

INTRODUCTION

COMIC BOOKS ARE BRIGHT, COLORFUL, AND GRAPHICALLY BOLD—the perfect medium for pictorial storytelling, when covers serve as advertisements for their own purchase. DC Comics inaugurated the Golden Age of Comics in 1938 with *Action Comics* #1 and the debut of Superman, birthing the genre of the superhero. Over the decades, comic books mastered the art of grabbing the attention of shoppers browsing spinner racks with imaginative premises and promises of heart-racing peril. The tactic worked, as artists perfected simple yet eye-catching compositions while readers bought and enjoyed millions of comic books every month. For a period in the 1950s, with stories such as “The Bride of Jungle Jimmy” in *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen* #98 and “Titano the Super-Ape” in *Superman* (Vol. 1) #127, DC Comics seemed to strike gold every time it published a cover featuring a gorilla.

By the 1980s, the craft of designing comic book covers had matured into a fine art. The industry, however, had begun to experience the first tremors of a tectonic shift. For the first time since the birth of comic books during the Great Depression, buyers had begun forgoing newsstands in favor of specialty stores selling comics and nothing else.

It reflected the demographic shift of readers, who were now more likely to be adults with disposable incomes. DC Comics quickly recognized that its audience was changing and introduced a new level of maturity into its storytelling, while simultaneously launching a new initiative tuned to the sensibilities of savvy collectors: the variant cover.

Fans had increasingly come to appreciate comic artwork as genuine art, with comic book covers as the medium’s largest canvas. By publishing an issue available in two (or more) different covers, DC Comics could give more artists the chance to interpret a story or hero and give more fans the opportunity to appreciate it. Typically, the “regular” cover would receive wide distribution on newsstands, while the variant cover would appear only in limited quantities available from specialty comic book retailers.

The first variant cover appeared on issue #1 of DC Comics’ limited series *The Man of Steel* in 1986. The program was a runaway success, though the company chose to use variants sparingly in the following years, often to mark the launch of a highly anticipated new series. Each alternative cover wielded a fun, blank-canvas approach in the service of experimentation, and adding variant issues into comic book collections became a fun, engrossing pastime for completionists.

When the 1990s rolled around, a comic book boom led to an escalation of variant covers. Improvements in printing technology allowed visual and tactile wonders unheard of only a few years prior, including metallic treatments, holofoil, lenticulars, embossed lettering, and glow-in-the-dark highlights. By the end of the decade, the focus had shifted back to the illustrations themselves, and the industry’s artistic soul rebounded in the 2000s and soared in the 2010s. Variant covers became more common over time, appearing during regular series runs without the requirement of a buzzworthy #1 issue. Today, DC Comics regularly publishes entire months of variant covers that include dozens of titles, applying artistic themes across the lineup to delightful effect.

Mark Chiarello, DC Comics’ senior vice president of art, design, and collected editions, has been with the company since 1993 and has weathered the industry’s many changes. He has masterminded most of the themed variant months, enlisting many artists at once to execute a simultaneous line-wide release—celebrating a character’s legacy, for example, or experimenting with a superhero version of the newest pop culture obsession. These monthly themes are one reason why variant covers have become more widely available than ever.

“The challenge [with a variant] is doing something that has never been done before, which can be almost an impossible task,” explains renowned comic artist Jae Lee. “I have the highest ambitions whenever I start a cover, but sometimes you have to settle for whatever comes and hope that it works.”

Variants aren’t only a showcase for the imagination of illustrators. They are also an artistic expression of the legacy of DC Comics. Variant covers have explored the company’s eight-decade history, teaming its heroes with the likes of equally long-lived Looney Tunes characters and taking a look back at artists such as Neal Adams, whose comics output set the tone for entire publishing eras.

“We work so hard on these covers, so it’s fun to just walk into the comics shop and see them all lined up there on the rack,” says Chiarello. “My rule of thumb? When you create a product, it should always be something that you want on your own bookshelf.”

PAGE 2 **All-Star Batman** #3
October 2016
Jack

PAGE 4 **Superman/Wonder Woman** #11
October 2014
Tony S. Daniel (cover pencils),
Matt Banning (cover inks),
Tomeu Morey (cover color)

OPPOSITE **Man of Steel** #1
October 1986
John Byrne (cover pencils, inks)





OPPOSITE **Villains United #1**
 July 2005
 J. G. Jones

"For that particular cover, I was going for a look of 'assembling the guys for a caper movie' as if they were going to go and blow open the bank vault or something," says artist J. G. Jones. The six-issue *Villains United* series saw the baddies of the DC Comics universe take center stage. "The fun was in playing off those tropes," continues Jones, "but finding little things in their attitudes and postures to tell you that they're not really heroes. They're flipping the script on the whole thing."

LEFT **JSA Classified #1**
 September 2005
 Adam Hughes

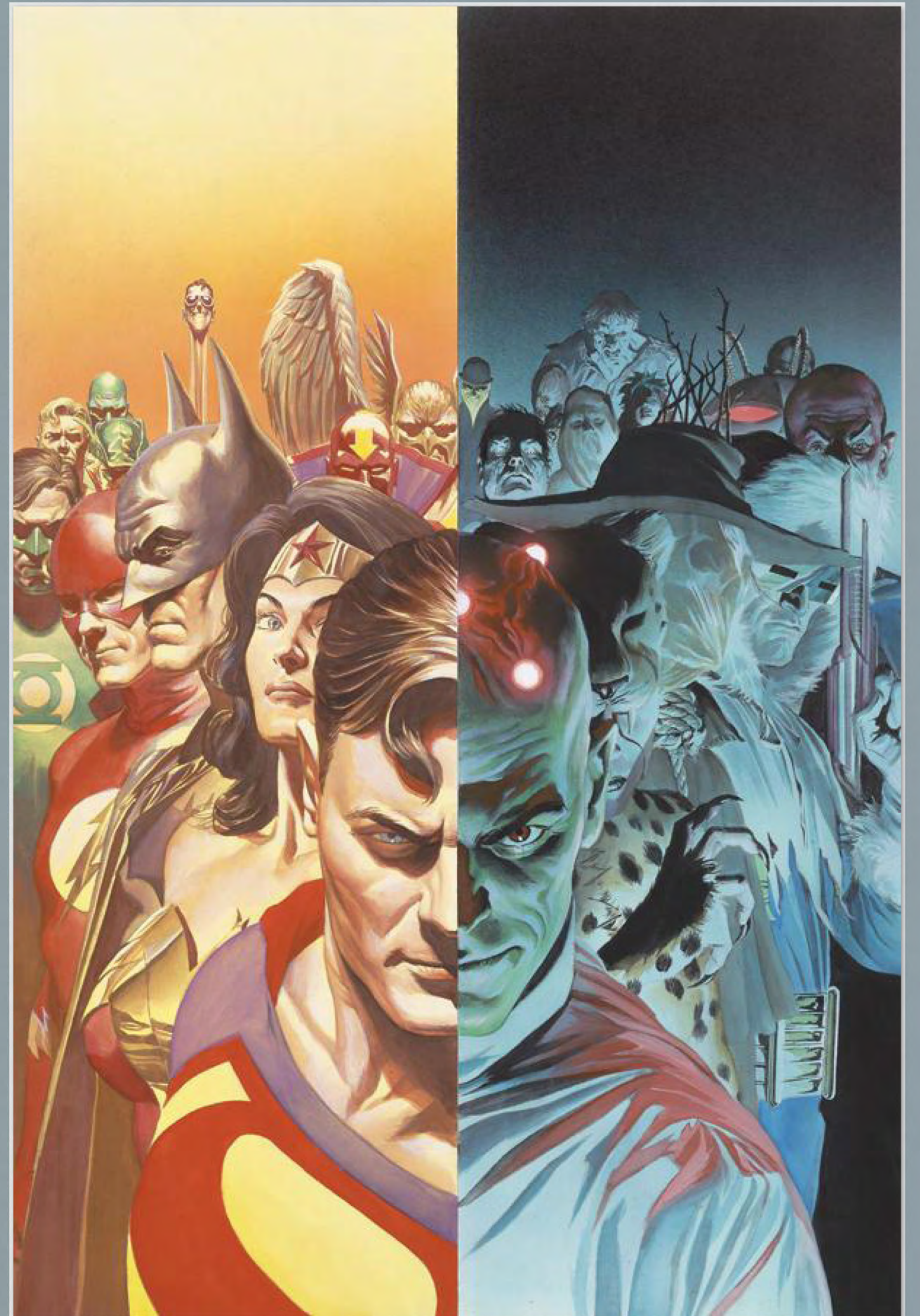
RIGHT **Teen Titans (Vol. 3) #27**
 October 2005
 Rob Liefeld (cover pencils, inks), Matt Yackey (cover color)
 Retailer Summit Variant Cover



LEFT **Justice #2**
December 2005
Alex Ross
2nd Printing Variant Cover

RIGHT **Justice #5**
June 2006
Alex Ross
2nd Printing Variant Cover

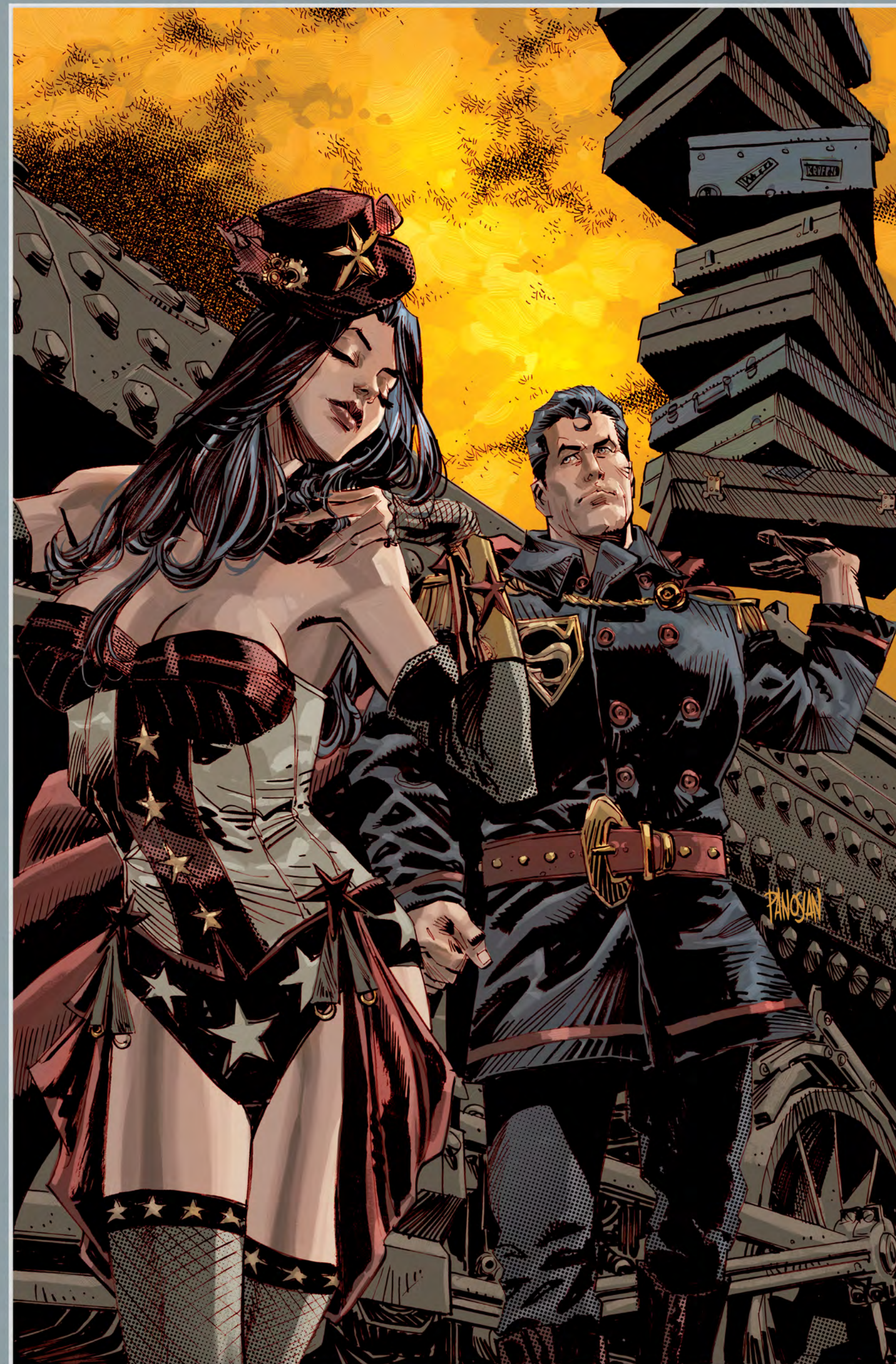
OPPOSITE **Justice #5**
June 2006
Alex Ross
3rd Printing Variant Cover





ABOVE **Batman/Superman #8**
 April 2014
 Tommy Lee Edwards

OPPOSITE **Superman/Wonder Woman #5**
 April 2014
 Dan Panosian





Darwyn Cooke—December 2014

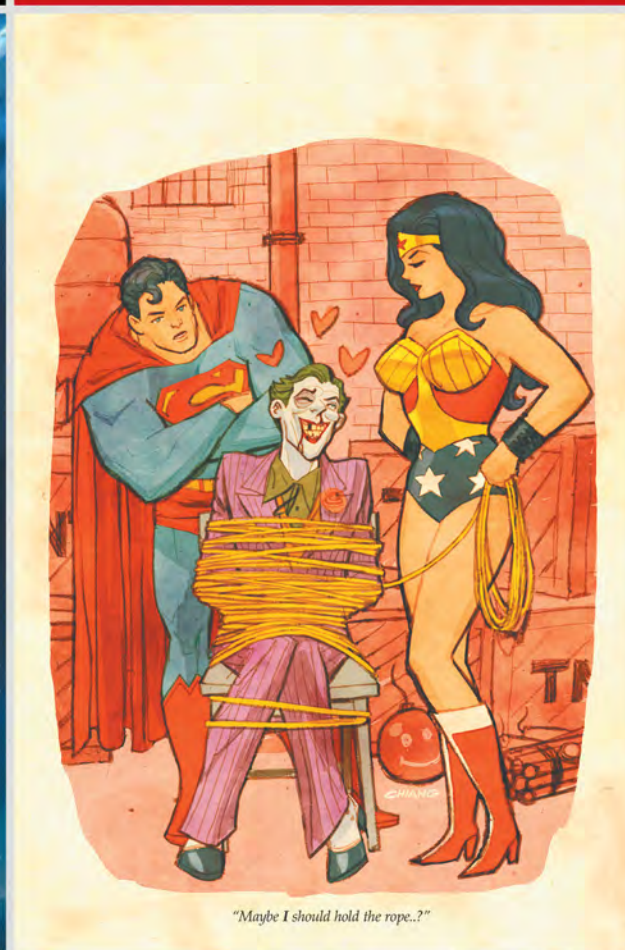
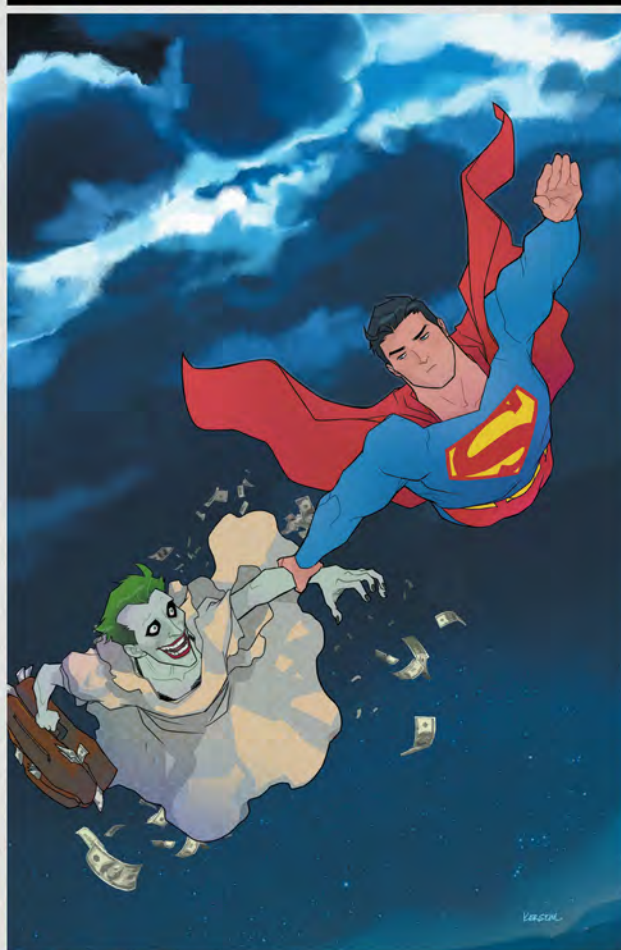
Award-winning artist Darwyn Cooke famously stripped superheroes to their essences, finding a way to capture their spirits through clean and simple line work that wore a timeless flair. He sadly passed away at the age of fifty-three in 2016, but he left his indelible mark on the DC Comics universe, with projects ranging from the 2001 *Catwoman* series to 2004's *DC: The New Frontier*.

"Darwyn was possibly the most talented person I've worked with in my twenty-five years at DC Comics," says Mark Chiarello, who in 2014 commissioned Cooke for a series of cover variants done in horizontal "widescreen" format, known in the industry as a wraparound cover. "He understood the iconic nature of our characters, and his covers were, by far, the biggest-selling variants we've ever done. Fans really connected with these, because he understood the dramatics behind every single one of our characters."

ABOVE **Supergirl** (Vol. 6) #37
December 2014
Darwyn Cooke

PAGES 56-57 **Teen Titans** (Vol. 5) #5
December 2014
Darwyn Cooke





TOP LEFT **Secret Six** (Vol. 4) #3

August 2015

Dan Jurgens (cover pencils), Danny Miki (cover inks), Alex Sinclair (cover color)

"The assignment I took on was to reflect the Joker and the Secret Six and to have fun with it," says artist Dan Jurgens. "I think I did three different sketches of different treatments and you depend on the editor to pick one that's different from anything that anyone else is doing. The emphasis is on the Joker, but that mask on the wall belongs to Catman, [and] by putting it on the wall, you have that level of implied violence. And at the same time, you have the Joker holding an old-school gun with a BANG flag, so you can have a little fun with it at the same time."

TOP RIGHT **Catwoman** (Vol. 4) #41

August 2015

Javier Pulido

BOTTOM LEFT **Superman** (Vol. 3) #41

August 2015

Karl Kersch

BOTTOM RIGHT **Superman/Wonder Woman** #18

August 2015

Cliff Chiang

"I was getting pretty stuck," says Cliff Chiang. "At that point, I'd done a couple Superman and Wonder Woman variants, and coming up with different ideas was difficult. But the idea of 'It's the Joker; let's do a gag' made my mind drift toward those classic *Playboy* cartoons and the work of guys like Jack Cole. A lot of those gags can be really sexist, but the fun was to play around with that and give Wonder Woman the respect she deserved. The Joker is smitten by her because of the lasso, and Superman is sort of lumbering over to see if he can help out. It was me wanting to have fun and to see if I could do a '60s gag illustration."

OPPOSITE **Wonder Woman** (Vol. 4) #41

August 2015

Brian Bolland

