York Taylor, *Birds, Beasts and Blossoms in Thai Art* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), 101

³ *Ibid.*, 105

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19

⁵ *Ibid.*, xix

for its own sake but rather to allude to the spiritual precepts of Buddhism which underlie the world it embellishes.⁶

In contrast, Art Nouveau presents a stylized but acutely observed vision. In a typical piece like Mucha's 1897 lithograph *Reverie*, three separate and specifically described species of flowers make up the decorative border (Fig. 5). Natural forms, through the lens of Art Nouveau, are "rendered flat, formed into regular pattern and shaped to complement the contours of the object" which they are designed to decorate.⁷ In this process, the artist "started with observable natural objects and subjected them to a process of aesthetic filtration (simplifying, geometricizing and harmonizing) to arrive at a finished image or object."⁸ This synthesis of abstraction and observation has stayed with me up to the present day and I believe forms the basis of my visual style.

The Thai method of symbolic stylization and the Art Nouveau technique of representational decoration came together for me in Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints and drawings, particularly those of Katsushika Hokusai. In these works the acutely observed details are transformed through the simplifying Japanese aesthetic that "lead[s] away from any naturalistic imitation into the realm of abstraction, yet without changing the form of the object,"⁹ so that "stylization renders the essence of nature."¹⁰

The close interchange between Western art and Asian art (particularly that of Japan) in the late 19th century allowed these three geographically diverse art traditions to harmonize well with my own artistic explorations. Though each brought their own

⁶ Ibid., 14

⁷ Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau: 1890-1914* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000), 58

⁸ Ibid., 58

⁹ Wichmann, 278

¹⁰ Ibid., 281

strengths and characteristics, they shared common values, like “the asymmetric, undulating, dynamic line that is the principal formal characteristic of Art Nouveau,” which is “a distinct feature of much of the Japanese art that was available in the West at the turn of the century,” and typifies Thai decoration as well.¹¹

An ongoing element of my style which is found in each of these tree traditions is the use of flat or shallow space in contrast to a traditional Western depth-of-field. Most decorative Thai art forsakes depth altogether in favor of a superficial surface patterning. If a scene is presented, space is arranged vertically, with the objects closest to the viewer at the bottom of the composition, and there is little to no overlapping (Fig. 6). In Art Nouveau this sense of shallow space relies on a few pictorial effects, including outlining, which flattens the picture plane, and the organization of color and value. Mucha organized space in this way throughout his oeuvre. In the earlier commercial work he achieved it mainly through the use of outline, as in *Reverie*, while in later works like *Svantovit Celebration on the Isle of Rügen* from his mural cycle *The Slav Epic*, where form is treated much more naturalistically and outline is largely discarded, the same effect of spatial layering is come to through the organization of color and value (Fig. 7). In examples like that of Fig. 7, the separation of spatial planes becomes extreme and the foreground images read as a commentary or note on the main image. Mucha used this effect to create a literal and a symbolic level to the paintings in *The Slav Epic*, with historical scenes depicted at one depth and their symbolic counterparts depicted at

¹¹ Greenhalgh 107

another, “combin[ing] the three-dimensionality of academic painting with the flat decorativeness of his Art Nouveau style.”¹²

Japanese art once again provides the bridge between Thai art and Art Nouveau – *Ukiyo-e* prints typically arrange space vertically as in Thai art, but, like Art Nouveau, include elements of overlapping, partial Western perspective, and a liberal use of pattern in the both the foreground and the background, creating a space that is simultaneously shallow and complex.

Even in Hokusai’s most Westernized images like *Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa* (Fig 8.), the depth which the (only partially realized) single-point perspective is supposed to create is belied by the homogenous use of line weight and color across foreground and background. The use of perspective, or rather, perspective-like effects, is employed so that “his designs appeared sufficiently Western-influenced to be new to a Japanese audience,”¹³ and the effect, like that in an Art Nouveau print, is ultimately that of theatrical scrims hovering closely in front of a painted backdrop, with the awkward perspective of the houses on either side of the bridge contributing to this perception.

Elsewhere in Hokusai’s work, it is the use of pattern layered across pattern which partitions the depth of field. Hokusai’s erotic prints provide excellent examples. Figures roll through solidified clouds of loosened garments, as in Fig. 9 where no less than six different fabric patterns come up against the blank white of the lover’s skin and another pattern is effectively formed by the closely written text in the background, presenting an extremely shallow scene whose “tight packing of the visual space...overlapping of rich textures...use of color for sheer aesthetic value and the contrasts of different color

¹² Sweeney, Jane, ed., *Alphonse Mucha: The Spirit of Art Nouveau* (Virginia: Art Services International, 1998), 104

¹³ Gian Carlo Calza, *Hokusai* (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 31

combinations within the composition all together create a kind of transcendental image that as it were denudes reality and from it achieves abstraction.”¹⁴ All these lessons in line, pattern, color and depth were elements which I took into consideration when designing the visual elements of my thesis project.

In addition to these ideas of the Thai, Art Nouveau and Japanese traditions, I began to look to other visual solutions from my childhood which would solve my problem of presenting the text and images of my story as a unified whole. I grew up overseas with a variety of fairly old books, often by European artists and publishers and many produced along the lines of the Victorian gift book, a “type of expensive, lavishly produced volume...[which first became] popular in the 1860s as the showcase of the new style of wood-engraved illustration.”¹⁵

These beautifully illustrated books of my childhood, many of which, like Victorian gift books, in true Japanese-influenced style “stressed decoration at the expense of three-dimensional illusion” and presented “images [that] were surrounded with an assertively ornamental border or incorporated a title or portion of text”¹⁶—left me with memories of well-laid out pages and a desire to achieve something similar in terms of a unity of text and image.

In my quest for well-integrated text and image, another strong influence was the illuminated manuscript. While I do not directly reference the common conventions of illuminated manuscripts—embellished capitals, carpet pages, marginalia and the like—the idea of a middle ground where text and image are dependent on each other is

¹⁴ Wichmann, 210

¹⁵ Bridgid Pepin, *Fantasy* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1977), 21

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13

one which I wanted to pursue. My aim was for something less text heavy than a traditional illuminated manuscript, but less image heavy than a comic book—a work in which word and image are compositionally intertwined and co-dependent.

This desire for a unity of text and image is part of what led me to the decision to hand-write all the text in the story, making a literal manuscript. The handwritten text has a softness and a responsiveness to the image which computer-set type would not have, and allows me to adapt the word to the image and vice versa as necessary. In addition, I ‘drew’ the forms of the text, including portions set in heavy blackletter script, with the same Micron technical pens which I used to create most of the illustrations (instead of ‘writing’ them with a calligraphic nib pen which forms the thick uprights and thin diagonals of the typeface in a single stroke), forging a further unity of the text with the drawing, as the weighted lines used in both are built up through a series of thin strokes rather than made by the turning action of the slanted pen nib (Fig. 10).

The third and final narrative and visual element is the inclusion of cut-out paper crafts throughout the story. These fit conceptually with the flat, decorative stylistic influences described above, as when assembled they create three-dimensional forms which are nonetheless insistently two dimensional in structure and origin (Fig 11). Like Thai art and Art Nouveau, they figure into my childhood artistic development, as I used to assemble them with my father.

We put together various paper models: a colonial New England town, a globe, and a fully feathered, anatomically accurate peregrine falcon. According to Chris Ware, who includes similar paper activities in his graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest*

Kid on Earth,¹⁷ “there’s something very delicate and innocent about paper assemblage,”¹⁸ and this childlike aspect is part of what I wanted to bring to the somewhat grim interpretation of the Red Riding Hood story that I created, as it matches the theme’s origins in children’s literature as well as the straightforward tone of certain passages.

From a storytelling perspective, these times spent with paper crafts come up in my memory as strong participatory moments where I worked together with my father to create three-dimensional objects which could be experienced as their own narrative. As such, I wanted to include them in a book as a way of further bringing the reader into the story. Whether or not the reader actually cuts up the pages to assemble the models, perusing the diagrams and imagining the set pieces coming into the third dimension creates a participatory mood and promises the possibility of exploring the world I have created in a way that goes beyond the flatness of the printed page.

Examining a few representative pages of *Red Hood* will demonstrate how the elements of pattern, line, shallow space and textual-pictorial unity are brought into play in the final product. On page 5 of *Red Hood* several of these decorative devices work in tandem (Fig. 12). The background, representing the wood through which the heroine Clara is travelling, is depicted as a flat pattern, with bold outlines and block colors predominating. Trees and plants are reduced to several basic motifs which repeat throughout the design. In a manner similar to that of a Thai design, the space is laid out from top to bottom. The text of the story appears in front of this pattern in a series of four floral cartouches, separated from the background by value and decorative style. The cartouches are brown, with darker brown linework, suggesting carved wooden

¹⁷ Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 23-4; 206-207.

¹⁸ Chris Ware, “Interview: Chris Ware.” Interview by Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, December 7, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/07/guardianfirstbookaward2001.gurardianfirstbookaward> (accessed February 5, 2011).

ornaments, and in contrast to the generalized plant shapes of the background, the plants which make up the frames have specific observational details, representing a tree peony, a devil's ivy, a Rose of Sharon and a flowering bulb of garlic, in a style close to Art Nouveau ornamentation.

This use of a cartouche imposed in a separate space over a larger image is reminiscent both of Japanese art, where colophons and commentary are often placed in the corner of a composition in a separate box, and of Art Nouveau, as in pieces like *Svantovít Celebration* where a visually separate but complementary layer comments on the action in deeper layers. This shallow visual stacking, like a Japanese woodcut, “does not permit of any suggestion of depth in the sense of central perspective. Spatial relations are blocked and unified by color values and surface border outlines...which within a small pictorial area imposes strict order on the various ornamentally rendered individual forms.”¹⁹ The “strict order” of color and line is what prevents the overall composition, with so many small details, from becoming confused, and what holds the text as part of the composition while preserving its legibility.

The visual problem of maintaining the clarity of the text in a dense visual space while incorporating it as part of the visual sequence of the page, recurs over and over through the book, requiring different solutions through the techniques of flat space and pattern. Several of the page layouts in *Red Hood* deal with the visual idea of ‘text as path,’ as part of the overall concept of the book as a participatory exercise. In Fig. 12 the cartouches act as visual stepping stones as the eye follows the open path through the forest, while in Fig. 13 the strong grid which the line of text follows is what gives

¹⁹ Wichmann, 213-14

structure to the eye's path, as well as suggesting the rigid social structure of the village in which Clara, the heroine, lives. Only when she breaks out into the unstructured, wild world of the woods does the line of text take off on a diagonal, and visually bursts out in a loose splash onto the empty, open green of the page background, which contrasts strongly with the overwhelming series of tiny perpendicular lines which make up the timber framing and wooden walls of the village.

The idea of multiple overlapping flat layers creating a shallow, decorative space is demonstrated visually in Fig. 14 as well. Here the woodsman is pictured walking through the forest. His face is rendered in a textural, three-dimensional style which calls attention to the play of light across the forms and volumes of his face, but directly behind him are flat, simplified forms of trees and non-spatial, graphic typeforms, while his shirt is drawn in simple, open linework. This conflation of rendered areas with layers of patterning, type, line and flat color create a visual space where, "as in the works of the Japanese *ukiyo-e* masters, pictorial depth exists in the imagination of the viewer."²⁰

These repeated decorative elements together all serve to emphasize the artificiality of the pictorial space, while simultaneously presenting the viewer with multiple levels of detail into which their eye is drawn. The multilayered but still shallow space speaks to my vision of a constructed visual world. The visual invitation which I mean for my pieces extend to the viewer is, "This world is completely artificial and is composed from visual themes which I abstract, simplify, complicate and recombine—thus it was created completely from my imagination, just for you explore." Presented with a world which is unapologetically illusory, made up of flat, detailed

²⁰ Ibid., 213

compositions and paper models which reference stage scenery and set pieces, the viewer is asked to come into the world in the same way they might experience a film or a play – as an immersive visual exploration of someone else’s imagination.

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- Fig. 1. Thai temple roof (Wikipedia.org, <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/e/e3/Thai-roof.jpg>).
- Fig. 2. Traditional Thai fruit carving (<http://venetianred.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/watermelon-carved-saveur.jpg>)
- Fig. 3. 'Lai thai' decorations (<http://art-thai.blogspot.com/search/label/Kranok>)
- Fig 4. Detail on a black-and-gold lacquer cabinet, Ayutthaya period, Thailand (Taylor, *Beasts, Birds and Blossoms in Thai Art*, 30)
- Fig. 5. Alphonse Mucha, *Reverie*, 1897 (Sweeney, Jane, ed. *Alphonse Mucha: The Spirit of Art Nouveau*, 214)
- Fig. 6. Black-and-gold lacquer cabinet depicting a battle scene from the *Ramakien* epic, 19th century, Thailand (Taylor, *Beasts, Birds and Blossoms in Thai Art*, 43)
- Fig. 7. Alphonse Mucha, *Svantovít Celebration on the Isle of Rügen* from *The Slav Epic*, 1912 (about.com, http://arthistory.about.com/od/from_exhibitions/ig/mucha_belvedere/alphonse_vienna_09_12.htm)
- Fig. 8. Hokusai, *Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa*, c. 1830-5 (Calza, *Hokusai*, 328)
- Fig. 9. Hokusai, *The Jewelled Merkin*, c. 1820 (Calza, *Hokusai*, 284)



Fig. 1. Thai temple roof



Fig. 2. Traditional Thai fruit carving

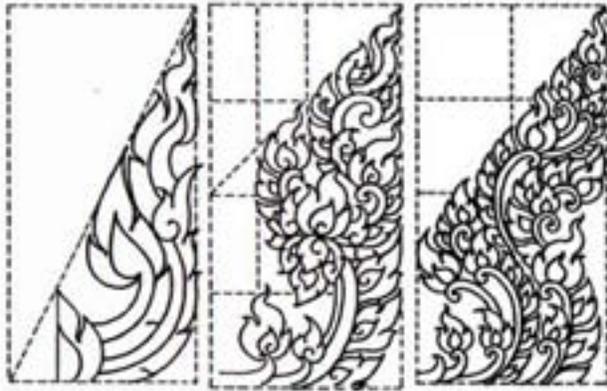


Fig. 3. 'Lai thai' decorations

Fig. 4. Thai lacquer cabinet with gold leaf embellishments





Fig. 5. *Reverie*, Alphonse Mucha.
Fig. 6. Scene from the Thai national epic, *The Ramakien*





Fig. 7. *Svantovít Celebration on the Isle of Rügen*, Alphonse Mucha
Fig. 8. *Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa*, Hokusai





: grent into and ov v er their bodies
 wnkshood did its wolfsbane work
 ittern round the first e.
 the miller's daughter's silence and
 g in the wolves 1 less wood.

Fig. 9. *The Jewelled Merkin*, Hokusai
 Fig. 10. Handdrawn blackletter type from *Red Hood*



Fig. 11. Assembled model, *Red Hood*, page 6

THE VILLAGERS REQUIRED ALL KINDS OF HERBS & PLANTS & FUNGI FOR COOKING & MEDICINE & RECREATION, BUT FEW OF THEM WERE BRAVE ENOUGH TO SEARCH THE REMOTE GLADES WHERE THE RAREST PLANTS WERE FOUND, AND NONE OF THEM COULD MATCH CLARA'S HERBAL KNOWLEDGE, WHICH SHE HAD LEARNED FROM HER GRANDMOTHER.

AND SO SHE WAS ABLE TO MAKE A SMALL BUT STEADY BUSINESS.

APART FROM HER SALES, CLARA BREWED CONCOCTIONS AND TINCTURES WHICH SHE BROUGHT TO HER GRANDMOTHER.

WHO LIVED SEVERAL MILES AWAY THROUGH THE FOREST ON A HILL THAT OVERLOOKED ALL THE SURROUNDING WILDERNESS.

SOCIOECONOMIC PRESSURES & PERSONAL WILFULNESS PREVENTED HER GRANDMOTHER FROM MOVING INTO A MORE CONVENIENTLY LOCATED RESIDENCE IN TOWN.

She suffered from a long, slow disease AND CLARA MADE THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE WOOD ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK TO BRING HER A MEAL & SOME MEDICINE.

Fig. 12. Red Hood, page 5

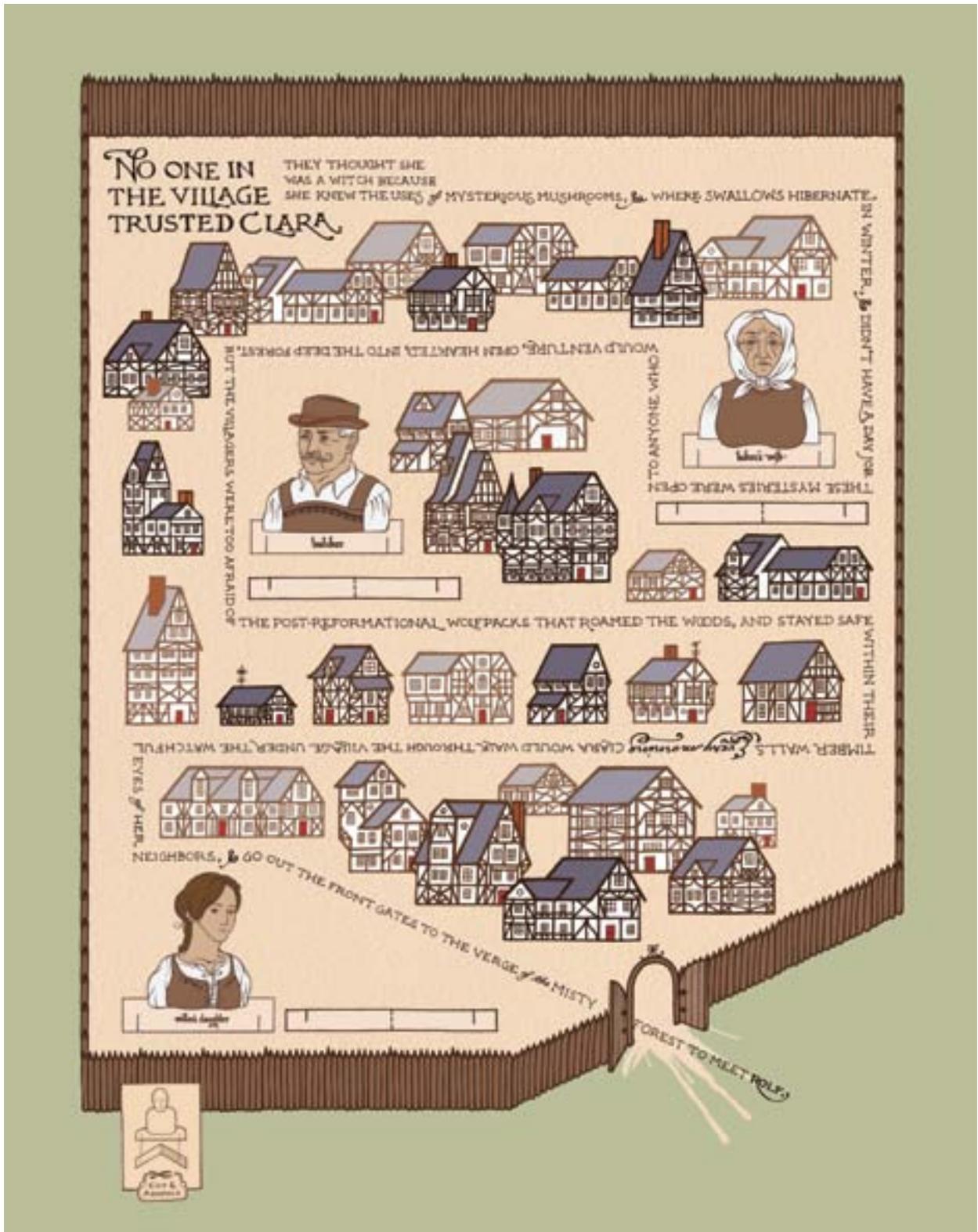


Fig. 13. *Red Hood*, page 3

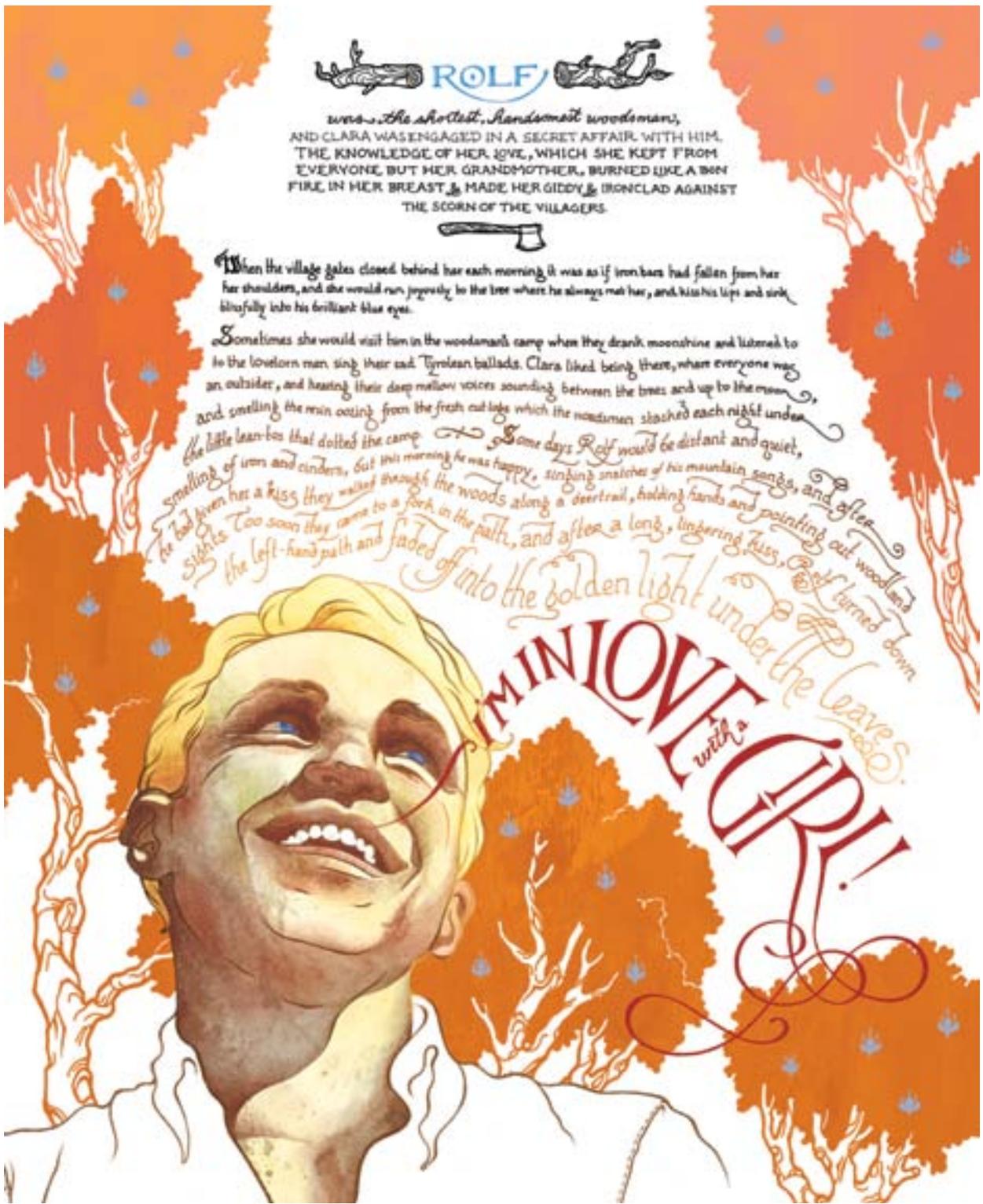


Fig. 14. Red Hood, page 4