

# *Mort Drucker, Master of the Mad Caricature, Is Dead at 91*

His illustrations of celebrities for Mad magazine's movie and television satires inspired countless cartoonists. Actors, politicians and others knew they had made it when he drew them.



By **J. Hoberman**

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Mort Drucker, a longtime contributor to Mad magazine known for his caricatures of actors, politicians and other celebrities, died on Thursday at his home in Woodbury, N.Y. He was 91.

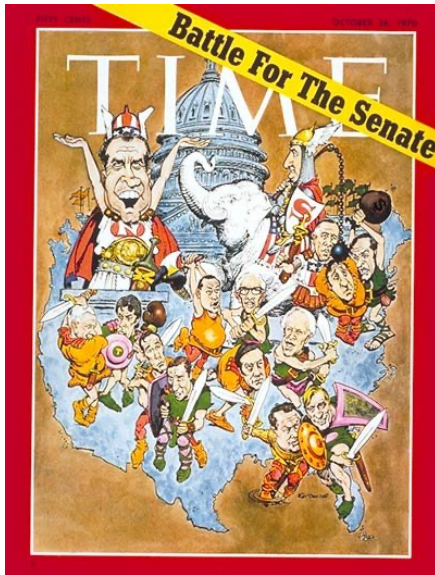
His death was confirmed by his daughter Laurie Bachner.

Mr. Drucker, who specialized in illustrating Mad's movie and television satires, inspired several generations of cartoonists. "To me, he's the guy," the caricaturist Drew Friedman said. "I used to imitate his work in Mad when I was a kid. I wanted to be Mort Drucker; I even loved his name."

Mr. Drucker's facility was best expressed in multi-caricature crowd scenes. His parody of the 1986 Woody Allen film, "Hannah and Her Sisters," opened with a panel depicting a Thanksgiving dinner that, in addition to most of the movie's ensemble cast, included caricatures of Mr. Allen's first wife, Louise Lasser; the film critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel; Mayor Ed Koch of New York; and Mad's mascot, Alfred E. Neuman. His drawing for a 1970 Time magazine cover, "Battle for the Senate," now in the National Portrait Gallery, featured a pileup of 15 individually characterized political figures, including President Richard

M. Nixon and Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. Mad's takeoff on the MGM retrospective feature "That's Entertainment," published in 1975, required Mr. Drucker to caricature more than two dozen stars.

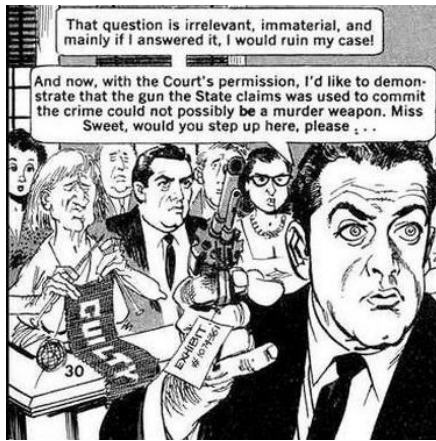
"I think I've drawn almost everyone in Hollywood," he told The New York Times in 2000.



Mr. Drucker's drawing for a 1970 Time magazine cover, "Battle for the Senate," is now in the National Portrait Gallery.  
Mort Drucker

Some of Mr. Drucker's most inventive works were double satires. The 1963 Mad piece "East Side Story," written by Frank Jacobs, is a parody of "West Side Story" as played out by prominent international figures. Nikita Khrushchev, Fidel Castro and Charles de Gaulle are among the many world leaders drawn cavorting against photographed backdrops of New York City streets. "It's a Blunderful Life," written by Stan Hart and published in 1996, updated "It's a Wonderful Life" to star Richard Nixon as Bill Clinton's guardian angel.

A self-taught freelance cartoonist who had worked on war, western, science fiction and romance comic books as well as personality-driven titles like The Adventures of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis and The Adventures of Bob Hope, Mr. Drucker came to Mad in late 1956, soon after Al Feldstein succeeded Harvey Kurtzman, the magazine's founder, as editor. Mad had run only occasional TV and movie satires, but Mr. Drucker's arrival "changed everything," the pop-culture critic Grady Hendrix wrote in a 2013 Film Comment appreciation of Mad's movie parodies.



A panel by Mr. Drucker from “The Night Perry Masonmint Lost a Case,” a takeoff on the television courtroom drama “Perry Mason,” published in *Mad* in 1959. It was then, one commentator wrote, that “the basic movie parody format for the next 44 years was born.”

“No one saw Drucker’s talent,” Mr. Hendrix wrote, until he illustrated “The Night That Perry Masonmint Lost a Case,” a takeoff on the television courtroom drama “Perry Mason,” in 1959. It was then, Mr. Hendrix maintained, that “the basic movie parody format for the next 44 years was born.”

From the early 1960s on, nearly every issue of *Mad* included a movie parody, and before Mr. Drucker retired he had illustrated 238, more than half of them. The last one, “The Chronic-Ills of Yawnia: Prince Thespian,” appeared in 2008.

Mr. Drucker compared his method to creating a movie storyboard: “I become the ‘camera,’” he once said, “and look for angles, lighting, close-ups, wide angles, long shots — just as a director does to tell the story in the most visually interesting way he can.”

Mr. Hendrix called Mr. Drucker “the cartoonist’s equivalent of an actor’s director” and “a master of drawing hands, faces and body language.” Mr. Friedman praised Mr. Drucker’s restraint: “He wasn’t really hung up on exaggerating. He was far more subtle and nuanced — interested in how people stood and so on.”

Morris Drucker was born on March 22, 1929, in Brooklyn. His father, Edward, was a businessman who repaired jukeboxes and ran a bar, among other things. His mother, Sarah (Spielvogel) Drucker, was a homemaker. He attended Erasmus Hall High School, where he met his future wife, Barbara Hellerman.

In addition to his daughter Laurie, he is survived by his wife; another daughter, Melanie Amsterdam; and three grandchildren.

Mr. Drucker began his professional career at 18 when, recommended by the cartoonist Will Eisner, a family friend, he got a job assisting on the comic book *Debbie Dean, Career Girl*. He also worked on a syndicated single-panel strip, “The Mountain Boys,” before finding steady work with National Periodical Publications, now known as DC Comics. He continued to freelance for DC even after joining *Mad*’s “usual gang of idiots.”

Working in a studio at his home in Woodbury, on Long Island, he also drew magazine illustrations, album covers, movie posters and advertisements.

Mr. Drucker was modest about his gifts. “When I started working for *Mad*, they assigned me TV satires and asked me to draw famous people,” he recalled. “So I just did it. It took me a long time to learn the skills I have, and it was time-consuming. With me, everything is trial and error.”

Mr. Drucker also illustrated children’s books and contributed to the vogue for adult coloring books, collaborating with the comedy writer Paul Laikin on “The JFK Coloring Book,” which sold hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of copies in 1962. Between 1984 and 1987, he collaborated on the syndicated newspaper strip “Benchley,” which revolved around a fictional assistant to President Ronald Reagan.

Reagan, whom Mr. Drucker once caricatured as the Godfather, Moses, Scrooge and a slaving Mr. Hyde in a 1982 *Mad* story, “Ronald Reagan — Now Starring at the White House,” written by Stan Hart, was evidently a fan of the strip and treated Mr. Drucker and his wife to a private tour of the White House. (There would be a Ronald Reagan coloring book as well.)

In 2015, Mr. Drucker was the first winner of the National Society of Cartoonists’ Medal of Honor for lifetime achievement. In 2017, he was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame.

Mr. Drucker not only satirized popular culture; he also became a part of it. Appearing on “The Tonight Show” in 1985, the actor Michael J. Fox told Johnny Carson that he knew he had made it in show business “when Mort Drucker drew my head.” The director Joe Dante wrote that “there are few thrills in life quite like seeing your own movie parodied in the pages of *Mad*.”

But not everyone was so pleased. According to Mr. Hendrix, *Mad*’s 1981 parody of “The Empire Strikes Back,” “The Empire Strikes Out,” prompted the Lucasfilm legal department to send a cease-and-desist letter demanding that the issue be recalled. “*Mad* replied by sending a copy of

another letter they had received the previous month — from George Lucas, offering to buy the original artwork for the ‘Empire’ parody and comparing Mort Drucker to Leonardo da Vinci.”

Mr. Lucas knew Mr. Drucker’s work well. He had commissioned one of Mr. Drucker’s classic multicharacter pileups as the poster for his first hit, “American Graffiti” — a nostalgic movie set in the same summer “The JFK Coloring Book” was a best seller. And, of course, Mr. Drucker had illustrated Mad’s sendup, “American Confetti.”

Julia Carmel contributed reporting.