

From Hogan's Alley to the big wide world

The comic strip from its beginnings to *Le Monde diplomatique*

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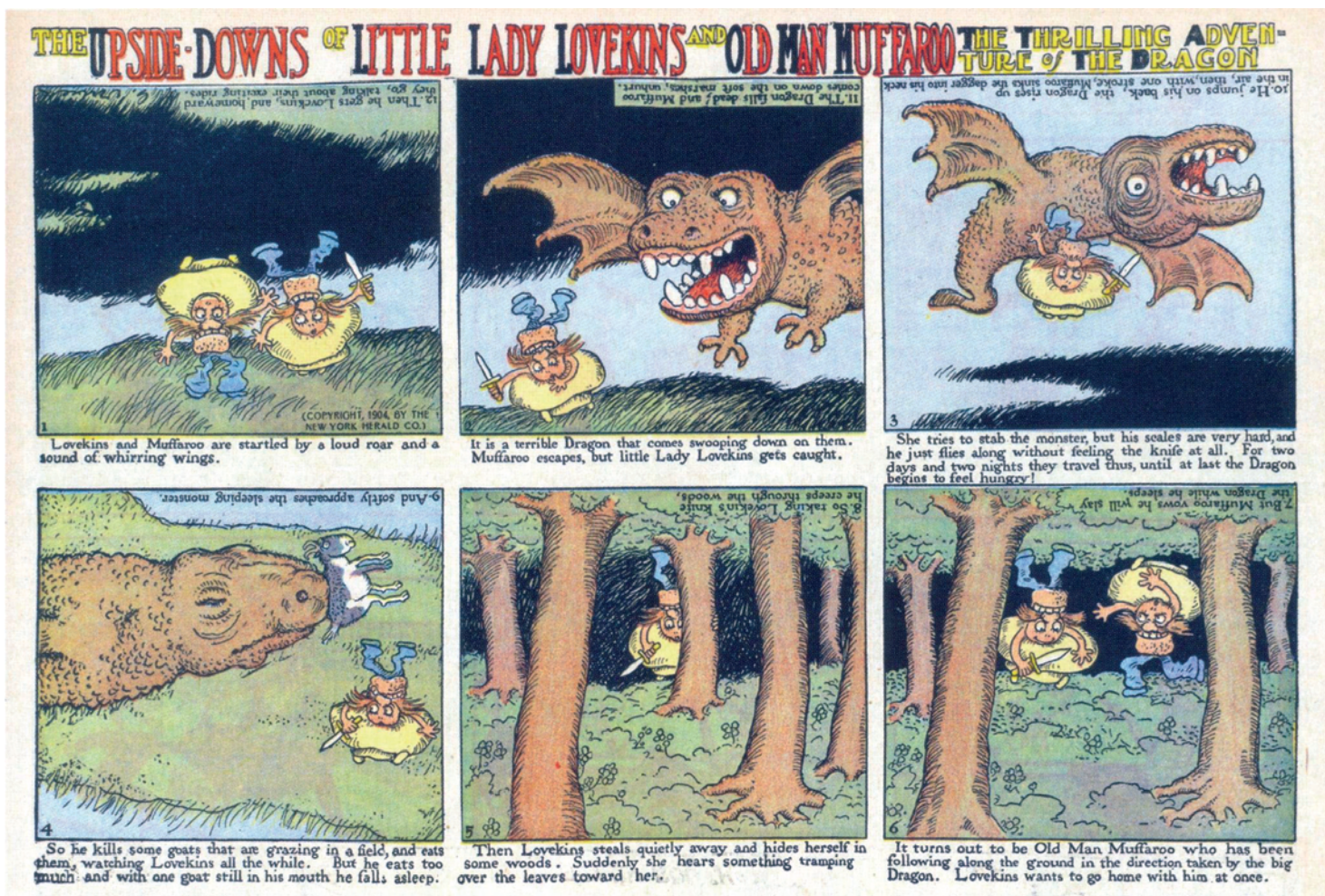
He just happened to pop up in the right place at the right time', declared Maurice Horn, the historian of comics, referring to the *Yellow Kid* – that grotesque bald-headed, flap-eared character created by the US cartoonist Richard Felton Outcault who, clad in nothing but a plain yellow night-shirt, regularly got up to no good in the pages of the *New York World* following his first appearance there on 17 February 1895.⁽¹⁾ This first appearance of the Yellow Kid in the Sunday supplement of Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper is generally regarded as having marked the birth of the modern comic strip – and hence also of the age of the so-called *Ninth Art*. Needless to say, this is pure myth, an endlessly regurgitated *origin story* – but at the same time it is also the story of a publishing stroke of genius that the editors and owners of vastly different newspapers and magazines right across the world still seek to emulate today as they sweat over their circulation figures – wanting above all, of course, like their predecessors in brash, up-and-coming New York, to bring a breath of fresh air to their pages and thus ensure the continuing loyalty of their readers. In reality the true history of the comic strip, that is to say of stories conveyed through a sequential series of images, extends much further back into the past. Depending on the standpoint or scholarly daring of the researcher, its origins are sometimes traced back to the Egypt of the pharaohs or the world of Greek and Roman antiquity; sometimes sought in mediaeval manuscripts, murals and carpets; or perhaps, in the case of those sticking more rigorously to the evidence, ascribed merely to the part-humorous, part-satirical output of writers and draughtsmen such as Rodolphe Töpffer or Wilhelm Busch.

These often spirited academic dog-fights are of little interest to us in the present context, however. Let us return instead to the melting pot that was New York at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and more specifically to *Hogan's Alley* and the murky back-street world – doubtless just as unsavoury then as it seems to us now – inhabited by Mickey Dugan, the ghastly *Yellow Kid*, whose deeply disrespectful thoughts on God and the world were emblazoned on his nightshirt in the now scarcely comprehensible back-alley slang of the period. These images in the newspaper – already printed in colour, by the way – have little in common with the comic strips that started appearing later on. They belong stylistically and thematically to the tradition of the cartoons already featured in satirical periodicals such as *Judge* and magazines like *Life* and *Truth*. As is well known, Outcault's own career as a cartoonist began in such outlets, but he owes his current renown to his work in the daily press with its far wider circulation. No wonder, then, that Joseph Pulitzer's fiercest rival, the publisher William Randolph Hearst, poached Outcault for his own *New York Journal* very soon after the plainly very successful debut of the *Yellow Kid* – doing so, of course, by offering him a substantially larger paypacket. From October 1896 onwards Mickey Dugan spouted his back-alley wisecracks in the Sunday edition of the *Journal*, while Pulitzer hired George Luks to carry on his own version of *Hogan's Alley*. Viewed from our vantage point today it seems scarcely credible that the first major copyright dispute in newspaper history – resolved in the end only through recourse to the courts – was triggered by a quite primitively put-together strip cartoon.

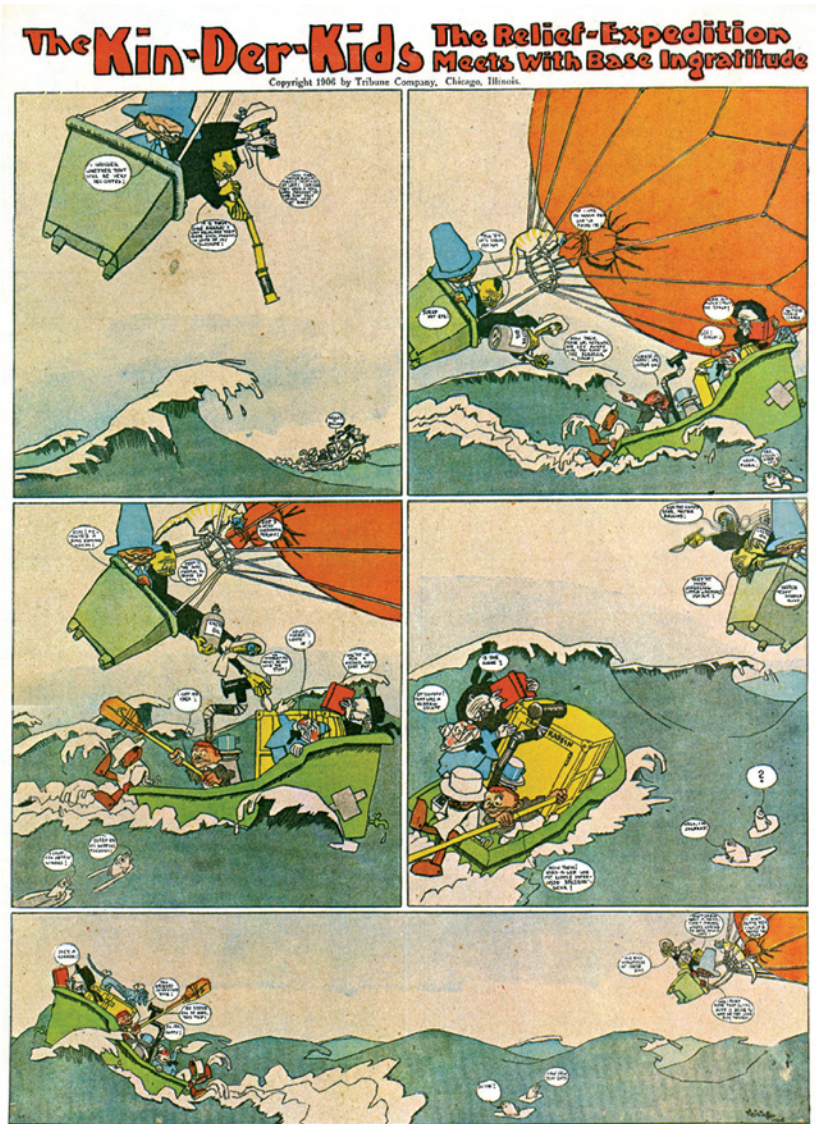
As is instantly clear from the very title of the cartoon, the *Yellow Kid* is indeed a child – but Mickey Dugan's antics and his comments thereon were by no means intended as edifying reading matter for his real-life peer group. Instead, both Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst were aiming their Sunday colour supplements primarily at an adult readership, a public hungry for sensationalism that they also sought to appeal to th-



Richard Felton Outcault: The Yellow Kid, New York Journal, 27. Dezember 1896



Gustave Verbeek: The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo, New York Herald, 8. Mai 1904



Lyonel Feininger: The Kin-Der-Kids, *Chicago Tribune*, 1906

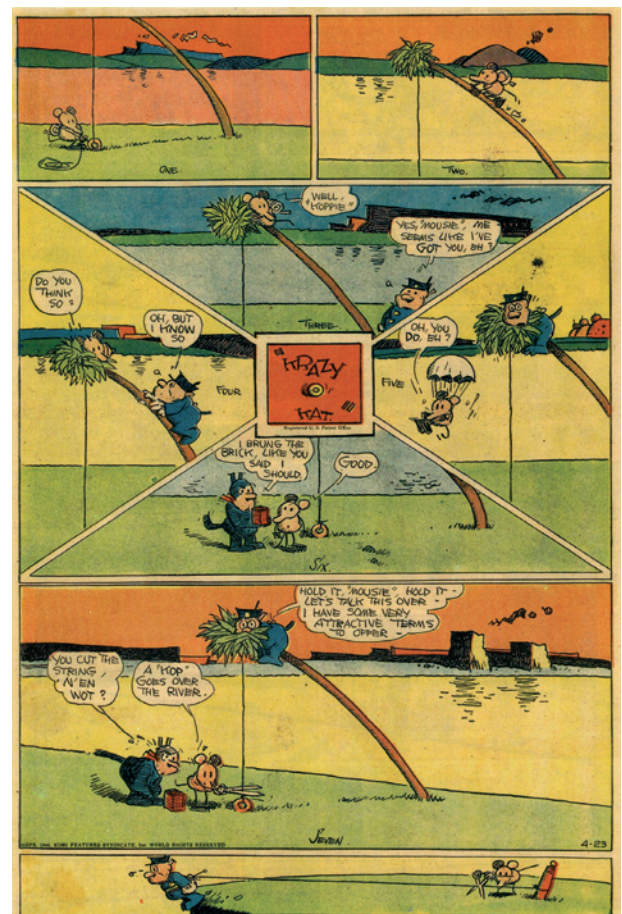
rough the luridly overblown reports that featured in their tabloids. This not only explains the choice of satirical topics in the cartoons and their visual complexity - a feature scarcely likely to appeal to the eye of a child; it also explains how the Sunday supplements of US newspapers were famously able over the following two decades to become a stomping ground for often extremely bold experiments in pictorial story-telling. Within the space of a few years skilled cartoonists such as Rudolph Dirks, Winsor McCay and Frederick Burr Opper created an immense store of comic strips that have since been long feted as classics of the genre - series such as *The Katzenjammer Kids*, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, or *Happy Hooligan*. Whether sketching their often thoroughly dubious heroes with cheeky abandon or delineating them with finicky Art Nouveau-inspired aestheticism, they sent them off week after week to the battleground of the newspapers to fight for their readers' favour - always, of course, under the watchful eye of the papers' owners, concerned as they were about their reputation and, more particularly, their circulation figures and hence also their bank balance.

Creative experiments and the mainstream

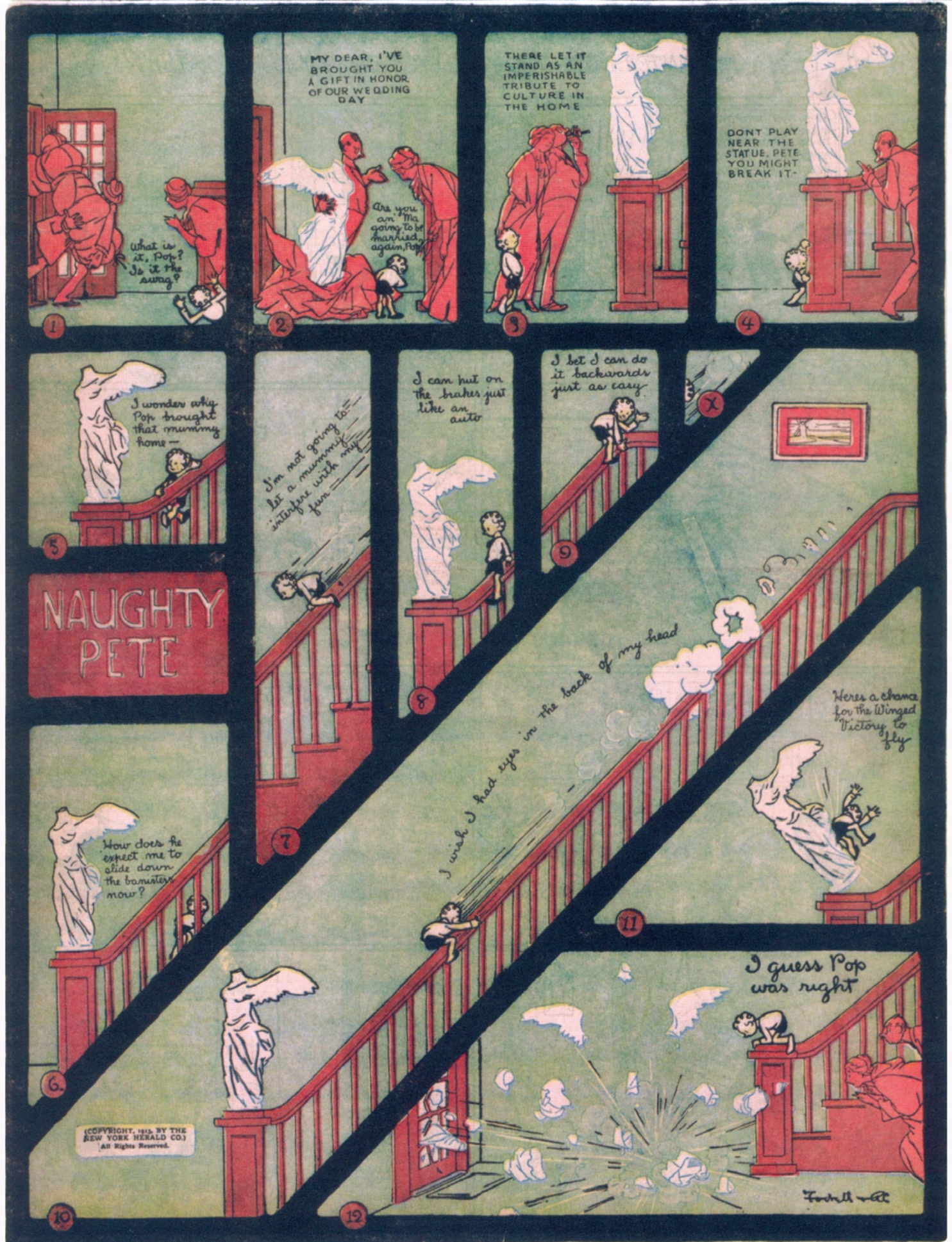
The aesthetic variety and radicalness of the early comic strips in US newspapers still comes across as astonishing even today. They plainly borrowed to some extent from European models such as Wilhelm Busch and Karl

Pommerhantz, however, and didn't even shy away from blatant plagiarism, as evidenced for instance by Dirks' snotty-nosed Katzenjammer Kids Hans and Fritz, who would surely never have seen the light of day if it hadn't been for their German predecessors Max and Moritz. Indeed Pommerhantz, one of the stars of the *Meggendorfer-Blätter*, actually worked directly for the US market in 1906 when he was unceremoniously hired by the *Chicago Tribune* for its Sunday supplement. Incidentally, his colleagues at that time included not only Lothar Meggendorfer but also Lyonel Feininger, subsequently one of the great Bauhaus masters, who dreamt up the comic strips *The Kin-Der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie's World* for the *Tribune*.

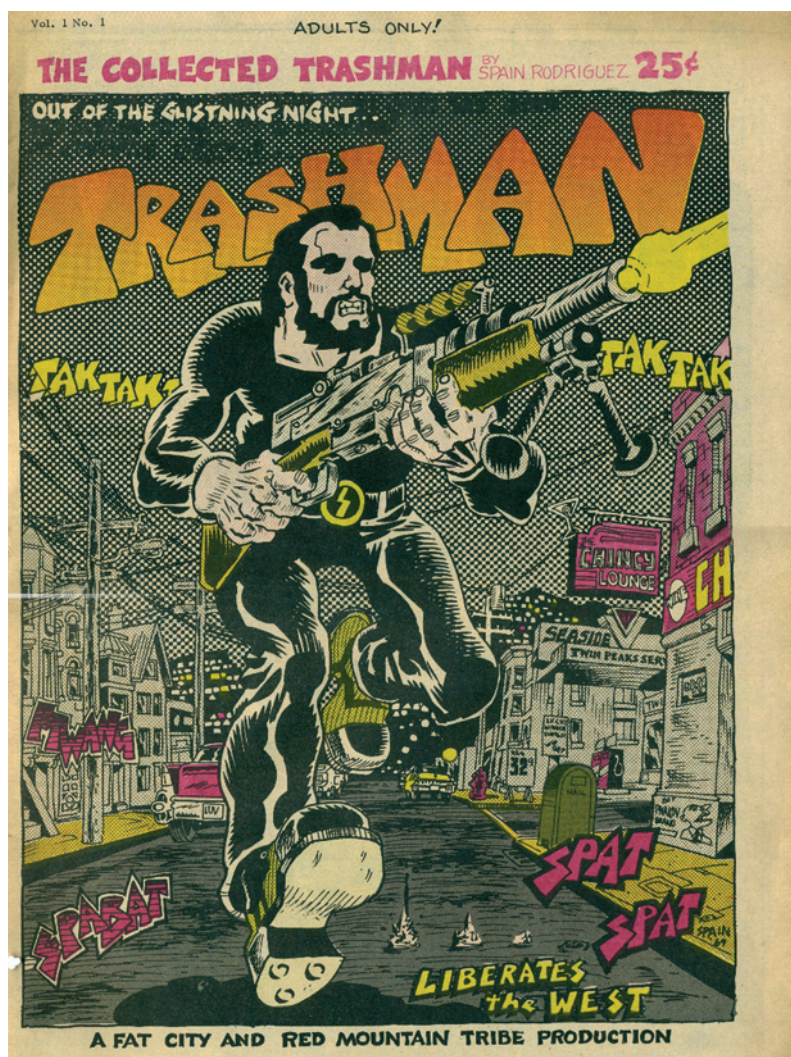
Further high points in the early history of the comic strip include the anarchistic escapades featured in the *Krazy Kat* series begun by George Herriman in 1910, and the racy Expressionistic razzmatazz of *Polly and her Pals*, created by Cliff Sterrett two years later. While these particular strips are still highly esteemed today, and re-issued again and again in carefully produced reprints, many innovative splendours of early comic-strip art have unfortunately slipped into total oblivion. In his recent book *Art Out of Time* Dan Nadel has given us a vivid insight into the many forgotten treasures crying out to be re-discovered.⁽²⁾ Thus for instance this anthology of work by unfamiliar visionaries of the genre includes a section on the absurdist comic strip *The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo*, drawn by Gustave Verbeek for the *New York Herald* from 1903 to 1905. In this case the full sense of each strip could only be gleaned by first reading it in the normal way, then quite literally turning it upside down and getting the rest of the story by looking at the pictures in reverse order. Another figure now largely forgotten is Charles Forbell, whose short-lived series for children, *Naughty Pete*, appeared



George Herriman: Krazy Kat, *New York Journal*, 1944



Charles Forbell: Naughty Pete, Los Angeles Sunday Times, 16. November 1913



Spain Rodriguez: The Collected Trashman, Special edition of *The Berkeley Tribe*, 1969

going. Thus for instance in the 1930s e.o.plauen (Erich Ohser) and Barlog regularly drew their strips - Vater und Sohn and Die 5 Schreckensteiner - for the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung. After the war, too, there were numerous examples of wholly German comic strips; one only has to think for instance of Cefischer's cat Oskar in the Frankfurter Illustrierte, Reinhold Escher's Mecki in the TV magazine Hörzu, Manfred Schmidt's Nick Knatterton in Quick, or Roland Kohlsaats Jimmy das Gummipferd in Stern. Then as now, however, the majority of strips published in German newspapers and magazines are translations of American, and occasionally British, originals.

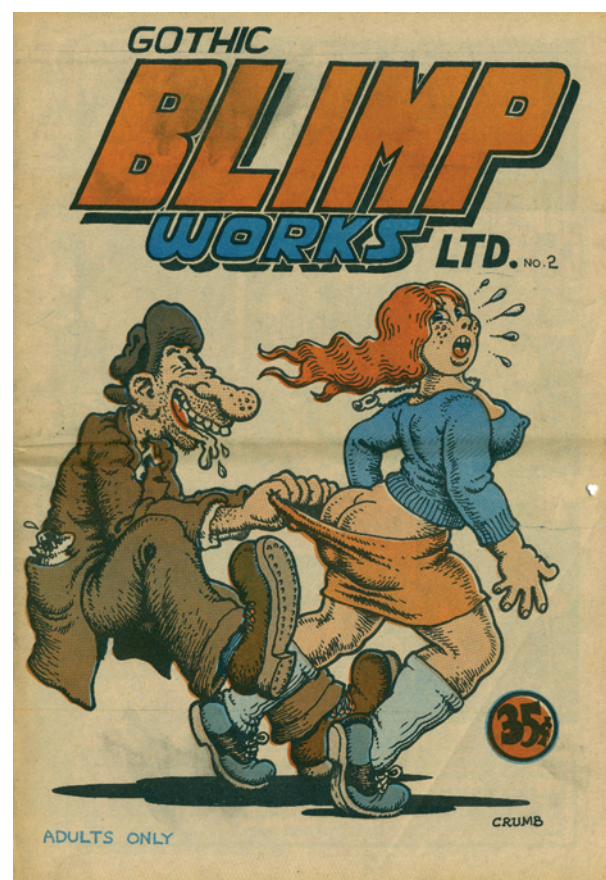
The underground and indie scene

A new chapter in the history of the comic began in the US in the second half of the 1960s. With Robert Crumb as their driving force a group of young artists began to ignore the notorious *Comics Code* agreed in 1954 by the majority of US comic book publishers whereby they undertook to ban the depiction of cruelty or of any sexual activity that was even mildly titillating, let alone pornographic, and to ban references to drugs or to race conflict. Self-published *underground* comics now started to appear in California, and spread rapidly in the relevant subculture thanks to their provocative flouting of taboos and their (left-wing) political themes. As a result they soon began popping up in the form of supplements in alternative newspapers such as Berkeley Tribe with its Trashman by Spain Rodriguez, or Eastvillage Other with its Gothic Blimp Works, which included contributions by the likes of Robert Crumb, Simon Deitch and S. Clay Wilson. The naked aggressiveness and provocative humour of these underground comics meant that the burning issues within the subculture and within the world of alternative politics rapidly entered the awareness of

in 1913 and contained some of the most sophisticated full-page layouts in the entire history of comic strips.

The subsequent trajectory of the comic strip in US newspapers is well known. After initially consisting mainly of adults, the pool of devotees attracted more and more children and other youngsters, and their needs and expectations had an ever increasing impact on both the form and the content of the genre. Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon zoomed off into the infinitude of space on fantastic adventures; Tarzan and The Phantom took their readers into exotic jungle settings; Prince Valiant transported them to the fabled realm of the heroic middle ages; Dick Tracy and Rip Kirby went in merciless pursuit of criminals in the darkest depths of gangster cities such as Chicago and New York. In addition to these realistically drawn comics there were - and indeed still are - any number of humorous and satirical strips. But even such popular series as Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts, Jim Davis's Garfield or Bill Watterson's Calvin and Hobbes can't begin to compete with the radical and innovative aesthetic of their predecessors at the beginning of the twentieth century. In their case the experimental creative impulse that gave many of the early comic strips their special appeal has long since given way to a mode of drawing and story-telling which for all its high-level craftsmanship often threatens to turn into mere routine.

Compared to the history of US comic strips, the history of the genre in German newspapers and magazines has thus far received insufficient attention. But in this country, too, there has been a long and multi-faceted tradition of pictorial story-telling that can be traced back at least as far as Töpffer and Busch, and which is still on-

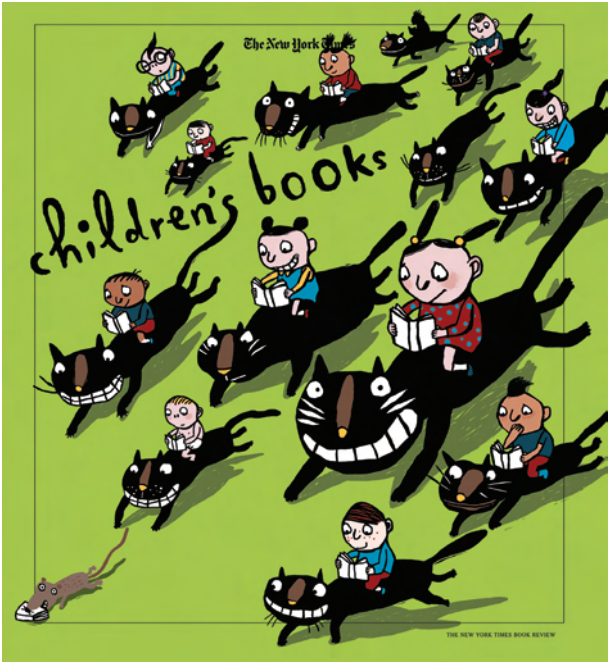


Robert Crumb: Gothic Blimp Works Ltd. No.2 (cover), supplement of the *The Eastvillage Other*, New York, 1969

the broader public, and even ended up affecting the actual appearance of the established press and other media. This soon led to the alternative comic scene becoming international, a process in which Art Spiegelman played a major part with his magazine RAW. The crucial elements in this greatly enlarged world of the comic were no longer brilliant draughtsmanship or adherence to traditional themes, but self-reflection, fresh ideas for changing society, and - not least - a hefty dose of cultural pessimism.

During the early part of the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, US imports by artists such as Crumb, Rodriguez and Gilbert Shelton (The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers) also largely dominated German-language underground publications and the left-wing and alternative press. However, a whole cohort of young German cartoonists and comic artists rapidly followed in their footsteps, including Gerhard Seyfried with his anti-police cartoons in Munich's Blatt, Fuchsi (Peter Fuchs), whose Zorro wielded his rapier in Berlin's Tageszeitung (Taz), and Volker Reiche, who campaigned with burlesque humour against the Biblis nuclear power station in Hinz & Kunz, and whose Strizz now philosophises away in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. This meant that in Germany, too, the mainstream comic tradition was infected by the *alternative* virus. Starting in the 1980s, even the venerable Die Zeit, published in Hamburg, has repeatedly offered its readers more or less far-out picture stories, such as the peculiar space adventures of Captain Star by Britain's Steve Appleby, and Art Spiegelman's strip-cartoon series In the Shadow of No Towers. It is precisely this part-autobiographical, part-reflexive treatment of the terrorist onslaught of 11 September 2001 that systematically re-deploys the narrative structures and the aesthetic of the early experimental US comic strip.

The Paris newspaper Libération, and the New York Times with its Book Review - long characterised by its use of drawn and painted illustrations, are just two examples of the considerable number of national and international magazines and newspapers that still draw heavily both on the early comic-strip tradition and on



Nadia Budde, cover of the Book Review, supplement of the New York Times, November 2008



Henning Wagenbreth: Festivals, Cover of a supplement of the Libération, Paris, 1999

the aesthetic gains of the underground revolution of the 1960s. For their artistic design work they mainly and quite deliberately engage artists from the indie scene of the past three decades. And these are precisely the people who have been enlivening the back page of Le Monde diplomatique with their innovative illustrations and picture stories ever since 2005. Here, stars of the German alternative comic scene such as ATAK, Anke Feuchtenberger and Henning Wagenbreth rub shoulders with professional graphic designers, illustrators and picture book authors like Nadia Budde, Katia Fouquet and Volker Pfüller - a notable doyen in the field. Their creations certainly don't have much in common with the graphic techniques or narrative procedures of the classic comic tradition. Instead, they are located right on that intersection between high art and trivialist culture that has become so to speak the trademark of the visual arts in the post-modern era. Stylistic eclecticism, the decidedly excessive inclusion of all manner of quotations, and above all the unrestrained, irreverent use of the full range of graphic possibilities now available: these are the key elements in their creation of today's images and stories - a mode of creation that clearly yields very readily to the fascination exercised by the trivial picture-world of comics.

1) Maurice Horn, 100 Years of American Newspaper Comics (Avenel, New Jersey, 1996), p.399.
2) Dan Nadel, Art out of Time. Unknown Comic Visionaries, 1900-1969 (New York, 2006).