Comics

The early twentieth century saw the rise of the modern comic strip, the comic book, and the artist’s book as distinctive forms of graphic narrative art that merged literary and graphic traditions into new modes of expression. As with literature more broadly, comics has ranged in quality and aims from the banal to the bizarre, from the blandly conventional to the wildly original. Their close association, from their very inception, with a network of advertising and commodity tie-ins has kept them at an uneasy distance from the anti-commercialist culture of high modernism. Yet the ubiquity of comics in newspapers internationally, and the often absurd, transgressive, and episodic worlds they depicted, ensured their interest to modernist writers and artists more widely.

Comic strips developed out of roots in the satirical genre of editorial and humour cartoons of the nineteenth century periodical, and in its unique invention of personified “funny animals,” drew as well from folk traditions of the trickster and the animal fable. They often explored subaltern class and ethnic life worlds not prominent in other modern arts, or offered flights of fantasy that directly challenged or therapeutically escaped from social norms. Early creative masters of the comic strip include Richard Outcault, who playfully explored modern society from the perspective of the New York slums and its signage-garmented denizen, the “Yellow Kid,” in *Hogan’s Alley* (strip from 1896), and the tension between the daimon of childhood and bourgeois conventionality in *Buster Brown* (from 1902); Winsor McCay, whose *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (from 1905) and *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* (from 1904) explored modern fantasies and repressions in a gorgeous and baroque art nouveau style, and who pioneered film animation; and Lionel Feininger, the cubist and Bauhaus painter, who briefly but successfully created syndicated comics beginning in 1906.

Among the many and diverse newspaper comics that flourished between the world wars, too many to do justice to here, were Cliff Sterritt’s nearly abstractionist *Polly and Her Pals* (from 1912), and the strip that most stood out for its idiosyncratic style, peculiar themes, and creative innovations, George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* (from 1913). *Krazy Kat’s* setting is a fictional Kokonino Kounty, loosely based on the Arizona desert and permeated with Navajo motifs, whose protagonist is the meditative optimist Krazy, a “kat” in love with a spiteful mouse, Ignatz who enjoys throwing bricks at her, and a dog, Offisa Pup, who enforces the law versus Ignatz. Modernist intellectuals and avant-gardists such as Gilbert Seldes, Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso greatly admired *Krazy Kat*, and the strip was adapted as a jazz ballet in New York in 1922. Among later innovative strips were Walt Kelly’s wackily satirical *Pogo* (from 1942) and Charles Schulz’s gently psychological *Peanuts* (from 1950). The American comic book was launched in 1939 with Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel’s *Superman* and was quickly followed by numerous other superhero comics and an explosion of genre comic books in crime, horror, and romance. Reacting against this industrialized genre, artists of the underground comix movement which began in the 1960s, such as Robert Crumb, returned to the aesthetic freedom of the 1920s and 30s comic strip artists for inspiration, as well as to the burlesque of Harvey Kurtzman’s *Mad* magazine (from 1952), for its openly transgressive sexual and satirical themes.

In Europe, comics in the modernist period comprised the *bandes dessinées* or BD of France and Belgium, the *tebeos* of Spain, and the *fumetti* in Italy. Before the protection and expansion of indigenous European comics industries in the 1960s, all are historically dominated by the success of Hergé, the pseudonym of Georges Remi, the Belgian creator of *The Adventures of Tintin* (strips and books from 1929). Tintin is a young journalist whose curiosity and nose for wrongdoing get him swept up into political and criminal plots around the world. Hergé is known for his process of background research for places and settings and his detailed, “clear line” style.

In concert with the developments of comics in the popular arts were the emergence of two genres produced outside the mainstream periodical and book markets, the artist’s book and the early graphic novel. The latter were narratives composed of black and white prints, normally speechless, such as Lynd Ward’s somberly expressionist *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932) and Laurence Hyde’s chiaroscuro story of South Pacific violence, *Southern Cross* (1951). The artist’s book is an avant-garde genre that typically employs a parataxis of words and images, sometimes in unique, handmade editions. The form was developed by European futurists, constructivists, and surrealists between the two wars, for example in the futurist collage books of Aleksei Kruchenykh, the enigmatic dream narratives of Max Ernst, and the calligraphic mysticism of Alexei Remizov.

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Three visual images

1. From George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, 8 July 1928. King Features Syndicate.

2. From Cliff Sterrett, *Polly and her Pals*, 27 February 1927. King Features Syndicate.

3. From Hergé, *The Calculus Affair*, 1956. Methuen/Casterman.