

REVOLUTIONARY, EXPLOSIVE, AND POPULAR: THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT PRESENTS COMIC-STRIP PIONEERS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

# PIONEERS OF THE COMIC STRIP. A DIFFERENT AVANT-GARDE

JUNE 23 – SEPTEMBER 18, 2016

PRESS PREVIEW: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 2016, 11:00 A.M.

Spectacular, large and colorful – this is how comic strips captivated their audience, beginning back in 1897. The middle classes, working classes, and a host of immigrants were equally fascinated by the unfamiliar visual experience they encountered in American newspapers. From June 23 to September 18, 2016, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting the first extensive thematic exhibition on the “Pioneers of the Comic Strip,” who—progressive and eager to experiment—set the artistic and content-related standards of the early comic strips. The exhibition features six outstanding, primarily American illustrators who shaped the cultural history of the comic strip: Winsor McCay, Lyonel Feininger, Charles Forbell, Cliff Sterrett, George Herriman, and Frank King. Unforgotten are Herriman’s absurd humor in *Krazy Kat* (from 1913), the Surrealist and Expressionist visual worlds of McCay (from 1904) and Sterrett (from 1912 onwards), Feininger’s comic strips for the *Chicago Tribune* (1906-7), or the comic strip *Gasoline Alley* by King (from 1921) told in real time over a period of three decades. With Forbell’s synthesis of the arts *Naughty Pete* (1913), the Schirn enables visitors to the exhibition to rediscover a forgotten illustrator.

The prevalence of the comic strip in the early 20th century was based on the meteoric rise of the newspaper as a mass medium. High-performance printing presses and decreasing paper prices made it affordable. This led to an explosion and democratization of newspapers, and the comic strip supplements they contained resulted in the first pictorial mass medium in history. A single New York-based publishing house could reach a readership of millions daily with only one newspaper issue. In order to distinguish themselves from the competition, resourceful publishers included magazine supplements in the Sunday edition of their papers—the first one to do so being Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911)—and these included large comic strips printed in color. Together with the cartoons with one line of panels in the weekday editions, these comic strips constituted the ultimate discipline, which was not followed by the now familiar comic books until the late 1930s. In the highly competitive newspaper market, comic strips meant power. The growth or decline of a newspaper was not decided based on the quality of the feature articles, business news, or the sport section, but on the popularity of its comic strips. The legendary newspaper war between Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951), which lasted from 1895 to 1898, was waged in the comic strip supplements. In 1891, Hearst, who had recently come to New York from San Francisco, lured away Pulitzer’s entire staff of illustrators for the purpose of strengthening his own newspaper empire.

The exhibition “Pioneers of the Comic Strip” presents over 200 pages of rare comic strips from between 1905 and the 1940s, including very rare original drawings by comic strip artists being shown to the public for the first time. Correlations between comic strips and developments in the fine arts of the day also become apparent. Of what were once a million pages of comic strips in the pioneering years, only few copies have survived. This can be attributed to committed private collectors who recognized their artistic value on time and contrary to public opinion.

Dr. Alexander Braun, curator of the exhibition: “The 100-year-old comic strip pages being shown at the Schirn continue to exude the energy of an epoch of new beginnings, a belief in the future, an enthusiasm for technology, and the meteoric rise of the first real mass medium: the newspaper. The productive rivalry in the newspaper market likewise promoted the ingenuity of the comic strip illustrators of the early years. All of the six artists presented in the Schirn explore the artistic possibilities of the young art genre and continue to influence it to this day.”

### THE PIONEERS OF THE COMIC STRIP

In “Pioneers of the Comic Strip”, the Schirn presents six exemplary illustrators from the early days of the comic strip. In the exhibition, an individual space is devoted to each of the artists.

**Winsor McCay** (1869–1934) is considered the first Surrealist and the godfather of the early comic strip. He preformulated the entire spectrum of Surrealist expression—for instance with donkeys whose legs grow to come stilts, or faces that melt like the pocket watches in pictures by the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí. In his series *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which was published in the *New York Herald* from 1905 onwards, McCay is still very much in the tradition of the fantasy conventions of his time, such as *Alice in Wonderland* (from 1865) or *The Wizard of Oz* (1900): Every night in his dreams, King Morpheus’ vassals take the little boy Nemo into Slumberland so that the princess has a playmate, and he experiences adventures there. In *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*, McCay also devotes himself to his central theme in an intense and groundbreaking way: In each of the approximately 900 episodes over three decades, repeatedly new protagonists are haunted by everyday problems in their dreams. This demonstrates a radically different understanding of the dream, comparable with, for example, Sigmund Freud’s “The Interpretation of Dreams” from 1900. Furthermore, McCay explored the artistic and intellectual possibilities of the young art form and redefined the comic strip. He self-referentially scrutinizes his authorship, for instance the figures he has drawn discuss the quality of his art of drawing with him—the illustrator—in the comic strip, or out of sheer hunger pry out and devour the lettering of the comic strip’s title. McCay is also regarded as the inventor of the animated cartoon, which is also addressed in the exhibition.

Famous painter and Bauhaus teacher **Lyonel Feininger** (1871–1956) began his artistic career working for 15 years as a caricaturist and comic illustrator. In 1906, the *Chicago Tribune* planned a new comic-strip supplement with original work by German illustrators and hired the artist, who was living in Berlin at the time, for two series: Following Jules Verne’s *Around the world in 80 Days*, *The Kin-der-Kids* made a mad rush over oceans and continents, while the young boy in *Wee Willie Winkie’s World*, Feininger’s alter ego, questions the world in melancholy languor. Even though these series did not prove to be lucrative for the newspaper and were soon discontinued, this contract allowed Feininger to achieve artistic and financial independence, which enabled him to move to Paris. It was there that he made contact with the art scene and embarked on a career as a painter. Feininger research has to date has not been taken into account the fact that the artist already formulated his idea for a *Town at the End of the World*—with Old German buildings, seascapes, church towers, etc.—in his comic strips. These constitute the narrative equivalent of his “prismatic painting.”

**Charles Forbell** (1884–1946) was among those many artists who, albeit only for a short yet extremely progressive time, devoted themselves to comic strips, but quickly vanished due to lack of success. In 1913, in the space of less than 18 months the graphic artist and illustrator designed unique color Sunday pages for his series *Naughty Pete* that were prominently staged by the publisher of the *New York Herald* on the colored title page of the supplement. To this day, the pages continue to be a synthesis of the arts that defines itself less through a concatenation of individual panels and more by the aesthetic of its overall composition.

One of the most important stylists of the comic strip in the 20th century is **Cliff Sterrett** (1883–1964). His principal work *Polly and Her Pals* gives an account of the Perkins couple and their

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

daughter Polly, who is idolized by admirers. Over the years, the focus increasingly shifts toward the father and his daily struggle with the pitfalls of everyday life. Over the course of his career, Sterrett's depiction of his figures develops from a nervous, organic line to clear geometric abstraction. In the late 1920s, his comic strip seems to then literally explode in Modernist manner: psychedelic forests and fantastic plants; everything in the images is set in motion, the proportions shift, and the perspectives of the architecture seem to collapse; walls and floors are entirely covered by patterns. The reasons for this transition can be found in Sterrett's home environment: he lived in the artist's colony of Ogunquit in Maine, where he kept company with numerous visual artists, including Walt Kuhn, the definitive curator of the legendary *Armory Show* in New York in 1913, with whom he socialized on a regular basis.

The comic strips of **George Herriman** (1880–1944) take up an outstanding position. He was the only comic strip illustrator to be offered a job for life by his publisher, William Randolph Hearst, who gave him complete artistic freedom. At first his *Krazy Kat* series was the only comic strip that did not appear in the Sunday supplement of the newspaper but in the art section, and it enjoyed an euphoric, intellectual readership. Pablo Picasso, for example, had Gertrude Stein bring him episodes from New York. No other comic strip of this period took greater artistic liberties, for instance in order to play with the stylistic elements of Dadaism, ignored the pressure of the anecdote and the punch line, and instead pursued a very independent, in part absurd narrative logic. *Krazy Kat* is about a cat named Krazy who loves the mouse Ignatz, who counters Krazy's unconditional affection by throwing a brick at her head, who in turn misinterprets this as proof of his love—a cycle of futile longing and desire. In the history of the comic strip, *Krazy Kat* constitutes the blueprint for all of the later small animal slapsticks ranging from *Felix the Cat* and *Mickey Mouse* to *Tom and Jerry*.

With his successful and popular series *Gasoline Alley*, **Frank King** (1883–1969) developed narration in real time for the comic strip. From 1921 onwards, one episode of the series was published in newspapers in across America every day from Monday to Sunday for more than three decades. The comic strip—stories from the everyday life of the bachelor Uncle Wald and his foundling Skeeze in an American suburb—takes place in real time, which results in parallels to the courses of readers' lives. Social and political developments are taken up and depicted. The literary protagonists age with their real readers and accompany their everyday lives with comparable problems, for instance during the Great Depression in the 1930s or the draft of all young American men (including the youth in the comic strip, Skeeze) as soldiers in World War II.

A scholarly catalog is being published to coincide with the exhibition.

**CATALOG** *Pioniere des Comic. Eine andere Avantgarde*. Edited by Alexander Braun and Max Hollein. Foreword by Max Hollein, essays by Alexander Braun, David Carrier, Thomas Scheibitz. German, approx. 272 pages, approx. 300 illustrations, 31 x 24 cm (vertical format); Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2016, ISBN 978-3-7757-4110-, Schirn edition: 30 €, in bookstores 35 €.

**VENUE** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** June 23–September 18, 2016 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **EMAIL** [welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **PHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** €7.00, reduced €5.00; free admission for children under the age of 8 **CURATOR** Dr. Alexander Braun **PROJECT MANAGEMENT** Natalie Storelli

**SOCIAL MEDIA** The Schirn communicates in the social web with the **HASHTAGS** #PioneersInTheSchirn #Comic #Schirn **ONLINE MAGAZINE** [www.schirn-mag.com](http://www.schirn-mag.com) **FACEBOOK** [www.facebook.com/Schirn](http://www.facebook.com/Schirn) **TWITTER** [www.twitter.com/Schirn](http://www.twitter.com/Schirn) **YOUTUBE** [www.youtube.com/user/SCHIRNKUNSTHALLE](http://www.youtube.com/user/SCHIRNKUNSTHALLE) **INSTAGRAM** @schirnkunsthalle **PINTEREST** [www.pinterest.com/schirn](http://www.pinterest.com/schirn) **SNAPCHAT** schirnsnaps

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