

Famous Artists Cartoon Course
Westport, Connecticut

Props and backgrounds

Lesson

15

Rube Goldberg

Milton Caniff

Al Capp

Harry Haenigsen

Willard Mullin

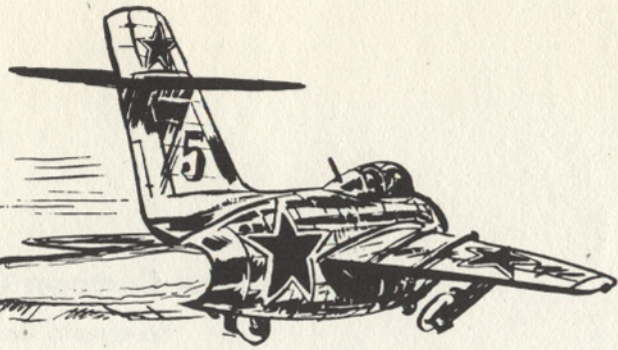
Gurney Williams

Dick Cavalli

Whitney Darrow, Jr.

Virgil Partch

Barney Tobey



Drawing by B. Tobey

© 1956 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.



"This neighborhood sure has changed since I was a kid."



Props that set the stage for these cartoons range from a simple hole cut in the ice, suggesting the Arctic background, to an elaborate rendering of buildings portraying a New York street scene. In the former, the background serves merely as a stage setting and is subordinate to the figure. In the latter, it is the whole point of the gag and consequently it dominates the "actors."

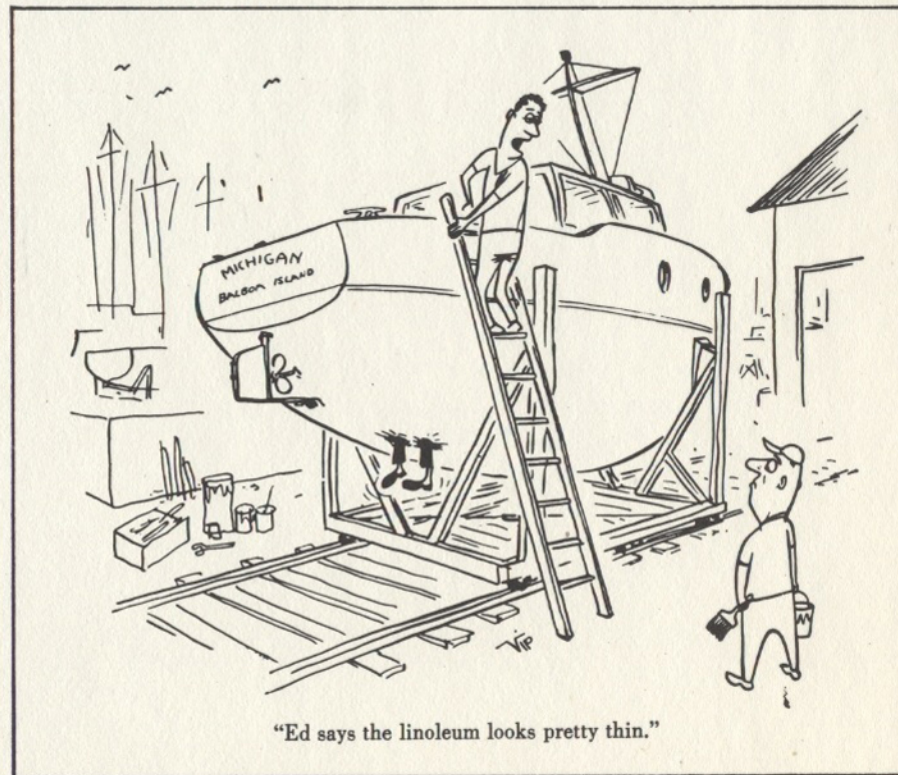
It is up to you as a cartoonist to determine what props you need to tell your story effectively and then, using reference material, to draw them accurately enough to be recognizable to the reader.

Courtesy True, The Man's Magazine

© 1963 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.
Drawing by Whitney Darrow, Jr.



"What type is your mother?"



"Ed says the linoleum looks pretty thin."



Props, details and backgrounds

As we have said before, the panel is your stage and it is here that your characters will act out the parts you have planned for them. To help tell your story and give atmosphere, you must build up a background for your actors. You do that by using props. "Props," a contraction of the word "properties," means anything put into the panel other than the figures. Clouds, trees, furniture, mountains, rocks, water, etc., all are props. It is the combination of these props that sets the scene for your story. Details are the small parts of the prop. A table is a prop. Carving on the legs of the table would be detail. An automobile is a prop. The headlights, steering wheel, wheels, windshield — these are all details.

You could draw a cartoon strip without any backgrounds, but it would only make the telling of your story twice as difficult. Your reader could recognize a farmer by his dress, but that same farmer would be twice as convincing in a barnyard, or driving a tractor. By the same token, a clown belongs with a circus background. When drawing a background, it is important to achieve a sense of realism. No matter how well the drawing is done, if it lacks authenticity or realism, your drawing will not serve its purpose.

Most beginners think that by drawing a great deal of detail they can achieve realism in their background. This is not true. Sometimes the whole feeling of a background can be lost because the artist tried for too great a sense of detail with his props. A steamshovel is a wonderful prop, and is built up of many thousands of small details. If a cartoonist were to draw a steamshovel in his background, complete down to the last detail, it would become so important that everything else in the picture would be lost. Here, as in all other branches of cartooning, simplicity is the keynote. You have already learned how to simplify the

human form — now you must apply the same rules to props and backgrounds.

As a cartoonist, it is of vital importance that you familiarize yourself with as many types of backgrounds as possible. When you buy a handle for the faucet, take a look around. Notice the props and details in the plumbing shop. They are not the same as in the drugstore or the public library. Every trade or occupation has its own tools. Learn to see, observe and *remember*.

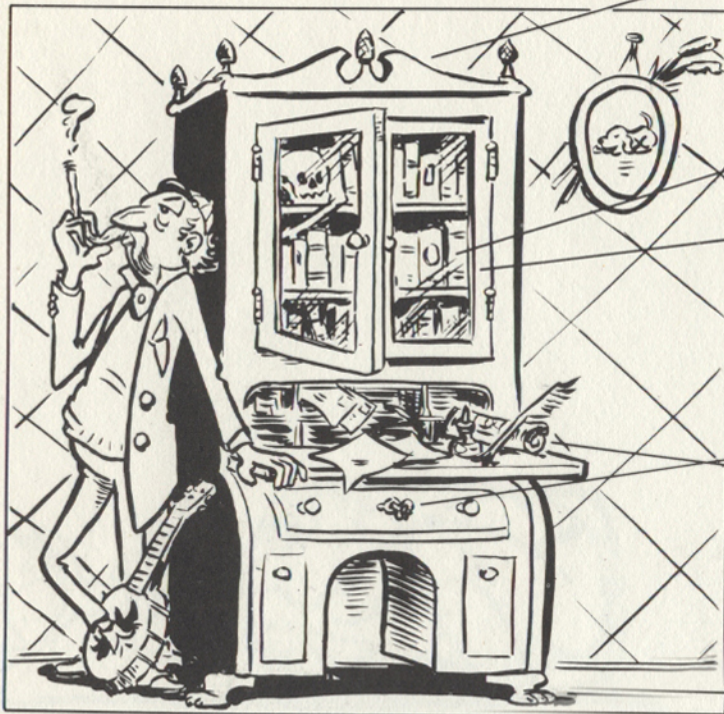
Trees, grass, shrubs and general landscaping vary throughout the world. A cartoon gag with an Eskimo as the key figure wouldn't be very convincing surrounded by palm trees and soft, white sand. Types of landscape are especially important in the adventure type strip. There the artist is continually striving for realism, and readers will be very critical of any detail in the backgrounds that does not fit in with the story. Here your morgue plays an important part. Most of us cannot travel all over the world to collect backgrounds for our cartoon features. But we can build up our morgue so that we have a complete range of landscapes for practically any part of the world.

In some successful strips you will notice an occasional panel with no props at all — only a figure and a balloon. But that is done only where the setting has been well established in the preceding panel, and the *story* needs further clarification. The omission of props here and there takes experience and rare good judgment. Don't underestimate the importance of props. They must be there — in your reader's mind — whether you draw them or not!

In this lesson we have given you as many examples as possible of props and details in a small space. Study them and copy them. They are here for you to use.

Props and details

In this lesson, simplification means leaving out unnecessary details in props. For instance, if your character is honking the horn of an old car, you should draw the little horn button. If he's just driving the car, the black horn button might stick out like a sore thumb — so leave it out.



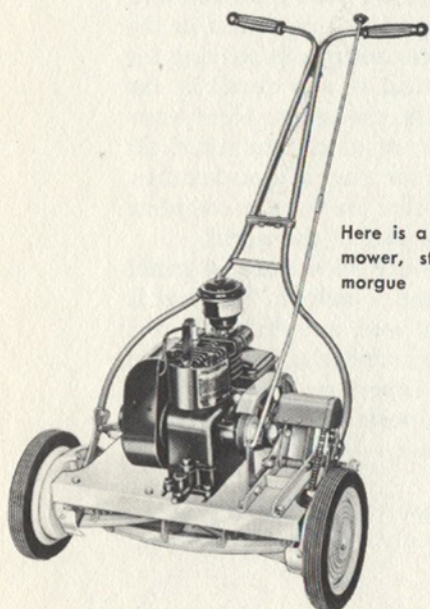
Details are small parts of a prop

An example of simplification

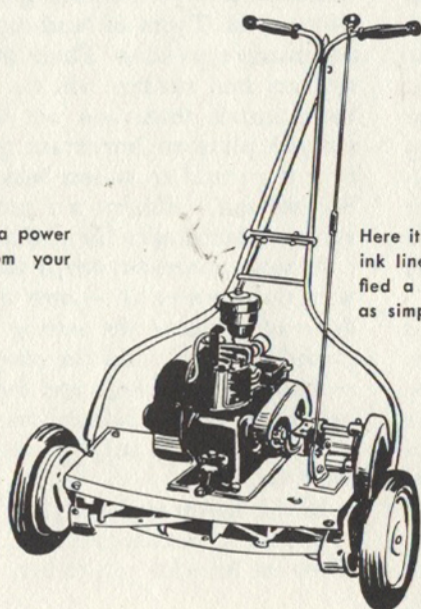
Below is a photo of a power mower, like the one you probably have in your morgue, and would use as a guide for your drawing. Of course, you could spend hours copying every detail, putting in every nut and bolt. This would be great if you were selling lawn mowers — but you are not. All you want is to let your reader know that it is a lawn mower. Maybe you're the type that's just nuts about drawing lawn mowers — don't get carried

away. Simplify, *simplify* and let your reader's imagination fill in the details. If you draw the lawn mower in complete detail, and the other props in the panel are simplified, your lawn mower will be out of key with the rest of the drawing.

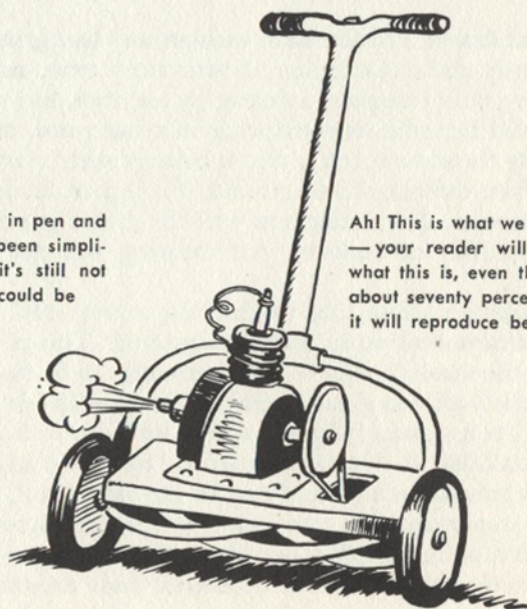
Too much detail in a prop is like long-winded wordage in a story. You will lose your reader if you bore him with unnecessary details.



Here is a photo of a power mower, straight from your morgue

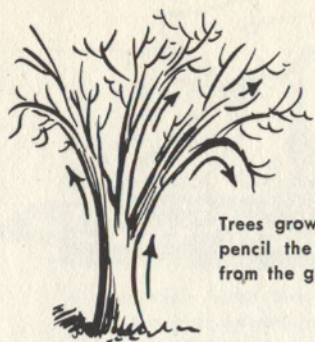


Here it is drawn in pen and ink line. It has been simplified a bit, but it's still not as simple as it could be



Ah! This is what we have been working for — your reader will have no doubt as to what this is, even though we have cut out about seventy percent of the detail — and it will reproduce better

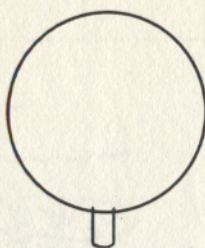
Trees



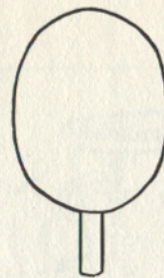
Trees grow up — so it helps to pencil the trunk and branches from the ground up



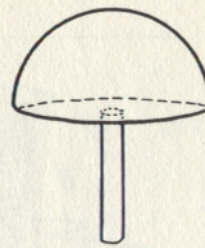
Cone



Sphere



Oval



Half sphere

Trees, too, have basic forms. Remember that the trunks vary in length and are cylinders



Summer



Fall

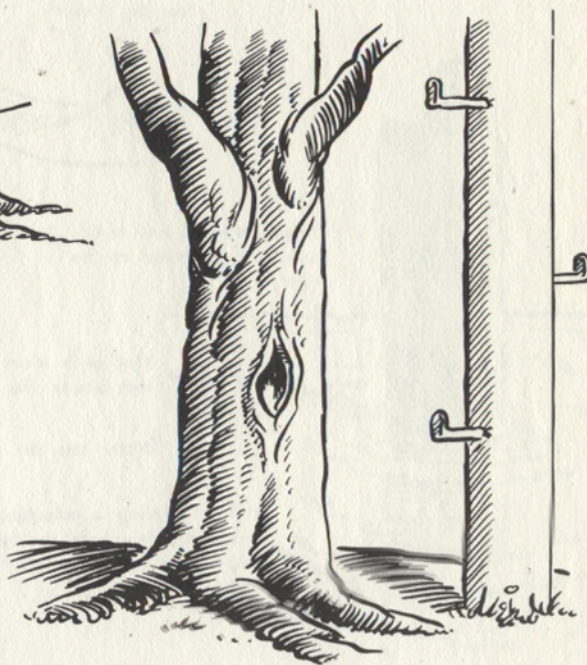


Winter

Because the branches hold the leaves in the summer, the bare branches in the winter must fill the same area the leaves did



Wrong



Right

A tree isn't like a post stuck in the ground — a tree spreads out at the base for a firm footing



Oak

Birch

Palm

Cypress

You're not expected to be a botanist — but you should know one tree from another so you won't draw a palm top on a birch trunk



Don't try to draw every leaf on your trees

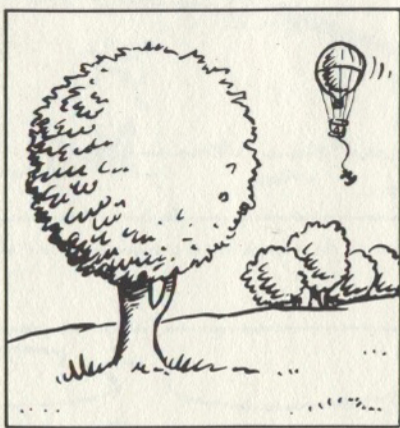


Keep them simple, with over-all shapes in mind

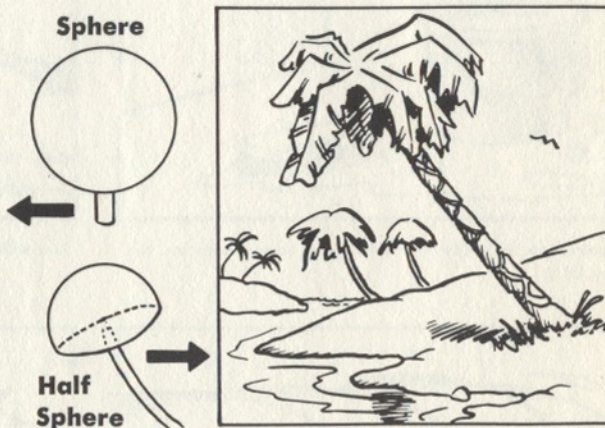
Both the tree trunk and the pole are cylinders, but the trunk is rough and the pole is smooth — it is with pen lines that we show texture of the trunk



The pine tree is a cone with a straight trunk



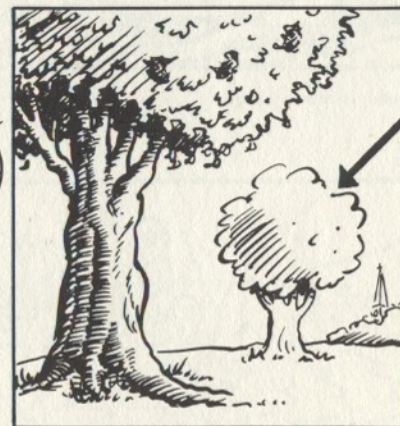
The maple and most shade trees are spheres



The palm is a half sphere with a long narrow trunk — most of them lean because wind makes them grow that way



Birches are spheres — they grow in groups



No leaves, just shading

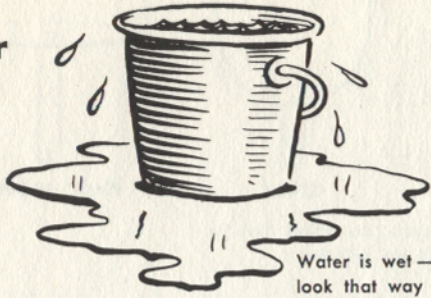
Cylinder

A tree drawn in the foreground will have much more detail than one drawn in the distance



Remember that stumps are cut-off trees — give them the same rough textures

Water



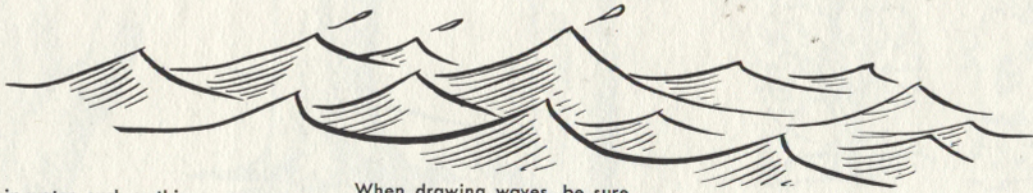
Water is wet — make it look that way by making it shiny



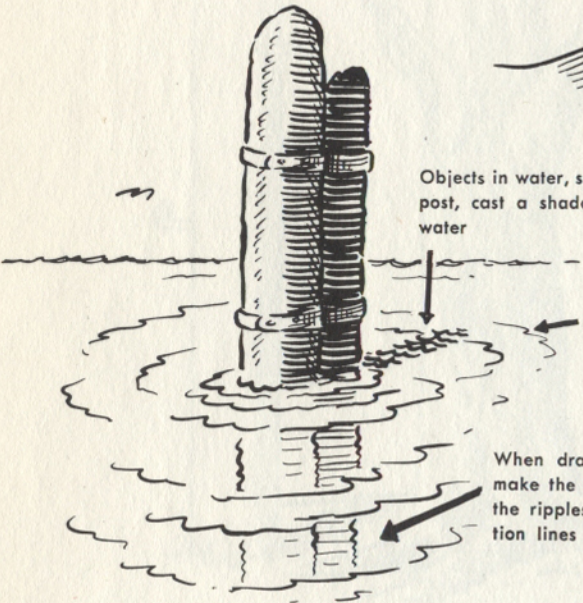
When objects float in water, only parts of them show above the surface



Dirt and water make mud. When drawing mud, make it look gooey and liquid



When drawing waves, be sure to shade them all on the same side



Objects in water, such as this post, cast a shadow on the water

Ripples in water go all the way around the object

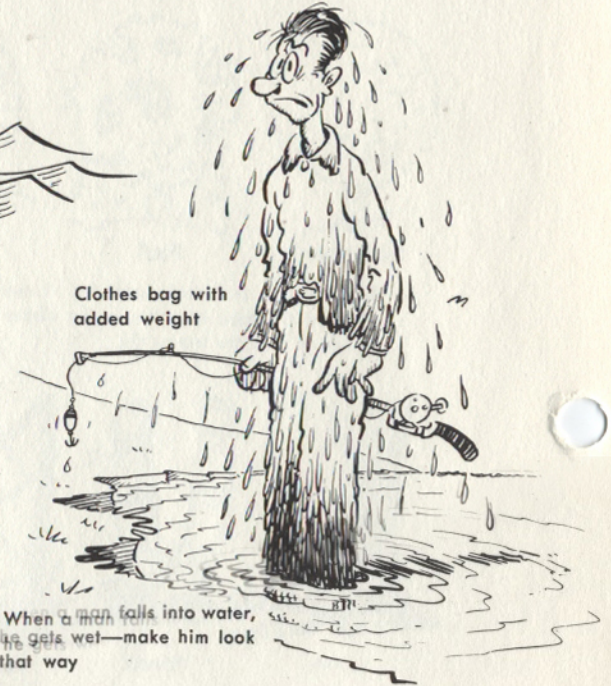
Water acts like a mirror

When drawing a reflection, make the line wavy and let the ripples break the reflection lines



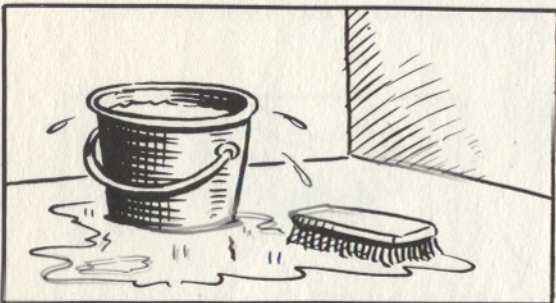
Sweat and tears are water

Heat, worry and fear can be shown by sweat

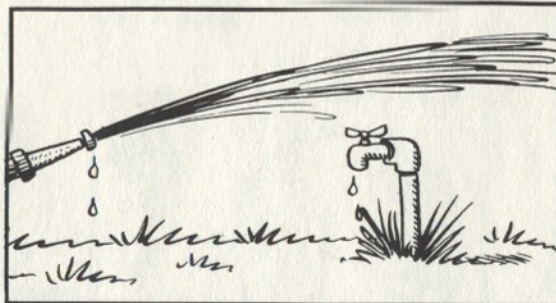


Clothes bag with added weight

When a man falls into water, he gets wet — make him look that way



When you draw a bucket of water, put some water on the floor around it



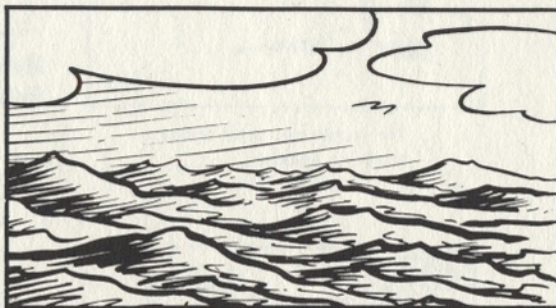
The water from the hose is under pressure — make it shoot out



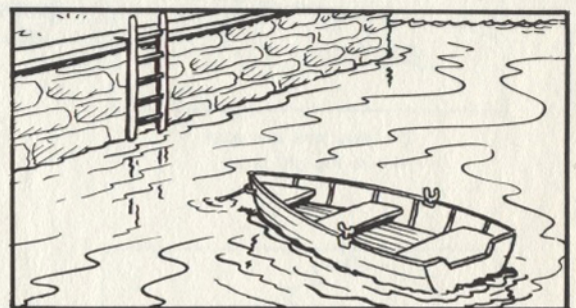
This is a lazy stream — the water flows slowly and shows reflections



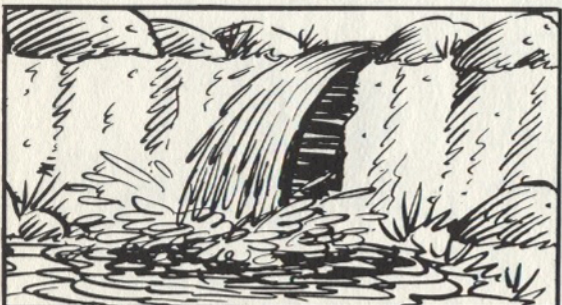
Waves curve over themselves — shading will show this



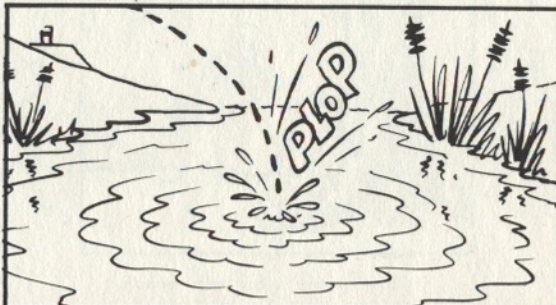
Ocean water is drawn rough



Inside a harbor or a lake, the water is smooth



The water from falls is pulled down by gravity — the higher the fall, the bigger the splash



Small objects make a small splash with ripple rings around it

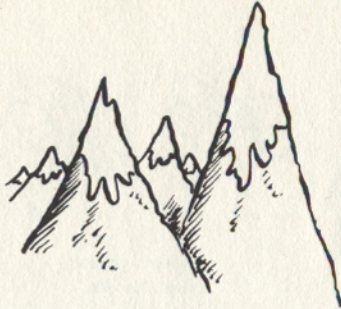


When a large object falls into water, there is a big splash

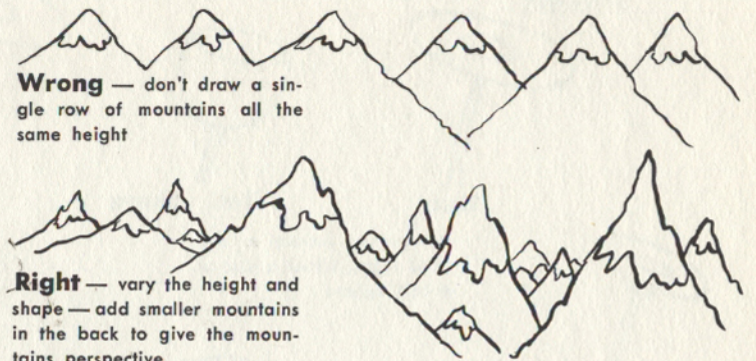
Mountains



Hills are old worn-off mountains and are smooth and flowing

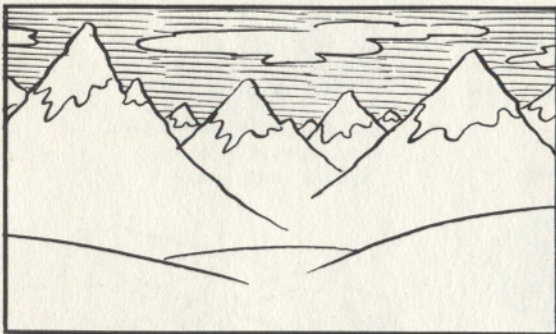


High mountains are new mountains and are rough and sharp

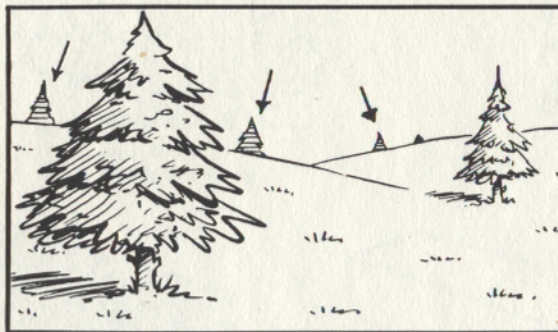


Wrong — don't draw a single row of mountains all the same height

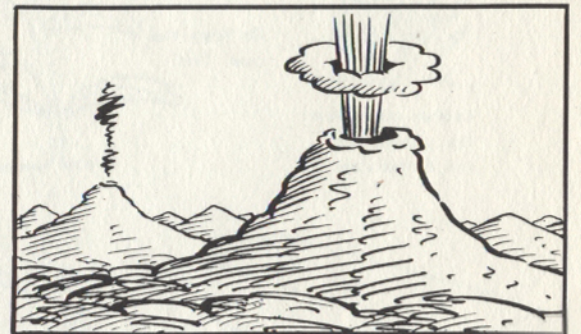
Right — vary the height and shape — add smaller mountains in the back to give the mountains perspective



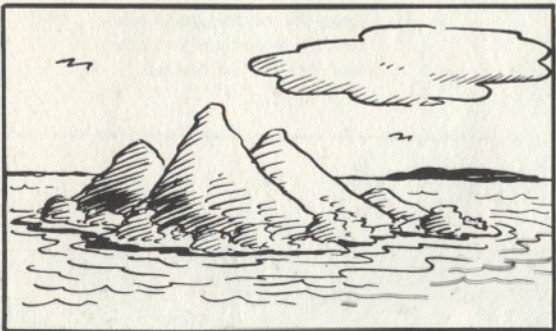
High mountains have snow on their peaks all year



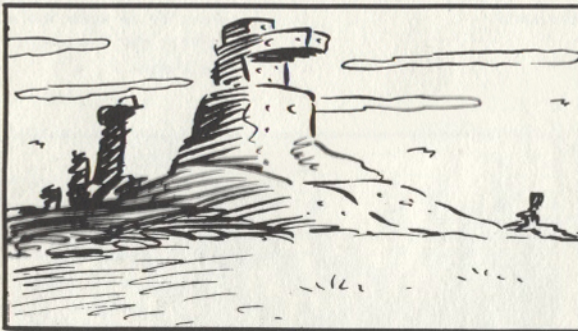
When drawing trees on hills, give your hills perspective by drawing the tops of the trees growing on the other side



Volcanos are mountains that have blown their tops — have smoke coming out the top



Islands are the peaks of mountains sticking up out of the water

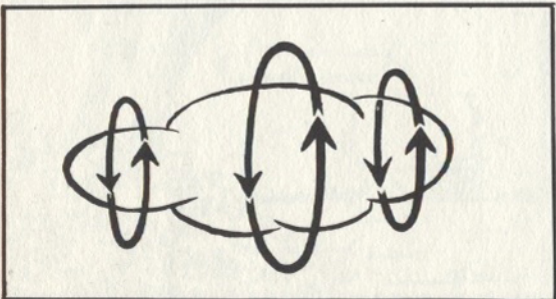


In the desert, the wind and rain have worn the mountains into weird shapes



You don't have to draw all of a mountain in a panel

Clouds



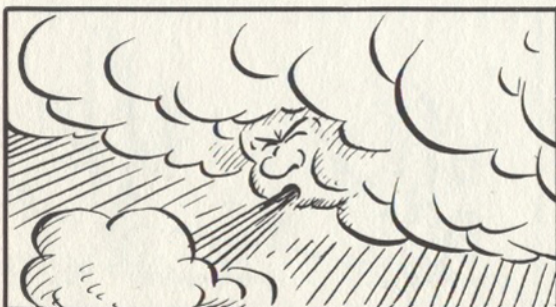
Clouds are round — when you draw them, keep this in mind and shade them accordingly



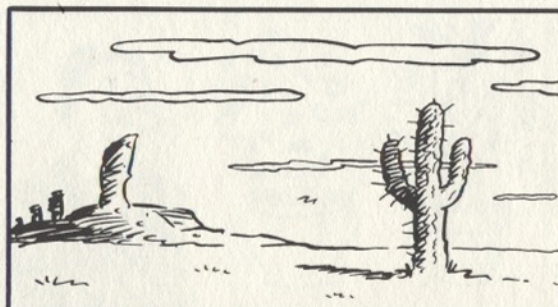
Before a storm, black clouds gather and the sky becomes dark



During a storm, there is rain and lightning



One way to show the wind blowing is to form the clouds into a face



Desert clouds — long and narrow — note clouds get smaller in distance



This is another use for a black storm cloud

Plants



Disc

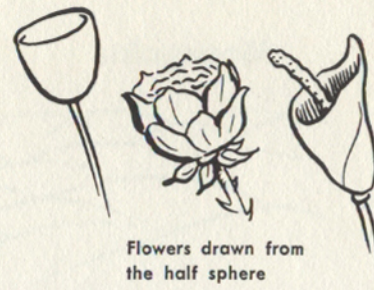


Half sphere

Flowers are usually of two basic forms, either a disc or a half sphere



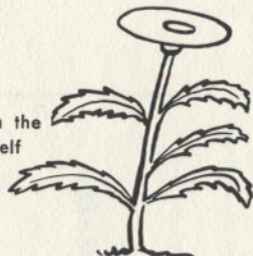
Flowers drawn from the disc



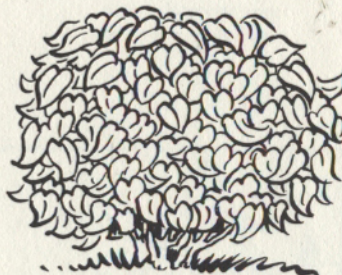
Flowers drawn from the half sphere



Leaves come from the ground with the flower stem



Or from the stem itself

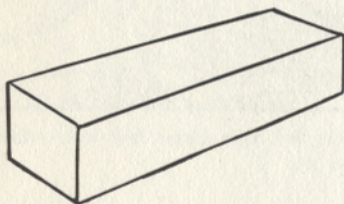


Don't try to draw all of the leaves

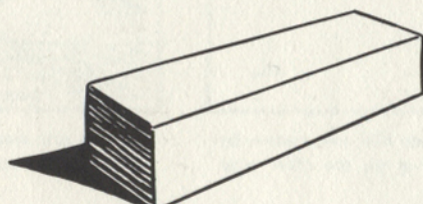
A bush is just the same as a tree without a long trunk



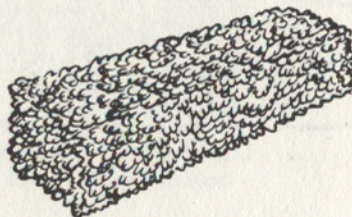
Just indicate the leaves and the rough outline



The basic form of a hedge is a cube



Shade it the same as a cube



Don't try to draw too much texture into it — you'll lose the shape



Make the outline rough and indicate leaves on the side and very few on the top



When drawing a row of small bushy plants, remember the perspective — they get smaller in the distance



In drawing open country, a silhouette can establish distances



Cattails grow around water — be sure to draw in their reflections on the water



When drawing a field of daisies keep the perspective by having those in the distance smaller



In the tropics the plant life is dense — use solid blacks in the foreground



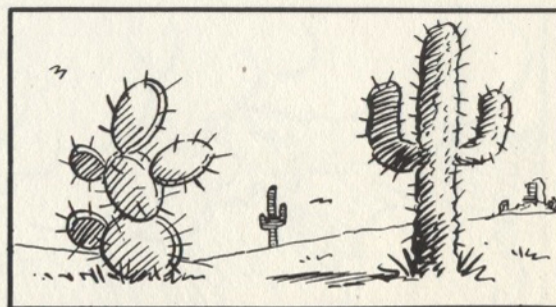
Leaning tree and shadowed leaves make a graceful, decorative scene setting



A few flowers spotted in a window box can make that hole in the wall interesting

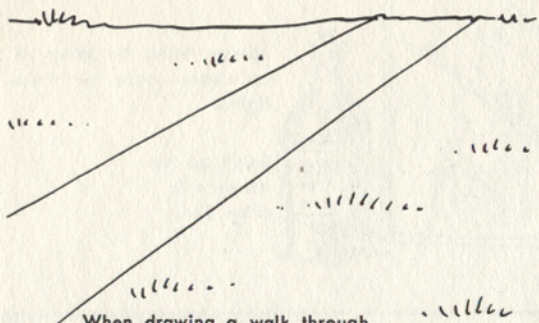


Plants and flowers can help establish mood of place or person

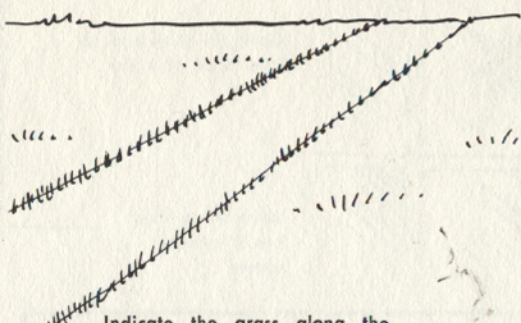


Two types of cacti — made up of flat discs and cylinders

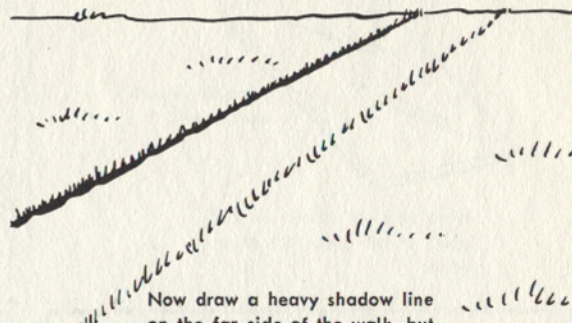
Grass



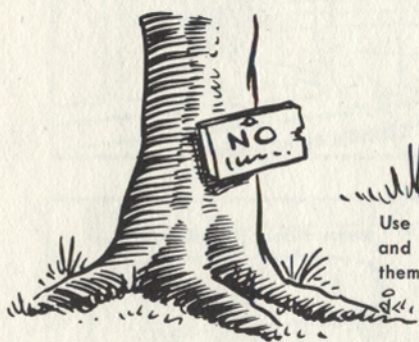
When drawing a walk through grass, pencil the walk first



Indicate the grass along the edges of the walk



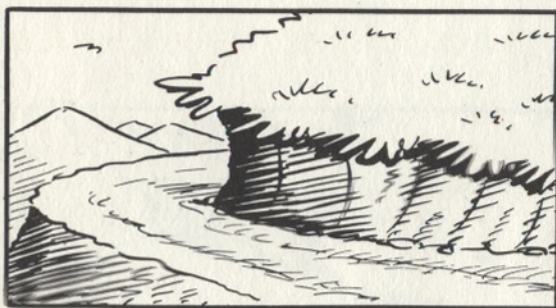
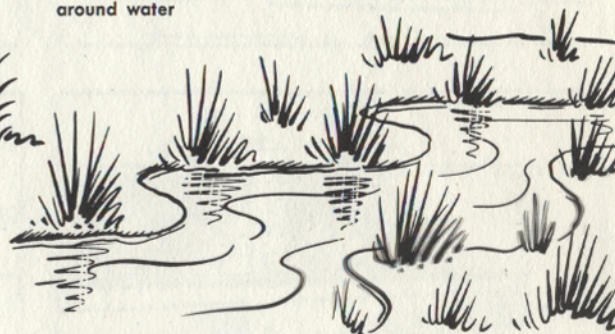
Now draw a heavy shadow line on the far side of the walk, but let the grass tips show above it — this gives the grass depth



Use grass around trees, rocks and other objects to help plant them firmly in the ground



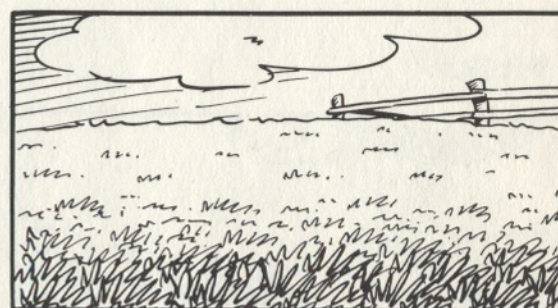
Grass always grows longer around water



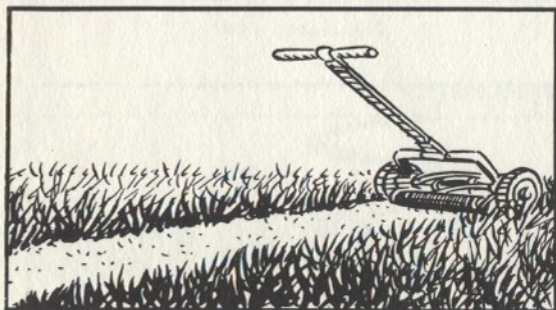
Grass grows over the edge of a bluff — show this by drawing in shadows under the grass



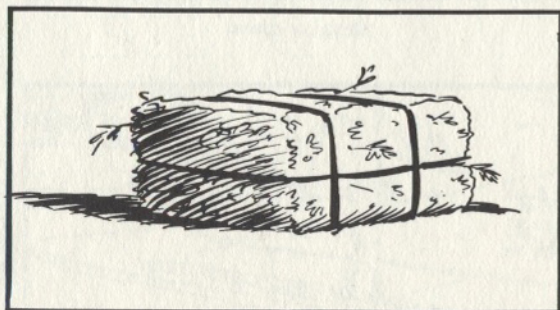
Wild field grass grows in hummocks — show this by curving the lines of the grass



In drawing a field of leafy grass, make horizon line rough



Lawnmower makes a path through grass — a few light lines indicate path of mowed grass



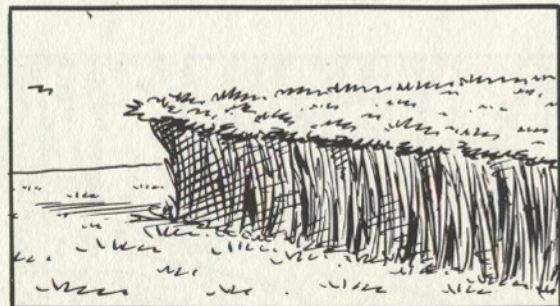
A bale of hay is compressed grass — a few stems sticking out of the cube indicate this



When drawing a shadow in grass, keep it in character by making the grass itself darker



Grass around steps — the grass on the right side hides the steps

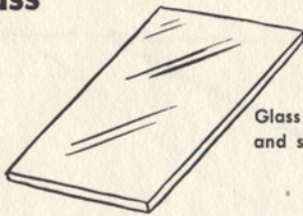


Grain is long-stemmed and bushy on top — note the bushy tops are suggested in outline



Haystacks and bunched corn — the stack is top heavy because cows eat at the bottom

Glass



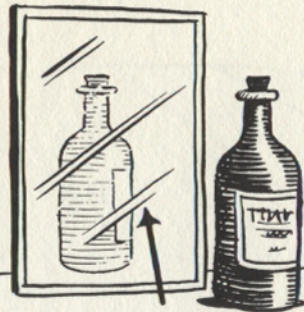
Glass is smooth and shiny

Note straight lines across glass at an angle for shiny effect



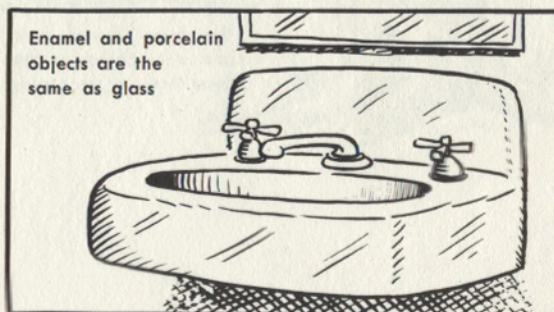
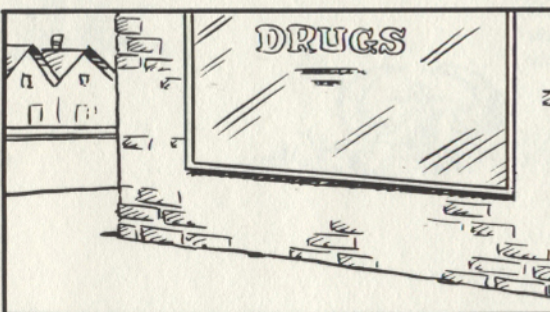
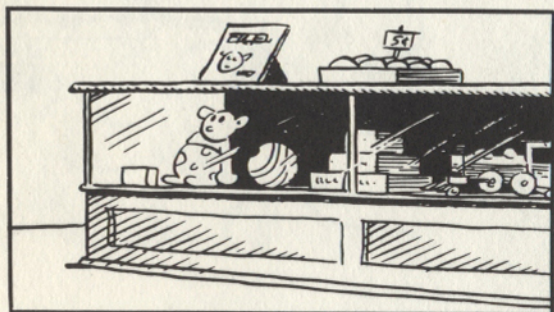
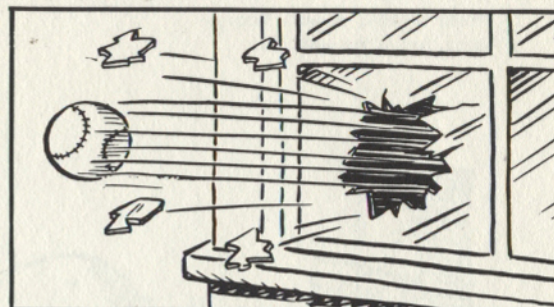
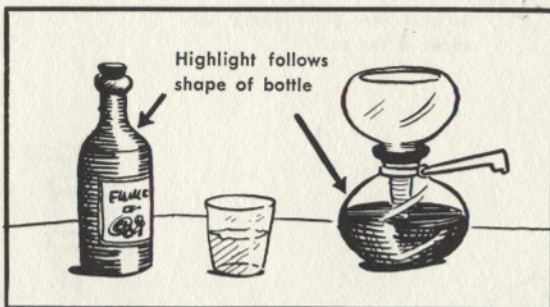
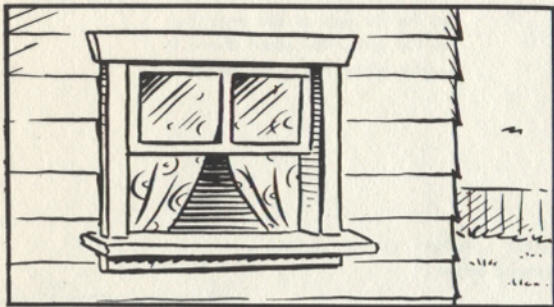
Cracks in glass radiate from point of break

Make shine lines heavy in one corner



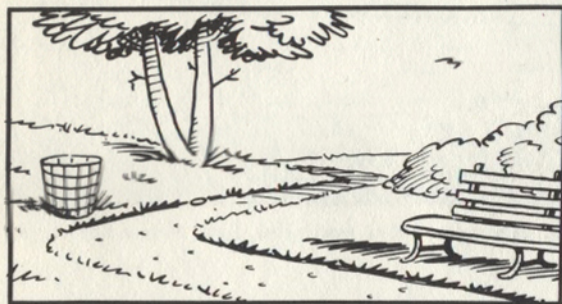
Mirrors reflect the image of an object—make the image lighter

Break up the image with shine lines



Enamel and porcelain objects are the same as glass

Walks



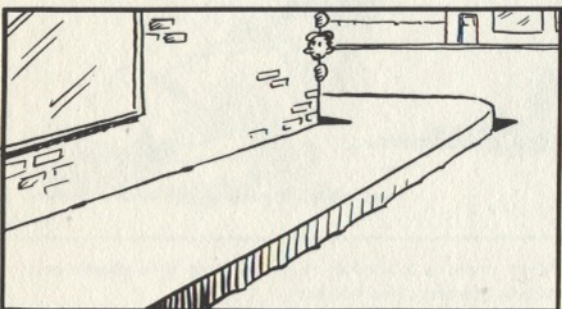
Dirt path



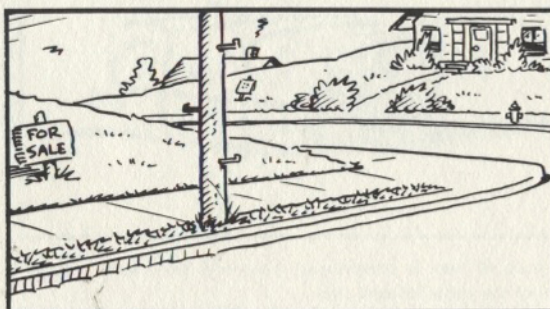
Stepping stones



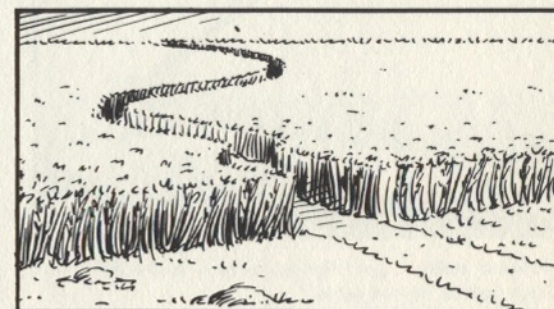
Path around a hill



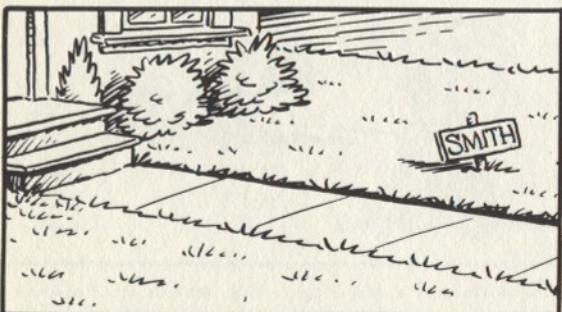
Sidewalk and corner



Every sidewalk has a fire plug



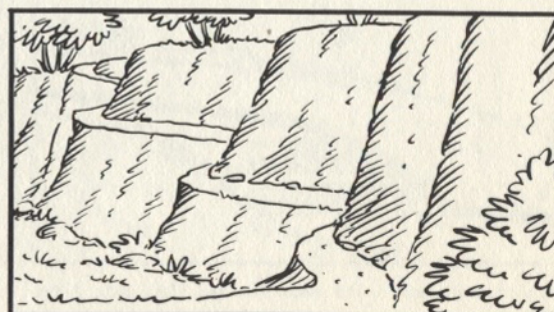
Path through high grass



Cement house walk

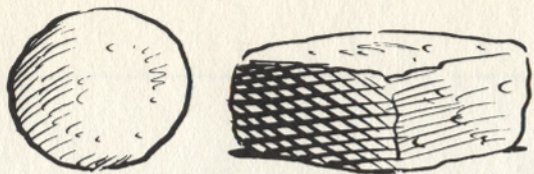


Path through trees

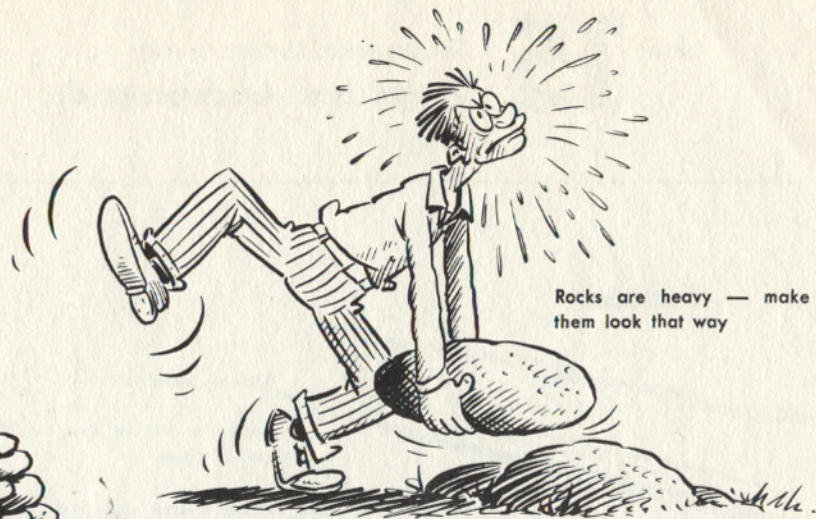


Path on side of bluff

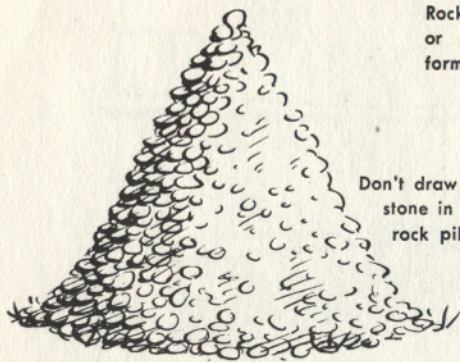
Rocks



Rocks can either be spheres or cubes in their natural form

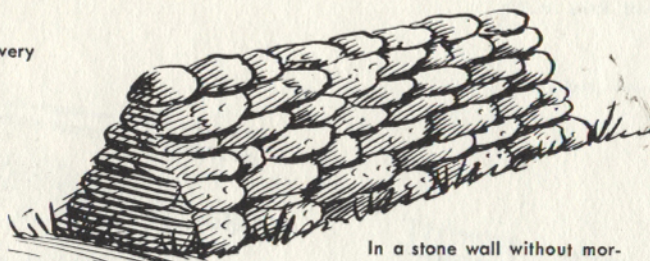


Rocks are heavy — make them look that way

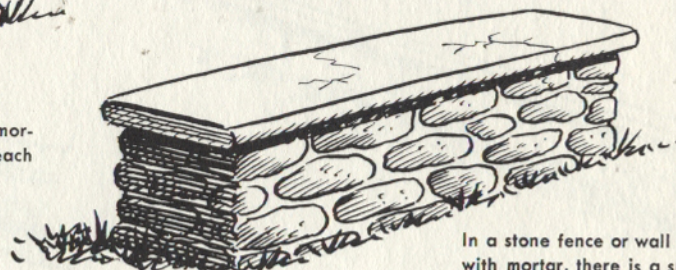


Don't draw every stone in a rock pile

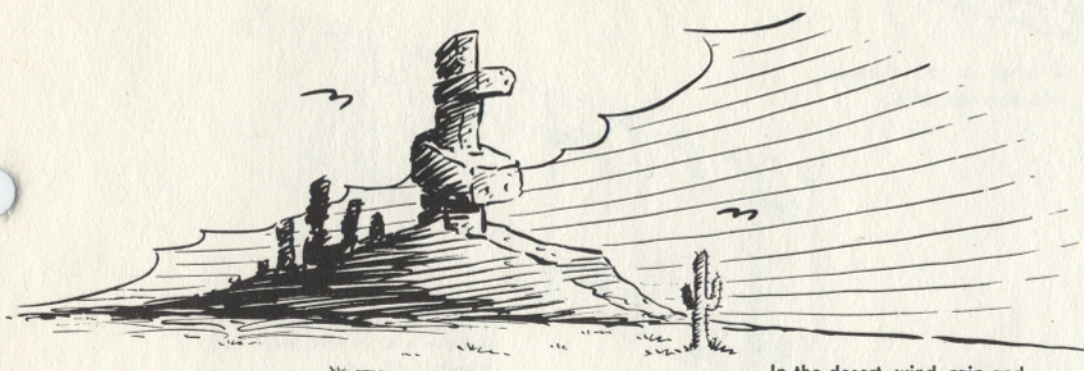
Treat them the same as leaves on trees and bushes



In a stone wall without mortar, the rocks will touch each other



In a stone fence or wall built with mortar, there is a space between the stones



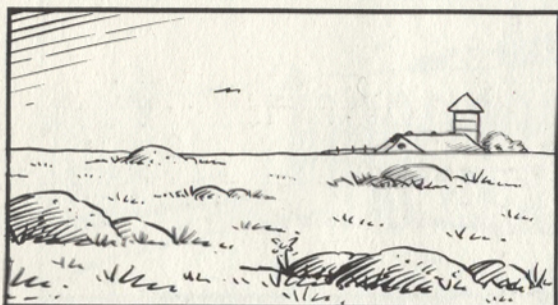
In the desert, wind, rain and sand have carved rocks into almost any shape you want to draw



Wrong

Rocks in the field never sit on top of the ground—they will look as if they belonged there if you show only part of them above ground

Right



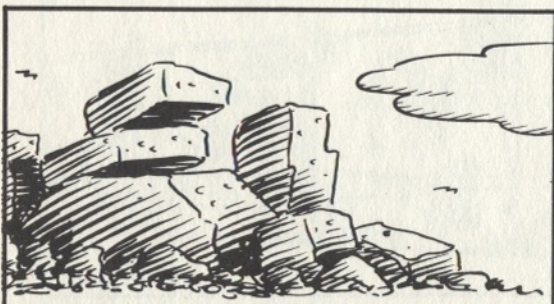
Half-buried field rocks — make them look solid



Fieldstone fireplace—rocks are spaced by mortar between them



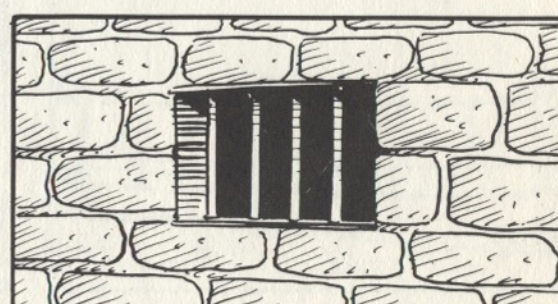
Rocks in stream break flow of water — lines stream around and behind them



Square, rough rocks — shade them right — decide where light is coming from



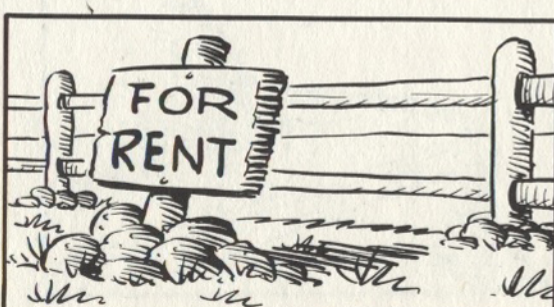
Draw small rocks in a dirt path



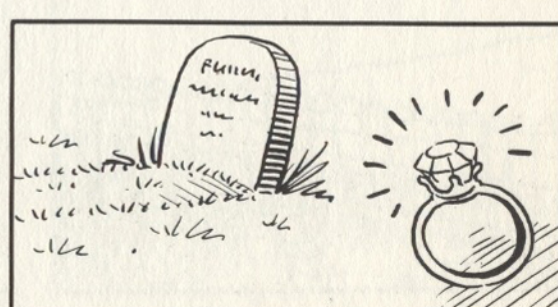
Prison wall



Rounded shore rocks — have waves break over the rocks

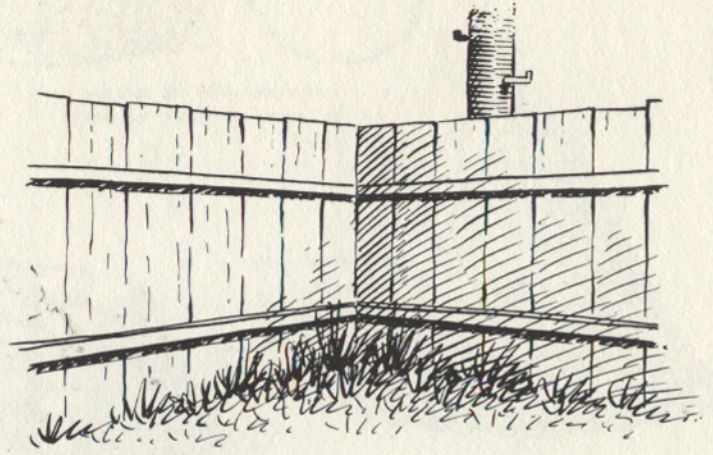
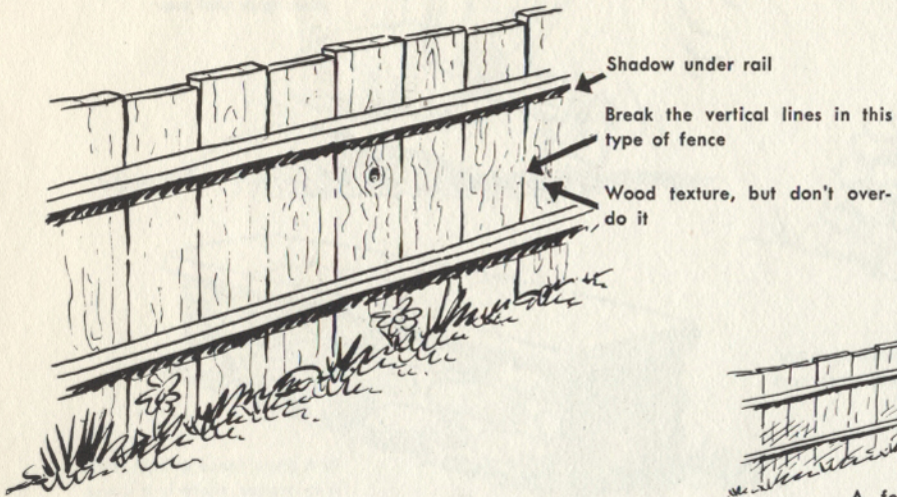


Rocks are used to hold things down — and up

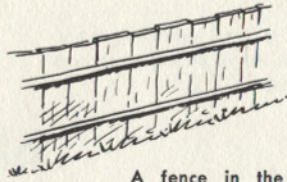


Two more types of rock or stone

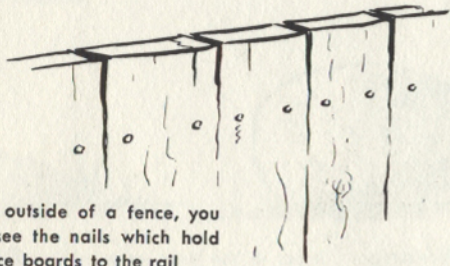
Fences



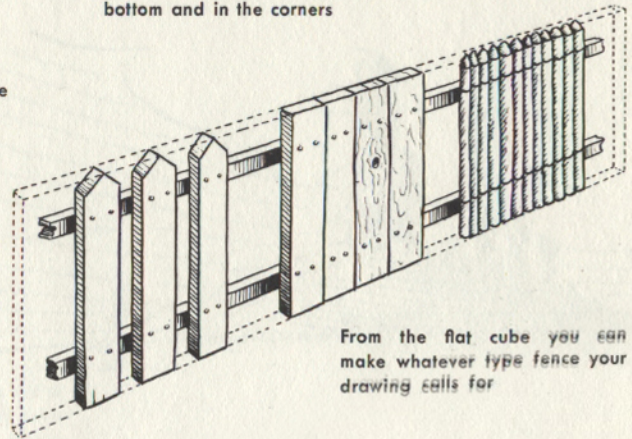
Hook the fence to the ground by darkening the grass along the bottom and in the corners



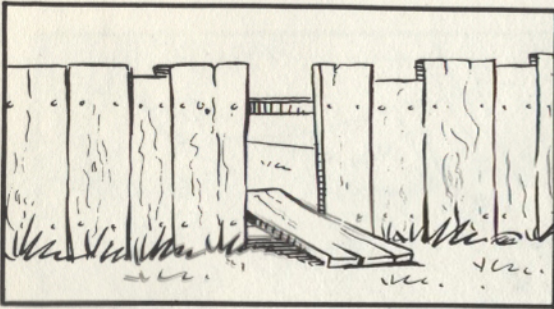
A fence in the distance will show less detail



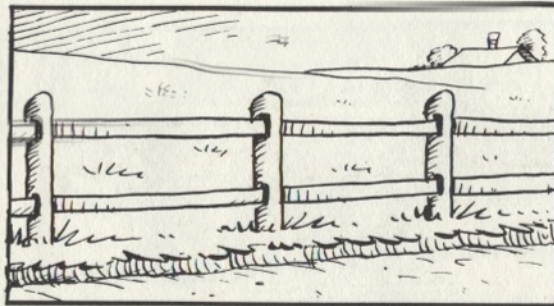
On the outside of a fence, you would see the nails which hold the fence boards to the rail



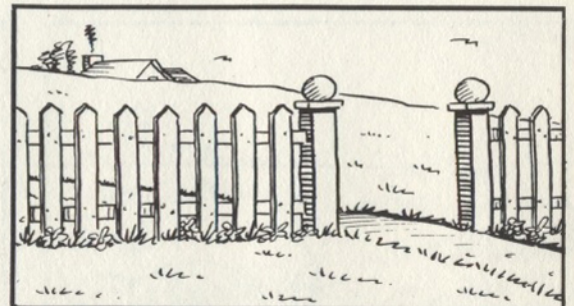
From the flat cube you can make whatever type fence your drawing calls for



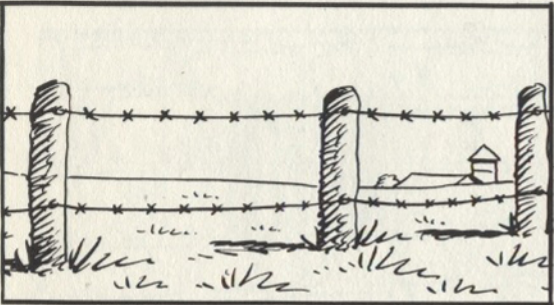
An old board fence — make boards different lengths



Post and rail fence — this type is found in the country — note grass used as a shadow



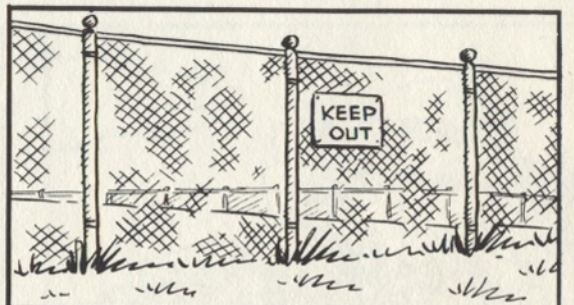
Picket fence — for small homes — draw flowers growing along this type



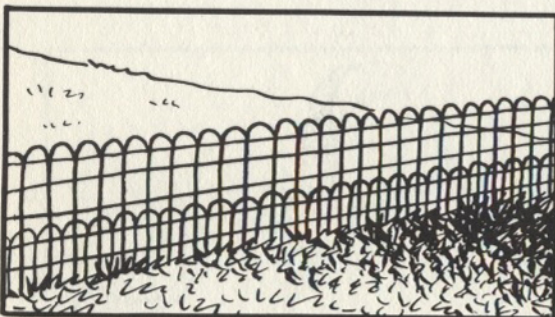
Barbed wire fence found on farms and in the West



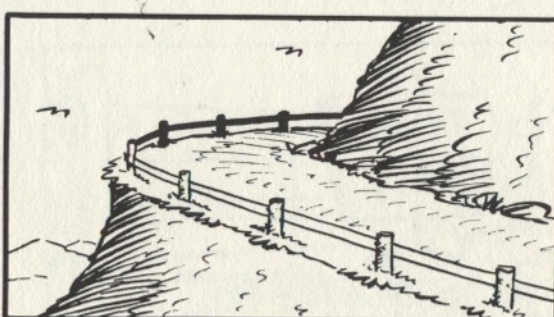
City board fences are covered with signs and writing



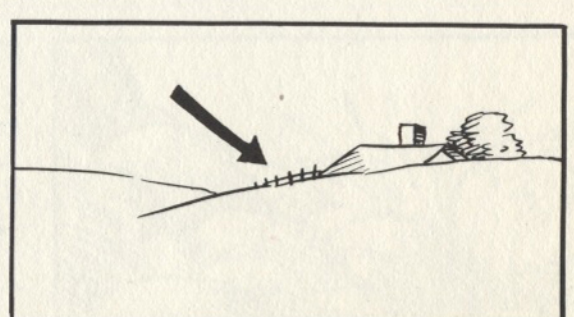
Wire screen fence — factory type — just suggest screen — don't try to draw every wire



Wire picket fence — okay in small hunks, but be careful of over-doing it



Guard rail fence — low and strong — found along mountain roads



A fence like this will add interest to buildings in the distance

Buildings

You will draw very few cartoon panels that haven't at least one building or part of a building in them. Not only should you have a good picture-idea of the outside of a house, but you must also be familiar with the appearance of other types of buildings. There are many little differences which you should notice. The window in a house is not the same as the window in a factory.

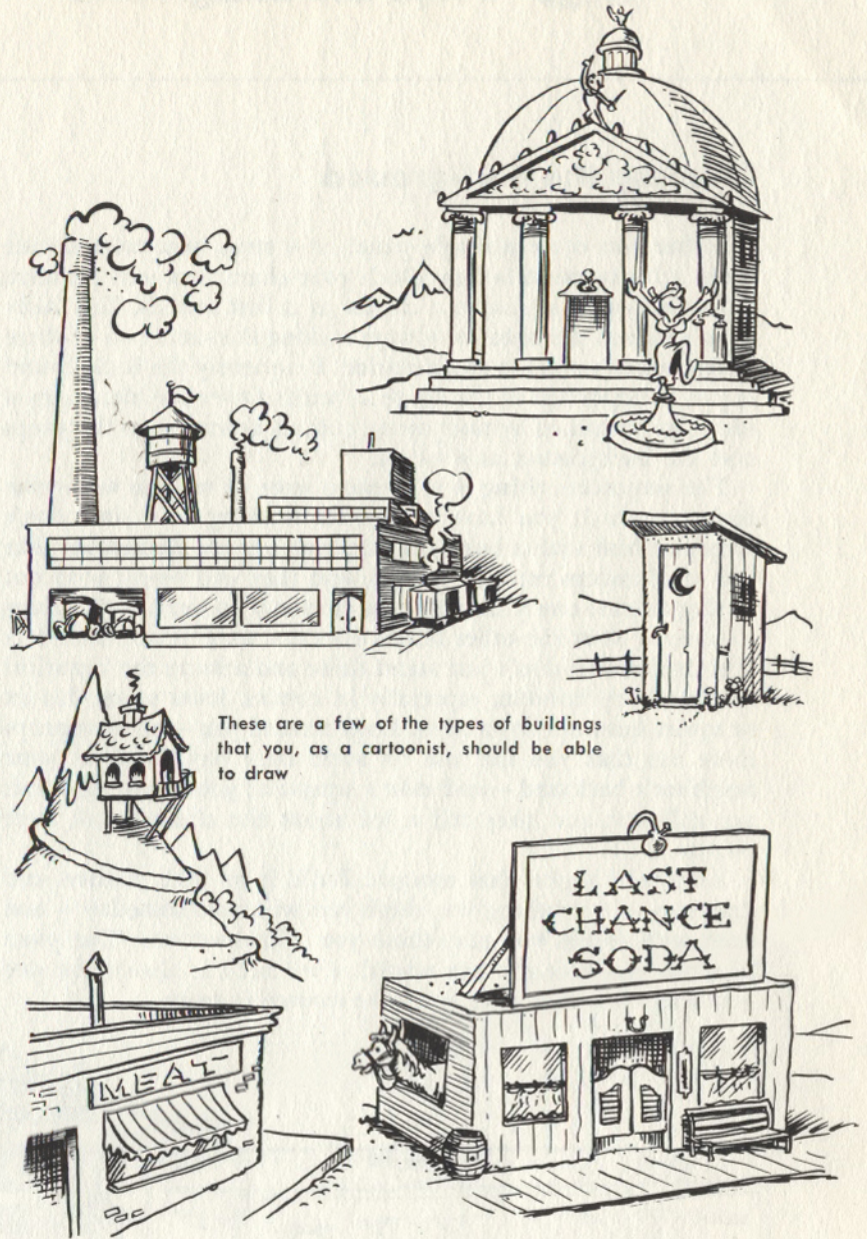
For your morgue, clip as many kinds of buildings as possible—inside and out. The home and garden magazines are wonderful places to find pictures of this type. For industrial-type buildings, look at the ads and borrow any trade magazines that your friends have. Trade magazines not only have buildings, they have photos of machinery and other industrial equipment.

Remember that most buildings are cubes in their basic form. When you draw them, simplify them, just as you did with the lawn mower. Don't try to draw every brick in a brick building. Just put in a few so your reader will know it is a brick wall. It's the same with windows. When you are drawing a building in the distance, just indicate a few of the windows and the door.

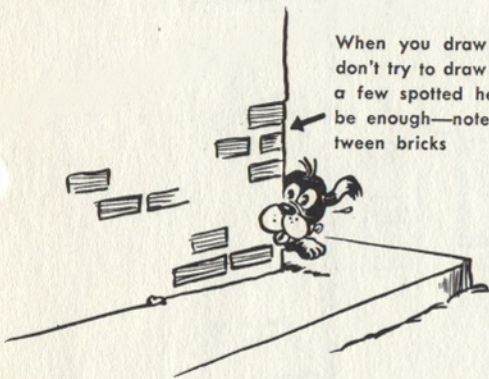
Take every opportunity to study the inside of houses. For example, notice the way a door is framed, not because you are going to draw it in complete detail, but because it is much easier to draw something if you know how it is made.

Both the insides and outsides of houses are like people. Over the years they will take on character. You will find that your readers will expect certain types of characters to live in certain types of houses. This also applies to locations. A southern California bungalow is entirely different from a New England farmhouse. Both are houses, and people live in them, but because of climate and background, they are entirely different in appearance.

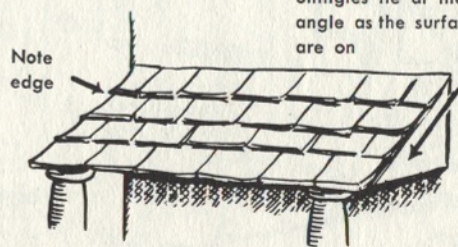
Don't forget that architecture is changing pretty fast these days. A fellow might be living today in a house that looks haunted. And next year his wife may talk him into building one of those modern houses with more glass in it than a row of department store showcases. Make your buildings fit the story and keep up with the times.



These are a few of the types of buildings that you, as a cartoonist, should be able to draw

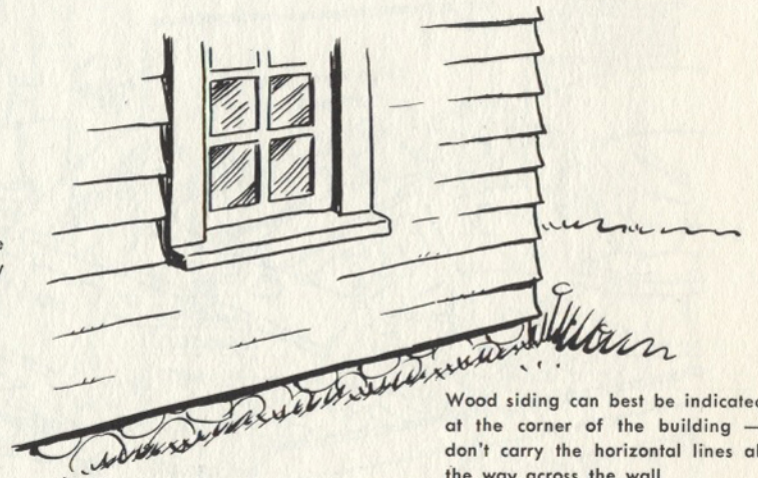


When you draw a brick building, don't try to draw all of the bricks—a few spotted here and there will be enough—note mortar space between bricks

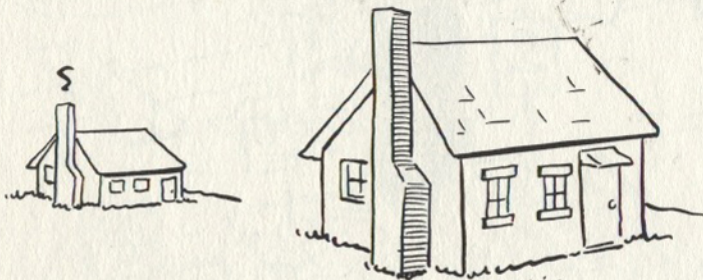


Shingles lie at the same angle as the surface they are on

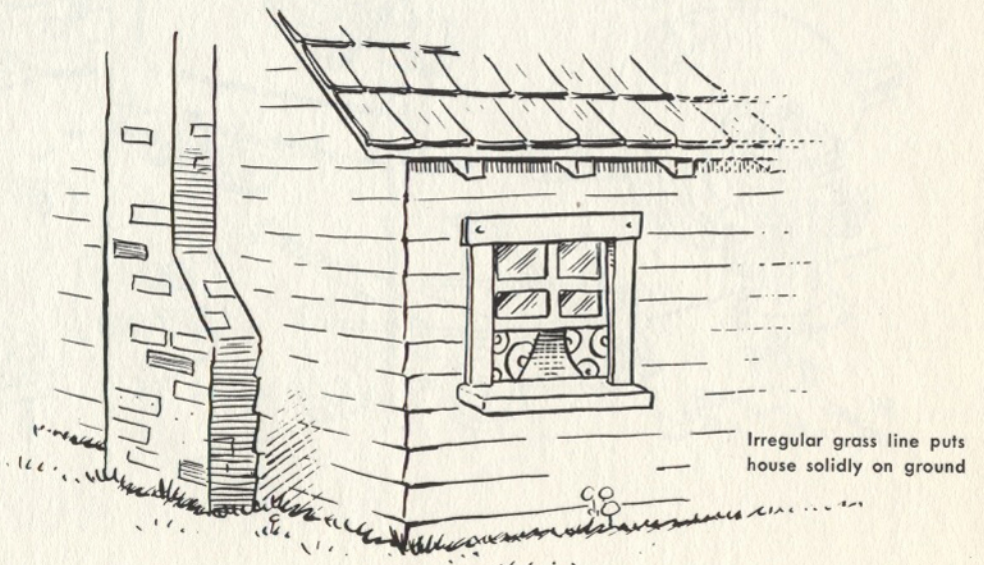
Shingles overlap each other — don't try to make them perfect



Wood siding can best be indicated at the corner of the building — don't carry the horizontal lines all the way across the wall



The closer you are to a building or other prop, the more details you see. Remember this when you draw. If you try to put the same details in a distant house as in a close-up, the small lines will fill up and make a mess in reproduction



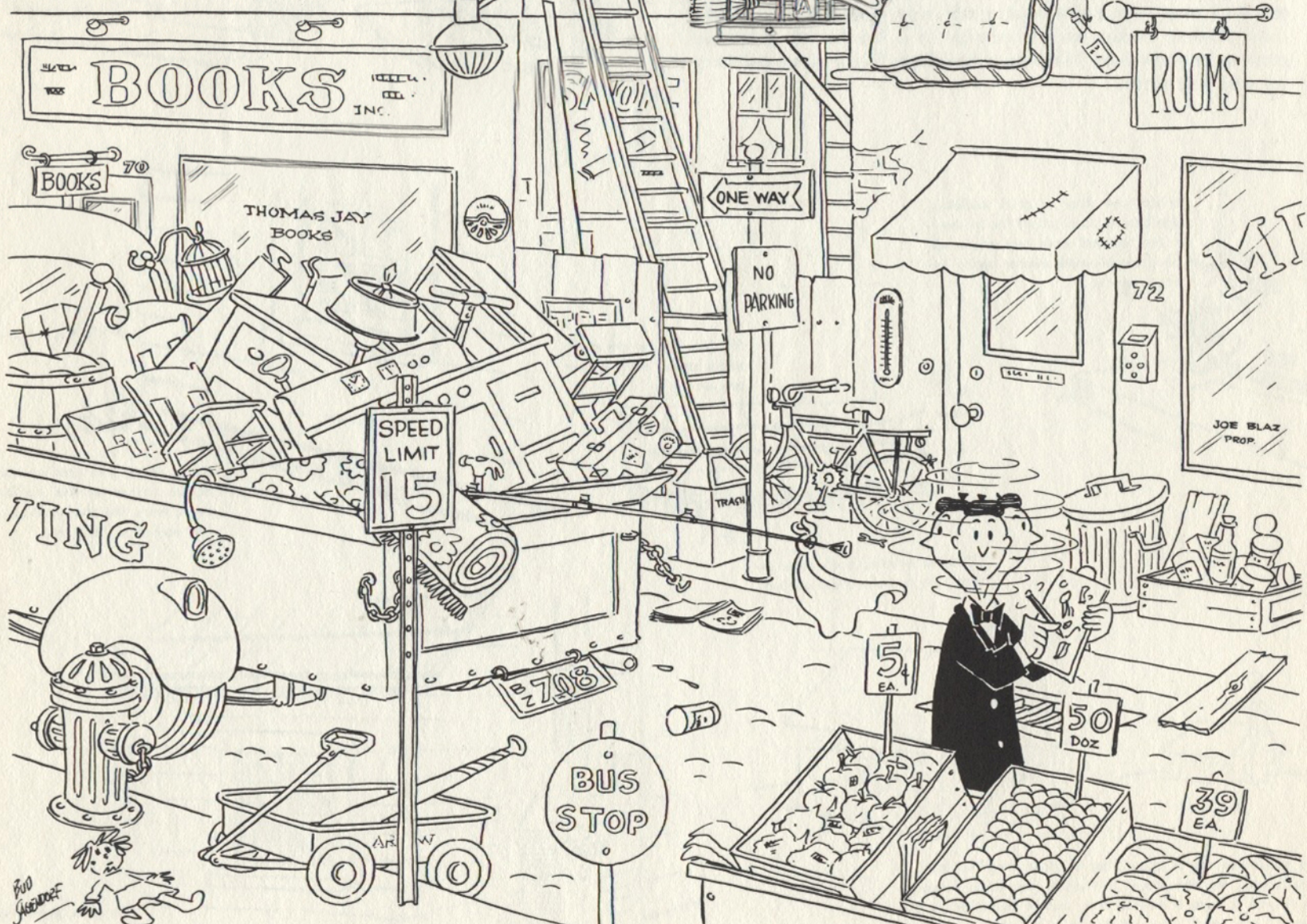
Irregular grass line puts house solidly on ground

Creating the background

Whether you draw a single panel or a strip, you must decide upon a background before which your characters will perform. This isn't quite as simple a matter as it first sounds. Too many of us get into the habit of always making the same two or three backgrounds work for any situation. Frequently the background is just as important as the figure in putting over the idea. A good idea can be ruined by not paying enough attention to the props and the background as a whole.

The important thing is to create a sense of realism with your backgrounds. If you have a plumber working on a sink, don't surround him with a bunch of carpenter's tools. Remember that lots of plumbers read the comics, and they will resent your not having at least one wrench for the character to work with. Learn to observe what the other fellow does and uses. When there is a fire, the firemen don't just stand there and admire the beautiful flames. Every fireman, especially in comics, loves to use his ax or squirt innocent bystanders. Look around you—see what props there are that you can use on some later day. Look at your neighbor's backyard—and take a squint at your own. All yards are different and they tell a lot about the character of their owners.

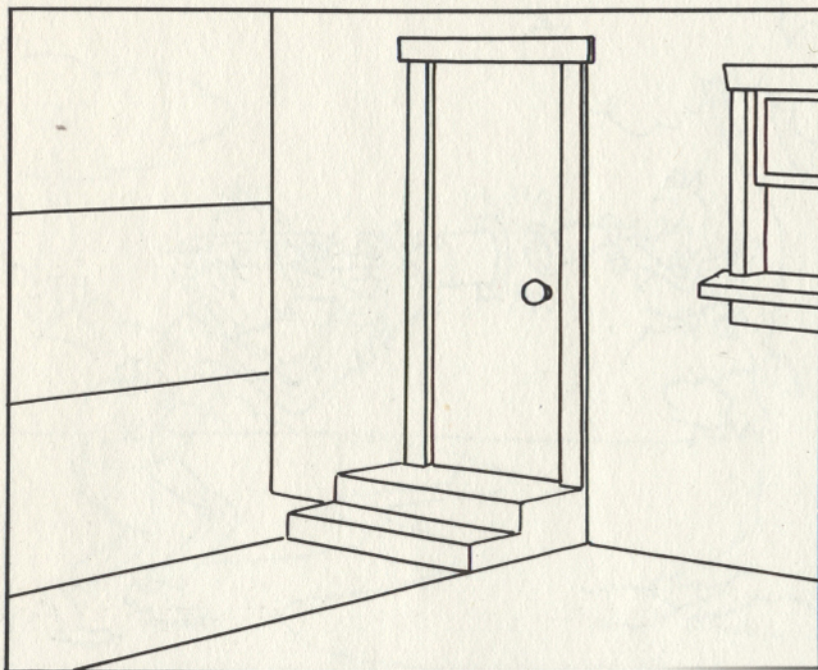
Keep working on that morgue. Build it up with pictures and drawings of everything you think you will need someday—and even with things you may think you will never use. The piece of scrap you thought you would never need is always the one you want two days after you have thrown it away.



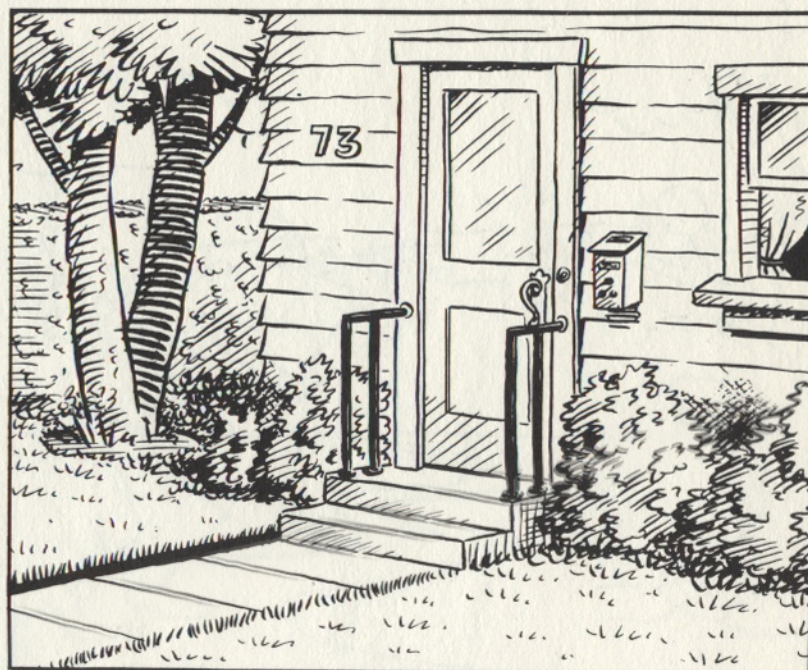
You are always surrounded by props and details—keep your sketch pad handy

Three scenes — one basic drawing

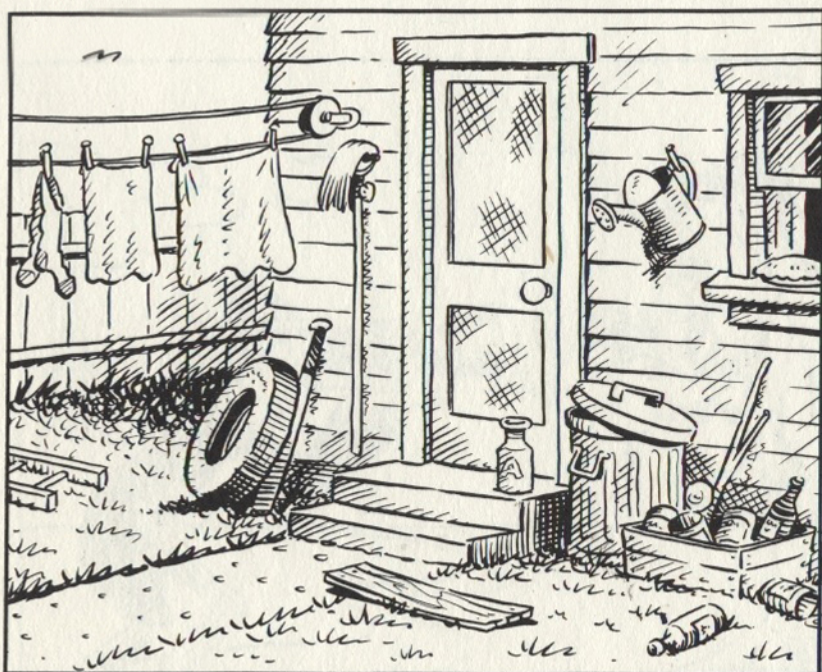
When creating the background for any given situation, remember that different props and details will often do the whole job of changing the scene. Below we have taken one basic drawing of a building with door and window and by changing the props and details, we have created three different scenes.



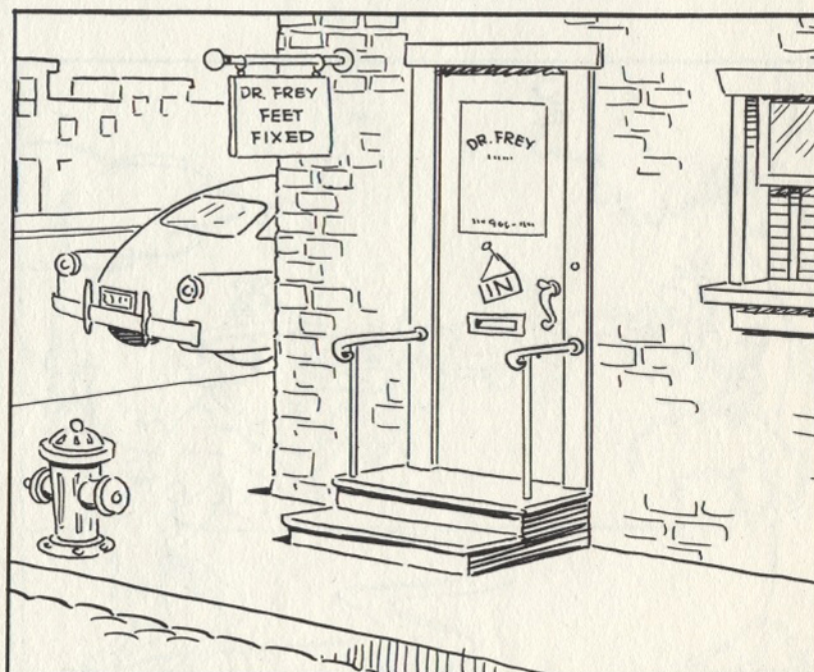
Here is the basic drawing of the side of a building showing the door and window



By the addition of props and details we have created a front yard



Here by the proper selection of props and details we change the basic drawing into a back yard



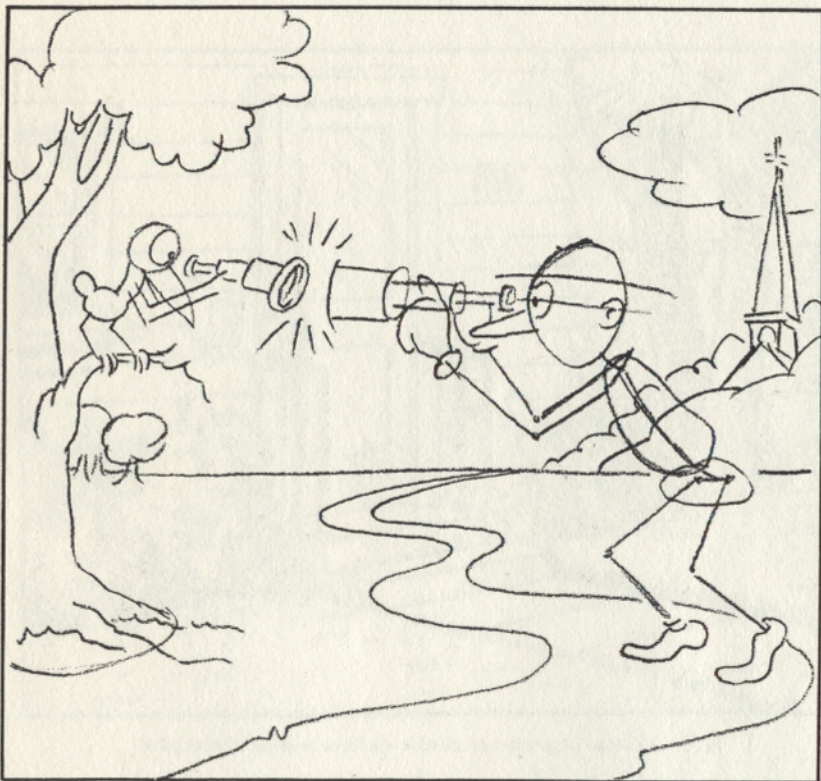
To move the building downtown we change its construction to brick and draw in the proper details

Drawing the figure in the background

If you're like the rest of us, your mental image of a cartoon idea will include the characters *and* the background against which they will perform. Let's say your gem-like idea concerns a gentleman engaged in the grand old sport of bird-watching. You wouldn't draw him in a submarine. No — he belongs in the country. The props you have in mind are those of the open

country — a tree, a telescope, a path, maybe the suggestion of a village.

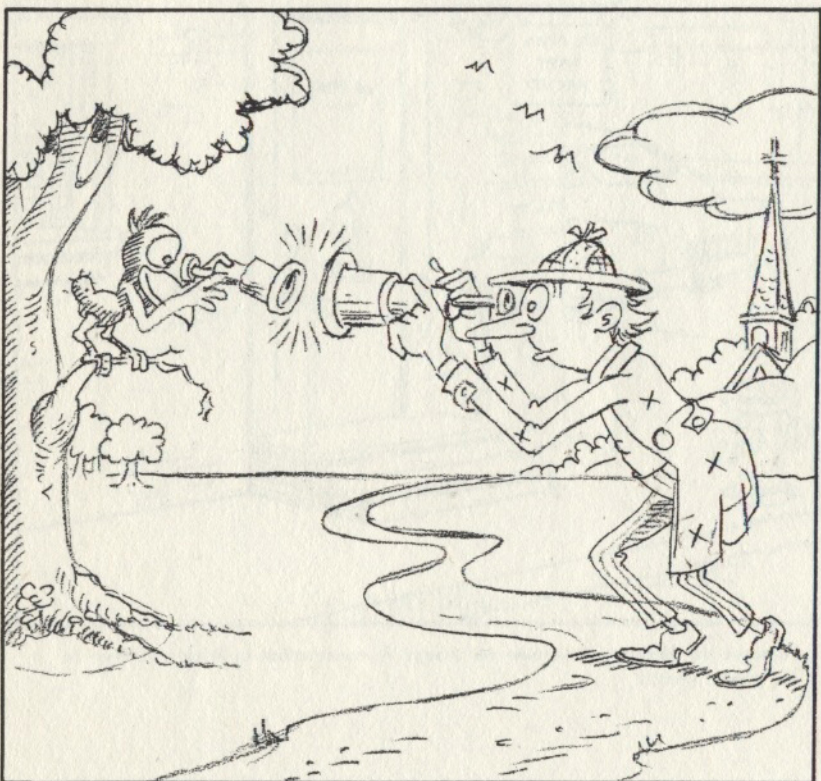
The scene has to *fit* the actors and *help* them get your idea across to your reader. Dreaming up backgrounds isn't too hard—learning to simplify them for use is. These step-by-step drawings show how to go about fitting the scene to the idea.



1. First decide what kind of background your story or idea calls for. Lightly rough out figure and background



2. If this looks right and fills the requirements of your story, finish up the pencil work on the figure



3. Now finish up the background in pencil — make any changes — indicate any shading that you will want



4. Ink figure and then background — let dry and then erase pencil — correct any mistakes or bad lines with Chinese white

Comic strip backgrounds

Drawing backgrounds in comic strips brings up two problems which are peculiar to this medium. First, because of the space occupied by balloons, you must set the scene of your story simply — but firmly enough so that your reader has no doubts about its location. Second, this must be done in such a way as to avoid monotony as the reader's eye goes on from panel to panel. Think

of each panel as being a different shot: use distant shots, close-ups and angle shots to vary the pace of your strip. Take a look at any comic page in your newspaper and see how seldom a whole prop, complete with all its details, appears in a strip. Learn to put in just enough to set the stage for your story — and then stop.



Detailed background to set scene — note main characters in strong silhouette



Part of bulkhead and life preserver put characters aboard ship



Scene has already been set, no background needed. Emphasis is on characters



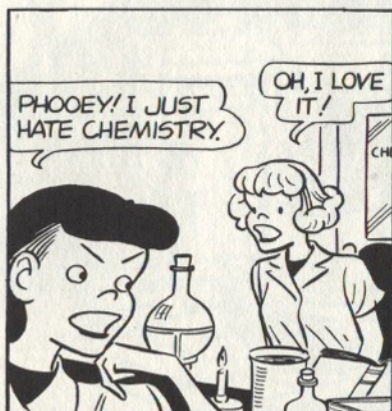
City scene is indicated by curbing and simple skyline buildings



No background — emphasis on action



Street scene re-set by auto and lamp post



Location set by simple chemistry props



Sign on door indicates it is a school chemistry class

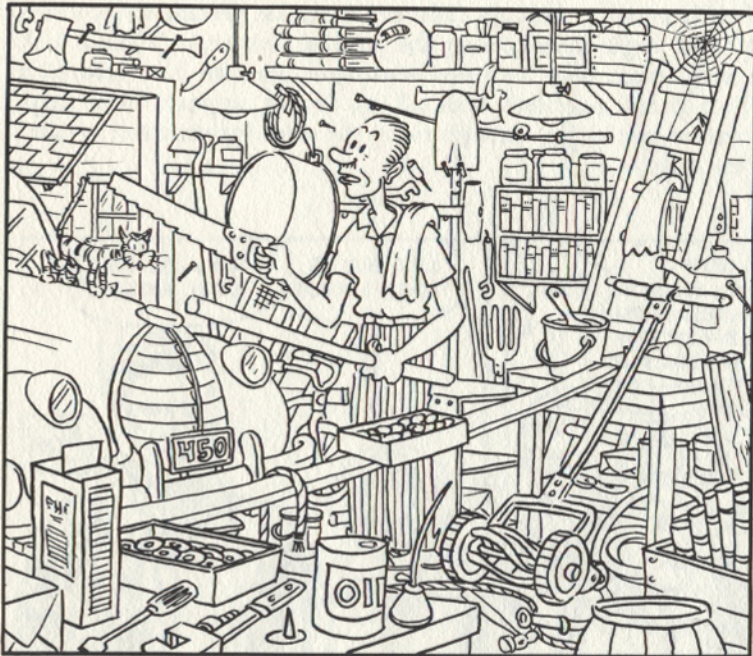


Emphasis on character — one test tube carries location along



Window and more chemistry props — all these scenes are simply and firmly established

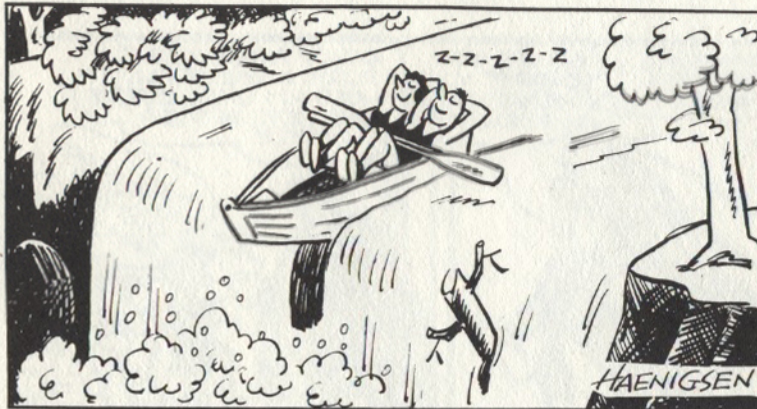
Things to remember



Don't overdo your backgrounds with too many props—use just enough to tell your story—no more



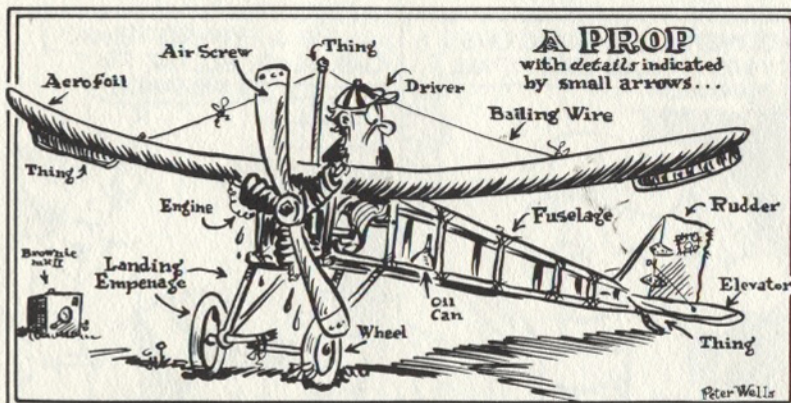
Another change of pace—good decorative props in the foreground with characters in silhouette



Simplicity makes your idea stronger. Here there is no question about the scene or what is happening



Change your reader's viewpoint—use angle shots to create variety and interest



Machinery plays an important part in this atomic age: learn to draw it simply and correctly



Keep details in key with your scene. For instance, a bait store is surrounded with boats, ropes and fishing gear

FAMOUS ARTISTS CARTOON COURSE
Student Work
Lesson 15

To study and practice

This is a lesson on how to draw things. There are enough examples of useful scenes to act as a stimulating swipe file for you, but don't think we meant to save you the trouble of building your own morgue. Nothing could do that. For specialized subjects, keep clipping pictures, studying them and filing them in your morgue for future reference. Don't get into the rut of using the same background over and over again for your characters.

As you develop the scene your idea calls for, always think of simplification. Look closely at the work of any good professional, and you will see that he seldom draws a complete prop when just a part of it will provide the setting. If the scene can be set by drawing only the side, windshield and steering wheel of an auto, he will not draw the whole, space-hogging car.

Our criticism on these assignments will be concerned mainly with the way you handle your props, details and backgrounds. At this stage of your Course, however, we may comment on your use of any or all of the teaching in previous lessons.

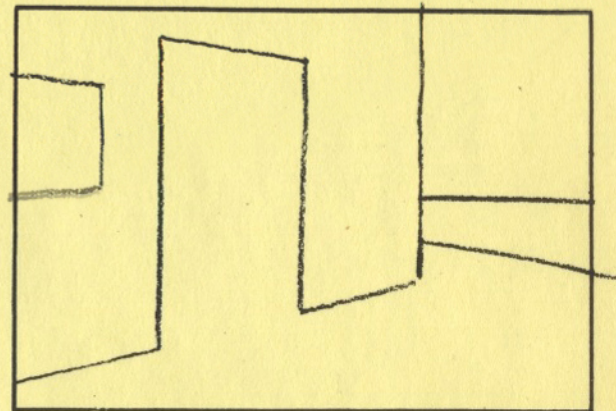
The assignments you are to mail to the School for criticism

ASSIGNMENT 1

On a sheet of 11 x 14-inch Bristol board, construct two panels. They will be reproduced 5 inches wide by 3½ inches high. Scale your panels up, for your working drawing, to 7 inches wide. Center them neatly on your paper, one over the other, with about one inch of space between them. Using the layout sketch on the right for your basic drawing in both panels (see page 15), draw the following scenes with pen or brush and ink:

- A. A door-to-door salesman giving his sales talk to a housewife at the door of a suburban house.
- B. A bum asking a handout from a business executive as he comes out of a downtown building.

IMPORTANT - Mark this sheet ASSIGNMENT 1.

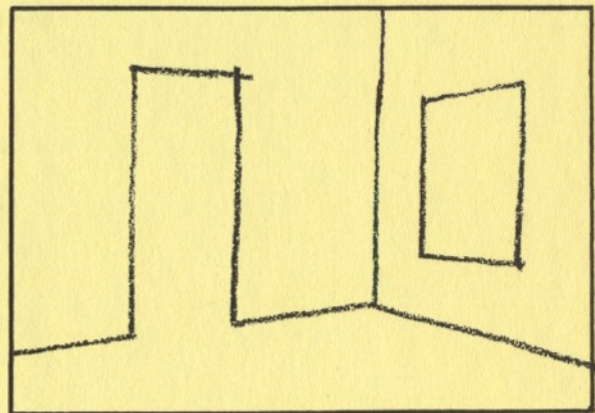


ASSIGNMENT 2

On another sheet of 11 x 14-inch Bristol board, construct two panels the same size as in Assignment 1. Using the layout sketch at the right for your basic drawing in both panels, draw with pen and ink the following scenes:

- A. A tenement-building interior, with a seedy-looking workman at a table, being served dinner by his wife.
- B. Using the same basic drawing, change the scene to show a society matron serving tea to an undernourished, poetic-type fellow.

IMPORTANT - Mark this sheet ASSIGNMENT 2.



Present your assignments in the same clean, professional manner you would use if you were submitting them to the cartoon buyer of a publication. Letter your name, address and student number carefully in the lower left-hand corner of each page. In the lower right corner, place the Lesson Number and Assignment Number. Mail to:

FAMOUS ARTISTS CARTOON COURSE
Westport, Connecticut