

Jason Nargis and Benn Joseph

# “From the Heroic to the Depraved”

## Mainstream and underground comic books at Northwestern University Library

In display cases on the grand third floor of McCormick Library, often graced by rare, first edition monographs and the longhand letters of historical figures, some primary color drawings of men in tights (and some in nothing at all) recently spent six months entertaining and educating the Northwestern University community. There is nothing like a comic book exhibit with an “explicit content” warning to get college students curious about library holdings. With

this show, curators Benn Joseph and Jason Nargis presented an overview of the history and scope of the comic book archive in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections.

From a 16th-century BC Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to contemporary minimalist Web-based comic *xkcd*, the interweaving of text and image has formed a powerful and unique form of communication and storytelling spanning millennia. Comics, or sequential visual stories, create a shared space of creation and comprehension, since it is the combination of the artist’s and the viewer’s imaginations that permits the

realization of the narrative. These artworks are also saturated with information documenting changing expressions of visual rhetoric and societal norms, with the themes, styles, plotting, pacing, and iconography all speaking to a particular cultural time and place.



Detail of Northwestern comics exhibit.

Comic books are one of the most effective and popular mass media of the 20th century, but the story of graphic, sequential art begins long before the first “funny pages” appeared in

American newspapers. McCormick Library’s exhibit “From the Heroic to the Depraved” focused predominantly on traditional comic books, but contextualized the origins of the art form through the 18th and 19th centuries with early examples of satirical broadsides, the “modern moral subjects” of William Hogarth, Blake prints, wordless woodcut novels, and more. As an easily reproducible, affordable, and

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accessible format, these works had significant social impact. The curators wished to showcase the quality and depth of the library's holdings, but also to delineate the progression of the form and the evolution of visual storytelling over time. Even without label text, the art can simply stand and speak for itself; comics are just fun and present visually arresting and dynamic scenes that can perhaps serve as a gateway into other parts of special collections and primary source materials.

This collection has a unique status at the McCormick Library as being the only archive initiated by a donation from an undergraduate. When religion major Juan Cole offered his 1,100 comic books to curator Russell Maylone in 1972, he could not have known what a snowball effect his gift would have. Within a year, four other donors had come forward, the collection had grown to 3,600 issues, and superstar comics creator and publisher Stan Lee was speaking at the dedication ceremony. While students would browse the collection as a break from their studies, the library also saw the comics as a legitimate research source. The works of popular culture contain a wealth of information about the society that created them. A scholar might focus, for example, on characterization of women, minorities, or communism over time. One professor recently included numerous comics portraying journalists in an exhibit on the profession; another assigned issues of *Fantastic Four* from 1966, in which the superhero "Black Panther" debuts in the jungles of Africa, to illustrate constructions of "blackness" in American culture.

The exhibit represented just a portion of the comic book holdings of the McCormick Library. With the collection approaching 25,000 items, donations continue to pour in, and the staff is working to fully catalog all issues. Alumnus Adam Beechen recently gave Northwestern the majority of his contemporary mainstream collection, totaling about 3,500 issues, with complete runs of many major titles and graphic novels. Joseph Lambert, a retiring chemistry professor at Northwestern, recently gifted the library a large run of comic book adaptations of classic literature containing some Gold Age and Plati-

num Age (pre-1938) comics. The library holds extensive runs of titles mostly from the Silver Age (approximately 1950–1970) of mainstream comics as well as the so-called "Underground Comix" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The *x* was included to differentiate these works from mainstream titles, and also to possibly hint at the X-rated nature of their content.

Our title holdings are unusually complete because the contributors were true collectors, though there are still some missing issues. Once the collection is completely cataloged, it will be easier to identify gaps and make acquisition decisions. Our comics archive is almost exclusively donation-based, so any purchases will have to fill a glaring hole. The catalog will also improve casual discovery and reading of titles, which we encourage since this is a "use" collection. Many of the comics in our collection, including *Amazing Spider-Man* #1, have been read many times.

With so many comics, and incomplete records, it was difficult to choose what to include in the exhibit. We began by reviewing the paper card catalog that existed for a good portion of the collection, and created lists of items to consider based on their age and genre. The underground titles had originally been a separate archive, so the several hundred issues making up this highly complete collection were easier to peruse. Limited exhibit space, and a huge scope, made for challenging and stimulating decisions.

Mention comic books to an average person and they are probably not going to think of a 15th-century illuminated Bible, but that is precisely where the "From the Heroic to the Depraved" exhibit begins. This *Biblia pauperum* (Paupers' Bible) is a reproduction of the Codex Palatinus Latinus 871 from the Vatican Library, and displays multiple bible scenes with vibrant color and action. The Paupers' Bible was a picture bible genre developed in the late Middle Ages, using sequential images and even speech scrolls (a precursor to our speech bubbles). Usually written in a vernacular language rather than in Latin, they were, despite the name, actually quite expensive. In these books the image was no longer subservient to the text, but occupied the center of the page and

bore an equal role in the telling of the tale. This is just one example of how the combination of images and written words has a long and powerful history of reaching, entertaining, and influencing audiences of all ages. While many years separate this Bible from *Batman*, the essential machinations of the art form are the same, and in the exhibit we briefly chart this continuity through the centuries.

Mainstream comics are commonly associated with the superhero genre, generally considered to have begun in 1938 with the debut of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman, in *Action Comics* #1. Numerous superheroes with similar powers soon followed: Captain Marvel, The Flash, Spider-Man, The Human Torch, and others. There is very little in our collection that is pre-1938, though we do have a few *Mutt & Jeff* compilations, as well as a number of "Big Little Books" from the 1930s, some of which chronicle the first appearances of Dick Tracy, a creation of Northwestern alumnus Chester Gould.

Comics often reflect wider elements of culture, such as when the United States entered World War II and superheroes were written into battles against Axis powers. In one of the library's issues of *Human Torch Comics*, the hero fights General Rommel in the Battle of El Alamein. Changes in society's moral climate are also reflected in comics, evidenced in the horror and true crime genres. The violence and gore of these stories were quite popular immediately following World War II, perhaps as a carryover of the horror of war, but by the mid-1950s, a censorship backlash essentially eliminated them.

In selecting the exhibit's mainstream material, we included as broad a cross-section as possible, while also highlighting some major events in comics history represented in our collection. It was important to strike a balance between items with a general "wow" factor and more substantive issues that fewer people were likely to have heard of. Some decisions were easy: we had *Amazing Spider-Man* #1, which of course had to be part of the exhibit. Other selections required more nuance: while we did not have *Woman in Red* (the first female superhero), we did have an issue of *Miss Fury* (the

first superhero created by a female cartoonist). Lacking either of the two issues of *Lobo* (the first African American character to headline his own comic, published by Dell in 1965), we included the January 1972 issue of *Green Lantern*, where DC Comics debuts their first African American superhero in a mainstream headlining role (i.e., the word *black* was not in the publication's title). The background research needed to make these decisions was one of the most enjoyable portions of the project.

Underground comix developed amid the counterculture turmoil of the late 1960s. Liberalized attitudes towards sex, drugs, music, and government informed the stories and characters of these stories, often presented with a prevailing sense of satire, sarcasm, or even paranoia. As it did for many elements of this new culture, the San Francisco Bay Area served as the cradle for the comix movement. There, leftist politics met private printing know-how (an effect of the music poster printing industry) allowing artists to professionally print small runs of their work. While they were absolutely a form of protest against the status quo and censorship, comix was also a brutally honest form of self-expression in an age when many were searching for a voice of their own. While the majority of comix contained highly sexualized fantasy images of women, leading to well-founded claims of misogyny, there was also a dedicated group of female artists and publishers promoting women's liberation through comix.

Comix found inspiration in many places, including the unauthorized, hand-drawn, pornographic renditions of popular comic book characters and celebrities known as "Tijuana Bibles." In the 1920s through the 1940s these short, paneled stories circulated widely and influenced many of comix' future stars. Horror and true crime titles in post-World War II America, mostly from EC (Entertaining Comics), were also central to the development of comix. The graphic violence, gore, and unflinching presentations of drug-use and other crimes prompted the U.S. Senate to hold hearings in 1954 investigating comics, after which the industry conservatively self-regulated through the Comics Code Authority. This code effectively

banned the “perverse” elements that would arise again in the late 1960s in works by comix artists such as R. Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, S. Clay Wilson, and Spain Rodriguez.

In representing underground comix in the exhibit, we again strove for a balance between displaying the “classics,” and highlighting the diversity of our holdings. Early and genre-defining titles such as

*Zap Comics*, *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, *Bi-jou Funnies*, and *Feds ‘N’ Heads* had to be present, but we also devoted a section to women’s liberation with *It Ain’t Me Babe*, *Wimmin’s Comics*, *Girl Fight Comics*, and more. The “perversity” of some of the material created a challenging curatorial situation in which we were cognizant of the centrality of sex, violence, and gore to the art form, and felt obligated to display that, but also did not want to have an unnecessarily grotesque exhibit. We showed representative examples of censorship-challenging art, but did not belabor the points, selecting less inappropriate pages when possible. The comix in the show were augmented by extensive holdings of other underground publications from the 1960s and 1970s, including newspapers, ’zines, and political pamphlets.

The exhibit also briefly follows the changing landscape of comix after a 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling allowed local governments to determine what they considered obscene. With retail outlets disappearing and revenue drying up, many titles and publishing houses folded. By the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a trend toward collaborative underground anthologies and more graphic design oriented work. The magazine *RAW* was a comic anthology with an

art and design focus, and included the serial publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* before it was combined into the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel. In the mid 1980s a convergence between underground and mainstream comics started to manifest.

Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* is an excellent example of the superhero genre imbued with dark,

psychological realism, a post-modern rhetorical structure, and cinematic, point-of-view imagery. Graphic novels have become recognized as a legitimate and unique form of high art, while

also sometimes appealing to low brow elements of slapstick, sex, and violence.

Comic books are central to the manner in which our culture makes sense of the contemporary world. We have become a highly image-oriented society, with ads, videos, and ubiquitous screens bombarding our senses—words and images inextricably intertwined. We are fluent in a vast language of iconography and visual allusion, often without realizing it, and our minds embrace fragmented narrative, moral ambiguity, visual foreshadowing, and the disjointed passage of time. The art form of sequential graphic art is responsible for teaching us much of this skill-set. How we fill the space between the word and the image illuminates how we perceive the world and reveals a lot about ourselves. Comics are not just stories that we read and view; they effectively form a world that we inhabit as participant authors and artists. From the heroic to the depraved, from Superman to the holocaust, comics are an integral part of today’s cultural imagination. ¶¶



Underground comix section of the exhibit.