

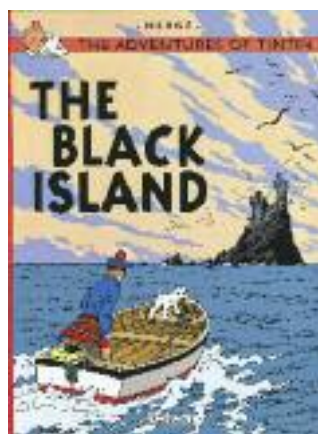
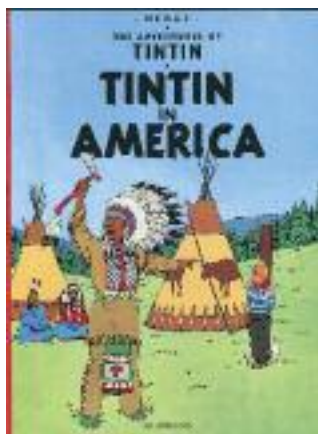
In Praise of Comics

The huge, inflated, almost punk-headed teenager and super-sleuth, Tintin, floating above our hotel in Brussels, inspired us to seek out the *Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée*. This museum commemorates Belgian artists' significant contribution to the development of the comic strip as an art form. It acts as a research centre for studies into the genre and contains exhibits that bring books and celluloid to life. It features a kingdom of the Smurfs, Lucky Luke and plenty of other paper heroes, but it was the adventures with Tintin, created by Georges Remi, who is known to everyone as Hergé,* that we, as comic enthusiasts, were determined to seek out.

We navigated a circuitous route from the almost overwhelming beauty of *La Grand Place*, past the flamboyant towers and arcades of the *Hotel de Ville*, all the while admiring the golden ornamentation on the narrow guild houses sitting around the Square. Enhanced by snow and bitter cold we tramped down the *rue des Sables* to number 20, our destination. It was like entering the concourse of a railway station over a hundred years ago, and quite unlike anything built nowadays. Housed in the last, semi-industrial building designed by Victor Horta, for the first seventy years of its life, cloth and fabrics were sold there as planned by Charles Waucquez and successive owners of the shop. Faithfully restored now, we entered and were overawed by the Art Nouveau masterpiece.

"...surrounded by the balustrades of the two upper storeys, intersected by hanging staircases and with suspension bridges built across. The iron staircases, with double spirals opened out in bold curves, multiplying the landings; the iron bridges, thrown across the void, ran straight along, very high up; and beneath the pale light from the windows all this metal formed a delicate piece of architecture, a complicated lacework through which daylight passed, the modern realization of a dream palace ..."

Emile Zola *The Ladies Paradise*



* This pseudonym is the French phonetic pronunciation of the letters 'R' and 'G' taken from Remi Georges.

The building, bought by the federal state in 1984, was established as a museum devoted to comic strip under the benevolent eye of Hergé, and opened by the Sovereigns on the 3rd October 1989. It was not only intended to preserve and promote comic strip, but also to restore meaning and life to the stained glass, the arabesques, the spirals and the natural light in this Victor Horta wonder.

The phrase *bandes dessinées* is derived from the original description of the art form "drawn strips" and one of the earliest, proper Belgian comics was not a stand-alone publication. Created by Hergé to introduce Tintin to his readers, it featured as an episode in a youth supplement newspaper, *Le Petit Vingtième*, in 1929. Like the cinema of the time, *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* was in black and white and was an adventure about a young travelling Belgian reporter accompanied by his fox terrier, Snowy. Tintin's hair was combed to the front in this story until a chase scene in a vintage Mercedes convertible blew it back over his head leaving his famous trademark quiff in place.

As a child Hergé had a gift for drawing but never had any formal training in the visual arts. He attended both school and the boy scouts during World War 1 and post-World War 1 era. His inspiration for Tintin came from his younger brother and incorporated the adventures of a fifteen year old Danish boy, Palle Huld, who had won a contest in the newspaper *Politiken* and went on a trip around the world. Hergé's illustrations were relaxed, with easy, clear lines; typically short of shadows, with geometrical features and realistic proportions. His style became known as *Ligne-Claire*. Another trait was the often 'slow' drawings with little to no speed-lines, and strokes that were almost completely even.

This museum has more than four thousand square metres of exhibition space. It brings together everything related to comic strips – how words combine with pictures to work their singular magic. From the oldest known accounts of cave art to the fierce competition among New York editors at the dawn of the 21st century, the various elements of the displays confirm the popular adage that 'nothing is invented, everything just changes'.

Comic strip is not the result of a discovery. It is the outcome of the ever closer collusion between the desire to tell stories and the art of drawing. Hergé had a remarkable ability to anticipate world events when he despatched Tintin to *The Black Island* at a time of uneasy tension in Europe. There was an air of nervous peace across the continent whilst the source of the conflict was clear. This detective thriller pits Tintin's wits



A Citroën 2CV which features in the stories.

A Carousel Editor with moon rocket!

A view of the 'dream palace'.

against a gang of forgers, a German spy and a mysterious 'monster'. He crosses the English Channel safely then heads north to the Hebrides in pursuit of the gang led by a possible fifth column spy. Hergé was a perfectionist by nature and he painstakingly modernised this story in 1956. Colleagues, Bob de Moor and aviation expert Roger Leloup, updated planes, electrified the railway and introduced fashionable modern cars – including a Triumph Herald towing a sleek caravan on page 29 of the new version. Dress code was also affected but Tintin himself remained in plus-fours whilst his assailant is in jeans.

After the Second World War Hergé set up 'Studios Hergé' to facilitate production of the Tintin adventures. He took on a team of young artists. Each had a particular strength and Hergé himself checked over every last detail of the many machines that appeared in his stories. For the moon adventures, a scale model of the rocket with cut-away sections was assembled to ensure accuracy of drawing.

Another key aspect of Tintin's enduring popularity is to be found in the many levels at which the adventures can be enjoyed. Circulating around the museum were young families with toddlers in tow. There were grandfathers holding the hands of six and seven-year-olds; there were short-sighted oldies; there were younger and older teenagers; just as Hergé predicted "... all young people, aged from seven to seventy-

seven, will love my stories." Each will find their own level of understanding and appreciation. The appeal is, moreover, self-generating, for in due course children become adults and then parents themselves, allowing the Tintin tradition to be carried on.

There are twenty-four coloured, fast-moving and action packed adventures to be enjoyed and artefacts from *Tintin in America* can be seen in the display. Red Indians are only part of the action, eclipsed (as in reality!) by the skyscrapers of bustling cities, by commerce and mass production, quite apart from the ubiquitous gangsters on page 10, who negotiated a breathtaking window ledge hop/crawl! The dizzy height of a thirty-seventh floor is brilliantly conveyed by the sheer plunging facade.

All our senses were uplifted by this visit. Our serious inquiry into the creation and adventures of Tintin was amply rewarded. We fully agreed with Will Eisner when he used the term *Sequential Art* to describe comics. Taken individually pictures are merely pictures, however, when part of a sequence – even a sequence of only two - the art of the image is transferred into something more: the art of comics.

Comics are as vital and important as film, prose or any other art form for everyone.

Jenny Blanch

