

Comic Strips – Serious Business: A History

As the precursor to modern comic books, the comic strip and its history have had a massive impact on not only how the popular medium has developed as we know it today but on society and culture over the course of time. Humankind has been communicating its thoughts and ideas pictorially since before it developed written language. Visual narratives were employed in telling stories for thousands of years, yet a significant breakthrough in the medium developed in its adaptation of expressing social and political commentary, often by satirical means. These cartoons forever changed the way in which the masses have been able to engage with important issues, particularly through their ease of access for the illiterate and destitute. In articulating the impact of the comic strip, particularly in North American culture and society, it is important to understand its etymology and chronology, issues of accessibility and censorship, and topics frequently expressed through the medium that have pervaded over the course of history.

While we know that a comic strip is an arrangement of images used to convey a message or story, there are a number of terms and synonyms that often refer to the same form. “Cartoon,” “strip cartoon,” “comic weeklies,” “comics,” “the funnies,” and “Sunday funnies” are some prominent examples. “Cartoon” is the oldest-dated of the bunch. From the Italian word for heavy paper, it referred to the preliminary layout stage in which Renaissance artists would roughly establish their fresco compositions prior to painting.¹ The term was later employed in its present context in the July 15, 1843 issue of the British magazine *Punch*, in reference to satirical political drawings collected as *Mr. Punch’s cartoons*.² “Cartoon” has also been used to disambiguate

¹ Constable, *The Painter’s Workshop*, 115.

² Harvey, “How comics came to be,” 27.

single from multiple panel comic strips, as a single panel is clearly not a strip in the same sense as a series of panels. “Strip cartoon” (and “cartoon strip”) developed as a popular British variant of the previous term.³ “Comics” derives from the Sunday supplement inserts of popular newspapers of the 1880s, such as the *New York World*, that included humorous articles and drawings that came to be known as “comic weeklies,” or “comics” for short.⁴ “The funnies” and “Sunday funnies” were similarly popular terms that were particularly prominent in the early 1900s.⁵

Although the term “comic” has persevered as an epithet that represents the medium as a whole, its implications are problematic and have nurtured criticism on the literary merit of the art form. Of course comedy is inherent in the nature of the word, and such was largely the nature of the medium’s primary discourse. One of the earliest recorded examples of humorous caricature was the portrayal of an overweight man with an oversized nose at Tassili n’Ajjer in Africa, from 4000 BCE, which “must have enlivened the perilous days of those Stone Age people.”⁶ Ancient Egyptians were perhaps the first to use one picture to satirize another and to employ anthropomorphization in order to further exaggerate their comedic drawings.⁷ And Benjamin Franklin, widely considered the first American cartoonist, is known to have advocated cartoons, saying, “Pieces of pleasantry and mirth have a secret charm in them to allay the heats and tumults of our spirits and to make man forget his restless resentments.”⁸ However, comics have always been (and continue to be) as equally non-humorous as their comedic counterparts, as the soon-to-follow chronology will indicate. Although visual narratives such as the Bayeux Tapestry

³ Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, 1.

⁴ Harvey, 36.

⁵ Walker, *The comics since 1945*, 6.

⁶ Robinson, *The comics*, 14.

⁷ Robinson, 14.

⁸ Robinson, 20.

of the 1070s have existed to simply portray significant events of the times, the medium, as early as the 1800s, produced a distinct segregation into the two primary genres of politics and humour.⁹ And in the 1920s, the personal tastes of leading publishers Joseph Patterson and William Hearst for adventure and realism and fantasy and humour respectively, helped to further solidify the diversity of genres and subjects of focus within the medium.¹⁰

In order to best appreciate the modern comic strip, the issues it confronts, and the topics it is apt to address, a look at its chronology is in order. As we have discovered with the prehistoric caricatures of Tassili n'Ajjer, the comic strip was pervasive even in ancient times and many further examples can be found in the civilizations of Egypt, Rome, and Greece. While the hieroglyphic script of the Egyptians in itself can be considered a manifestation of the comics medium, temples, palaces, and tombs were frequently decorated with mural narratives such as in the tomb of Menna, circa 1200 BCE.¹¹ In Rome, Trajan's Column recounts the Roman conquest of Dacia in 106 CE through intricate and extensive relief engravings.¹² Additionally, the buried town of Pompeii provided evidence of mural narratives on the walls of almost every home, purporting the centrality of the medium in ancient Roman culture. The Greeks, in addition to producing frieze sculpture similar to the Column, had a penchant for expressing their visual narratives through painted pottery, such as the Corinthian *Chigi olpe* from the 600s CE that depicts a lion hunt and the Judgement of Paris, prince of Troy.¹³ It is notable that the portrayal of

⁹ Robinson, 21.

¹⁰ Robinson, 81.

¹¹ McCloud, *Understanding comics*, 14.

¹² Kleiner, *Gardner's art through the ages*, 185.

¹³ University of Oxford, "Chigi olpe."

gods and goddesses was a particularly popular subject – the adventures of Hercules were perhaps the first visual narratives of a superhero.¹⁴

Following a rich world history of visual narratives, the Middle Ages witnessed a significant increase in caricature and satirical illustration and relief sculpture, both secular and religious, depicted in many ways, often of an extremely immodest nature. Church carvings and engravings were rife with perverse subjects such as nudity in school boy whippings, sexual relations between monks and nuns, depictions of homosexuality, monkeys dressed as bishops, and caricatures of the devil.¹⁵ These narratives were considered so risqué that later church administration during the Enlightenment physically altered them, such as in the Reims Cathedral in France.¹⁶ Political and social commentary via cartooning became a popular means of expression, often unrestrainedly. Martin Luther vehemently criticized the Pope and papacy, in one example portraying the former with the head of a donkey in the early 1500s.¹⁷ This isn't to say that cartoons and comic strips of the time were purely outrageous. Illuminated manuscripts and illustrated devotional books, such as books of hours and psalters, were generally more wholesome and of a less critical nature. The massive, 230-foot Bayeux Tapestry of 1077, widely considered an early form of the comic strip, is a colourful narrative that simply recounts the events of the Norman invasion of England.¹⁸

The 1500s saw the rise of mass distribution of the cartoon following the production of woodblock picture books in the early 1400s and the addition of movable type in 1436 that

¹⁴ Robinson, 14-15.

¹⁵ Robinson, 15.

¹⁶ McDonald, *Medieval obscenities*, 36.

¹⁷ Parton, *Caricature and other comic art*, 77.

¹⁸ Robinson, 15.

allowed large amounts of text to be more easily incorporated with image.¹⁹ These early precursors of the newspaper came in the form of prints, broadsheets, and newssheets (the first of which was England's *Weekly Newes*, in 1622) and were the vessels through which artists such as William Hogarth (*The Harlot's Progress*, 1731), Francisco Goya (*Caprichos*, 1799), and Gustave Dore (*Paradise Lost*, 1866) were able to garner wide-spread audiences for their multi-part narratives.²⁰ A myriad of staple conventions of the modern comic strip developed in this era: Thomas Rowlandson is credited with greater proliferation of the speech balloon and his *Tours of Dr. Syntax* (1812) (although it had existed since the 1300s) and featured perhaps "the first regular cartoon character,"²¹ Dore introduced the technique of speed lines to indicate movement in a still image, and early filmmakers such as Orson Welles credited cartoonists with creating the illusion of time through a sequence of panels.²² In addition, the framed panel was also in use as of the 1600s.²³

Finally finding its way to North America, the comic strip was christened in the United States with Benjamin Franklin's single panel "Join, or Die" on May 9, 1754, which, as the title suggests, helped encourage the American British colonies to join forces and eventually declare independence from Britain just over two decades later.²⁴ And while Franklin is credited as the first American cartoonist, almost a century later, in 1827, a man by the name of Rodolphe Topffer began to illustrate picture books in Switzerland that would later garner him the title of the father of modern comics in his pioneering of works interdependent in word and image.²⁵ This period witnessed the first publication of a political cartoon in a modern newspaper in 1814;

¹⁹ Robinson, 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bell, *Pictures and words*, 68.

²² Robinson, 19.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation, "Join, or die."

²⁵ Kunzle, *Father of the comic strip*, x.

however, their dissemination did not escalate until the 1870s and 80s, particularly with a cover feature of Walt McDougall's *The Royal Feast of Balshazzar* in the *New York World* in 1884.²⁶ Contributing to this expansion of the art form, humour magazines such as *Puck* (1871) emerged in response to popular demand for the material produced in cartoons and comic strips.²⁷ It was also during this pivotal time that the term “yellow journalism” was coined in reference to a media war in the 1880s and 90s between publishing giants William Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer over the talent and fame of cartoonist Richard Outcault and his character the Yellow Kid.²⁸ It was Outcault's serialized *Hogan's Alley* that featured this iconic protagonist and serendipitously became the first colour comic strip in a newspaper (widely considered the first modern comic strip), heralding an era that would produce works such as *Krazy Kat* and *The Katzenjammer Kids* and in turn inspire classics with which we are familiar today: *Peanuts*, *Doonesbury*, and *Calvin and Hobbes*.²⁹

Having established an understanding of the history of the comic strip, including individuals and factors that have contributed to the development of the medium as it exists in the present, two prominent issues – accessibility and censorship – can now be more effectively examined from a relevant and informed perspective. First, accessibility: it is a commonly accepted belief today that comics in any manifestation (cartoon, strip, or book) are a less legitimate form of literature than the written word. It is understood that the primary use of comics is to bridge the gap toward “real” and acceptable prose materials for reluctant and struggling readers. While this might easily be dismissed as obstinate ignorance and misinterpretation of a formidable medium, it might better be viewed as the extension of an

²⁶ Robinson, 21.

²⁷ Robinson, 22.

²⁸ Walker, 7-8.

²⁹ Blackbeard, *The Yellow Kid*, 69.

impetus that has propelled the art form headstrong into the modern day – accessibility. Pictures are a universal language that transcends cultural barriers and eliminates social hierarchy; and the comic strip has a rich history of empowering the illiterate and disenfranchised. One simply has to consider that humankind was communicating with drawings millennia before the development of written language³⁰ to appreciate the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

Just like today, comic strips, and particularly editorial cartoons, have been used in mass media as a means to inform the public of contemporary issues. One of the most popular woodblock picture books of the Middle Ages was the *Biblia Pauperum* (Pauper’s Bible), purportedly intended for the illiterate poor who ironically could not afford to own such lavish possessions.³¹ Yet, the advent of moveable type produced broadsheets and public prints that combined this form of expression with the information of current events accessible to all. Correlatively, Michael Bitz’ The Comic Book Project is an inner-city initiative, recognized by the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, and *USA Today*³² that seeks to educate youth in today’s society through the use of the visual narrative.³³ The comic strip to this day continues to provide powerful commentary on current events, and since 1922 the prestigious literary award, the Pulitzer Prize (named for the same Joseph Pulitzer of yellow journalism fame), has included a category for Editorial Cartooning.³⁴ Among its winners is Garry Trudeau with his 1974 *Doonesbury* strip in reaction to the Watergate scandal, upon which United States President Gerald Ford reflected, “There are only three major vehicles to keep us informed as to what is going on in Washington: the electronic media, the print media, and *Doonesbury* - not

³⁰ Robinson, 14

³¹ Kunzle, *The early comic strip*, 13.

³² Center for Educational Pathways, “The comic book project: press.”

³³ Bitz, “The comic book project,” 574.

³⁴ Pulitzer Prize Board, “Editorial cartooning.”

necessarily in that order.”³⁵ Ford’s implication of comics as a unique, powerful, and universal medium bolsters the sentiment of the 19th century corrupt politician William Tweed who is known to have proclaimed of Thomas Nast’s political cartoons, “stop them damn pictures! [...] I don’t care so much what papers write about me. My constituents can’t read. But, damn it, they can see pictures!”³⁶ And it was for this very reason that artists such as Outcault established such a devoted following: as an immigrant portraying issues confronted by growing populations of non-English-speaking, impoverished foreigners, readership of newspapers skyrocketed due to the appeal of the medium in symbiotic conjunction with its subject matter. This inherent ability of the comic strip to reach an inclusive audience bereft of language and literacy barriers has been a boon in elevating the art form and contributing to its persistence as a popular means of expression to this day.

In addition to, and in many ways because of, the impact of the comic strip on accessibility and literacy, censorship in multiple forms has always similarly been part and parcel of the medium over the course of its continued development. There are a number of methods with which critics have attempted to stifle the cartoonist over the years, including challenging the work, physical alteration of the work, and silencing of the artist. This is nothing unfamiliar to creators of contemporary literature, comics and otherwise. The modern comic book in particular has faced relentless persecution, and highly acclaimed works such as *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and *Bone* have been challenged on the basis of anti-ethnic sentiment, “obscene images,” and “promotion of smoking and drinking” respectively.³⁷ Early Sunday newspaper supplements were challenged as early as their inception by religious groups simply for being published on a

³⁵ Blair, *America’s humor*, 511.

³⁶ Robinson, 20.

³⁷ Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, “Banned and challenged comics revealed!”

specific day, such as one of the first by the *New York Courier* on March 20, 1825, with criticism citing that it was “antagonistic to the spirit of the Lord’s day, and tends to subvert the institution.”³⁸

Following the creation of early controversial works, sensibilities emerged with a duty to censor offensive materials by altering original documents as mentioned of the relief sculpture of the Reims Cathedral. A modern day example of this can be seen in the censorship that pervades republication of Japanese manga in North America: works such as *Dragon Ball Z*, *Naruto*, and *Pokemon* have suffered similar alterations such as remodeling of firearms to appear less violent, removal of the *manji* symbol (known for its misappropriation as the swastika by Nazi Germany), and the modification of clothing and anatomy to appear more modest.³⁹

Another way in which cartoonists have been censored over the course of history is through others’ attempts to inhibit their ability to produce or distribute their works. Samuel Ward’s 1621 broadsheet cartoon “Spayne and Rome Defeated” decried both the Pope and the king of Spain, finding him imprisoned, presumably in an attempt to stifle his political criticisms;⁴⁰ following his release, he limited his talents as an illustrator to the predominantly aesthetic covers of religious documents.⁴¹ Similarly, Henri Daumier was imprisoned for 6 months for his portrayal of the king of France as a grotesque giant, following the events of which his satirical magazine, *La Caricature*, was terminated.⁴² Albeit refused, William Tweed attempted to bribe Thomas Nast with half a million dollars to stop producing his cartoons

³⁸ Walker, 6.

³⁹ Anime News Network, “The greatest manga censorship fails.”

⁴⁰ Parton, 96.

⁴¹ Parton, 97.

⁴² Parton, 220.

in 1871.⁴³ As we can see, these methods of censorship have neither vanished nor changed much over the centuries, and while we ostensibly claim greater freedom of expression today, different cultures and societies possess values and standards that are not necessarily compatible, as will be demonstrated with the clash of secular European society and Islam in the following section.

The primary cause of issues of accessibility and censorship that have so thoroughly encompassed the comic strip form is arguably its most historically pervasive subjects, most prominently of which has been politics. While other subjects such as marriage and relationships, world events, philosophy, and of course humour have been popular for nearly as long as the medium itself, it is largely artists' reflections on political issues that has earned the comic strip its reputation as a formidable medium in American society, as acknowledged by President Ford. And, although the comic strip often tends to be more scathing in its criticism of political issues and figures, the caricature style in which it is often conveyed can easily be employed by the artist as a dismissal against accusations of defamation with the justification that it is simply a joke. However this can be viewed as a double-edged sword, and while we have seen that in the Middle Ages there was little reservation in the satirical works of the cartoonists of the day, portraying the Pope as a literal ass today would likely be met with violent protestation. Such was the case with livid reactions to a series of Danish newspaper cartoons that depicted the Prophet Muhammad (an act forbidden in Islam) in 2005 and 2006, which resulted in terrorist attacks and over 200 deaths.⁴⁴

Religion has certainly long been a delicate topic of the political comic strip, however, perhaps more controversial and instrumental in contributing to modern society has been its

⁴³ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, 181-182.

⁴⁴ The New York Times, "Danish cartoon controversy."

impact on government. U.S. President Grover Cleveland is known to have credited Bernard Gillam's comic strip *The Tattooed Man* in *Puck* magazine with his initial election more "than any other influence employed in the campaign."⁴⁵ Additionally, the U.S. War Department-sponsored and President Dwight Eisenhower-sanctioned cartoons of Bill Mauldin are credited with supporting the emotional well-being of American soldiers in Europe during World War II.⁴⁶ There is certainly much credit to be administered to the political cartoonist for not only expressing in a now socially acceptable manner the important issues of the time, often changing the course of history itself, but for doing so through a medium that is more equally accessible on a universal scale.

Although many of the same issues and subjects have consistently persevered over the course of comic strip history, it is clear from a brief account of the medium that its evolution and impact on the world continues to steadily progress. Today, the webcomic defies the editorial screening processes and syndication requirements imposed on the traditional comic strips of the 19th and 20th centuries, expanding the potential influence of the medium on a global scale and further eliminating barriers that have hindered its accessibility and impact in the past. Cartoonists and their art have helped shaped the world as we know it today and trends of the past indicate that their work is hardly finished.

⁴⁵ Ford, *Forty odd years*, 299.

⁴⁶ Mauldin, *Willie & Joe*, 13.

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