

UP, UP AND AWAY

museings

What are comics? To some, they are entertainment. To others they are art. As graphic novels, they are read and enjoyed by children and adults alike. They serve as a graphic reflection of their times, and even as moral guides.

Comics, as a form of sequential art, are both interactive and intimate. Several generations, weaned on the amazing feats of costumed crime-fighters boasting powers that go beyond this world, grew up entertained and possibly influenced by the do-good morals of these compelling stories. Between the covers of comic books are timeless lessons on heroism, courage, determination, inspiration, imagination and sacrifice.

THE VERY FIRST COMICS

The earliest drawings in sequence produced by man are generally recognised as those on cave walls of the prehistoric period which generally depicted hunting scenes.

In Ancient Egypt, hieroglyphs narrated stories of daily life or religious rituals through their unique pictograms. Akhenaten, the father of King Tutankhamun, who ruled Egypt around 1350 BC, introduced drastic reforms which were unpopular amongst his subjects, who expressed their criticism by carving exaggerated, almost cartoon-like, features on some of the pharaoh's sculptures. Across the Mediterranean Sea, Greco-Roman culture also displayed a good selection of sequential drawings on ceramics and sculptures.

In their simplest form, caricatures, cartoons and comics are related as they have similar mediums of drawing and print. But there are subtle differences in their components.



DRAW AWAY!

The Rise of Comics and Superheroes



CARICATURES AND CARTOONS

The cartoon and comic drawings that are seen today are a far cry from their original forms. Cartoons in the traditional sense were full-sized drawings used as guidelines for oil paintings, ceiling frescoes, stained glass and tapestries. When art studios became less fashionable, the term cartoon took on another meaning to become a pictorial parody.

William Hogarth, an English artist, is often referred to as the father of the modern cartoon. Although there were others before him, it was his sharp observations and exquisite delivery of ridiculous human behaviour that other cartoonists emulated in the tradition of universal social satire.

This early form of caricature, a distorted drawing of a person that usually exaggerates his or her flaws and sometimes transforms the subject's head into that of an animal, was used to great comic effect. In 15th century Europe, this form of sketched mockery to ridicule obnoxious human behaviour culminated in some form of political cartoons.

In the middle of the 19th century, satirical and humorous periodicals started to appear in Europe. With better and cheaper printing techniques, political cartoonists moved from periodicals to newspapers and this ushered in the era of comic strips.

COMICS' EARLY YEARS

The Yellow Kid, created by Richard Felton Outcault in 1895, was the original comic strip and paved the way for later American strips. In Britain, comic strips also started to appear in newspapers with the introduction one of the most successful comic

strip heroes, Ally Sloper, in 1867.

From the early 1900s, American newspapers started to present adventure serials, especially in the superheroes category, in addition to humorous strips. Among these were the crime-busting detective Dick Tracy, created in 1931, and Flash Gordon, who blasted his way into fame a year later.

The birth of the superhero genre also led to the repackaging of the strips. Comics became a regular feature in daily newspapers and with ever increasing demand publishers realised that by folding the Sunday comic supplement in half twice and presenting it with a cover, the 32-page format, very much like the comic books of today, could be sold and not simply given free.

The Phantom (1936) was the first crime fighter to don a skin-tight costume and a mask. With World War II looming, public demand for heroic figures became more apparent and Superman came to the rescue. Publishers responded to the public's call and introduced new titles at a phenomenal rate. This hothouse situation produced talents such as Will Eisner (*The Spirit*), Bill Everett (*Namor the Sub-Mariner*), Charles Biro (*Daredevil*), Carlos Burgos (*Human Torch*), Fred Guardineer (*Zatara*), Paul Gustavson (*The Angel*), Tarpe Mills (*Devil's Dust*) and Jack Cole (*Plastic Man*).

More than any other time, the astonishing number of comics created during the 1940s earned it the title: The Golden Age of Comics.

BY CHUA MEI LIN
CURATOR, SINGAPORE PHILATELIC MUSEUM



PUBLISHERS JOIN THE LEAGUE

In the 1940s, publishers old and new joined the superhero fray. Hundreds of pulp heroes made their debut but many did not survive more than a few issues. Marvel Comics, one of America's leading comic book publishers, introduced the Sub-Mariner, Human Torch, Ka-Zar the Great, Jungle Terror, the Angel and the Masked Raider. Boosted by the success of Superman and Batman, DC Comics brought in a host of costumed superheroes such as The Flash, Hawkman, The Spectre, Hourman, Green Lantern and the Atom.

Joining the ranks of the superheroes in 1941 were Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel Junior. With the impending war, a slew of American flag-bearing figures such as The Shield, Eagle, Minute Man, Captain America, Captain Victory, the Unknown Soldier, Captain Courageous, Yankee Doodle answered the call for patriotism.

Around 1945, hero titles experienced a dip but publishers countered this with a shift towards women audiences in offerings such as *Miss Liberty*, *Miss Victory*, *Miss America* and *Miss Cairo Jones*. But with the war coming to an end, demand for hero titles languished. Interest in ordinary men took centre stage and along with this new themes like education, romance, cowboys, science fiction and crime became popular.

BRITAIN AND EUROPE

Over in the United Kingdom, a country with a history of excellent political satire, humour and adventure comics eventually became more popular. Unlike the US, British comics were produced weekly with anthologies of three to four page

strips. Dan Dare, although not strictly a superhero, became a fictional icon in the postwar years. He first appeared in the magazine *Eagle* in 1950 as a British space pilot for the Interplanet Space Fleet engaged in adventures where he confronts humanoid aliens.

On the continent, France and Belgium have a long history of applying art to express opinions, especially against unjust social causes. Compared to the US, France and Belgium produced a larger number of comics or *la bande dessinée* in relation to the size of their population.

Towards the end of the 1940s, when crime and horror themes started to gain more readers, parents became concerned about possible harmful effects on children. In 1954, Dr Frederic Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* suggested a link between comic books and juvenile delinquency and this sealed the fate for comics. Investigations and public hearings by a US Senate Sub-Committee resulted in the introduction of a self-regulating Comics Code Authority aimed at protecting the industry from government regulation. Comics, once a bastion for unhindered artistic creation, became shackled by restraints and publishers jumped off in droves.

SILVER – THE COLOUR OF REVIVAL

From 1956 to the 1970s, the comics industry enjoyed a revival. Superheroes and characters were either launched or reintroduced. Unlike the Golden Age, however, it was the appeal of individual heroes rather than the genre, that drew an audience.

Superhero comics sales peaked around the late 60s, which also saw the insur-

gency of underground "comix". These self-published titles were sold directly to specialist comics stores and dealers and their subjects reflected the counterculture and uninhibited expressions of youth in that turbulent decade.

With creator-ownership deals and self-publishing, more materials were produced for a mature audience dealing with themes such as crime and horror. Today, webcomics or online comics which started with a handful of titles in the early 1990s provide self-publishers with an easy access to a worldwide audience.

DRAWINGS FROM THE EAST

Manga in its simplest refers to Japanese comics which were known to have appeared in the 18th century. The earliest stories printed from woodblock carvings narrate folk tales, legends and history. Unlike their American counterparts, manga has traditionally been accepted as an art form and popular literature.

The creator of Astro Boy, Dr Osamu Tezuka (1928 – 1989) is regarded as the father of manga. Immersed in Japanese culture and influenced by America, especially the work of Walt Disney, Tezuka's style is easily recognisable – with exaggerated eyes, nose and mouth features.

Modern manga is an amalgamation of the early woodblock print and western drawing style. They are usually printed in black and white with the covers in full colour. Translated to English, titles like *Sailor Moon*, *Akira* and *Dragon Ball* were the early forerunners that have overcome cultural barriers and expanded into animation, games and merchandise.

