exhibition view, photo: Marc Domage

VRAOUM!
comic strip treasures and contemporary art

curated by David Rosenberg and Pierre Sterckx

Comics make their entrance at la maison rouge with *Vraoum! comic strip treasures and contemporary art*. As an exhibition of original strips loaned by private collectors and shown alongside works of contemporary art, *Vraoum!* addresses many of the subjects of interest to la maison rouge, beginning with the private collection. Typically, the comic book (or graphic novel) has been seen as the finished work, and indeed attracts its own collectors; more often than not, the drawings themselves were discarded. Were it not for the interest and enthusiasm of the individuals who have collected these original strips, sketches and covers, in France and Belgium in particular, an entire part of comic strip history would have been lost. Several museums, many in Brussels and Angoulême, specialise in the history of comic strips, and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris recently acquired an original strip by Hergé. However, most strips (now a growing focus of interest for the market) remain in private hands. *Vraoum!* is an opportunity to bring to light treasures of comic-strip history by artists from Winsor McCay to Hergé and Philippe Druillet. Many of these original drawings have never been shown in public before.

Vraoum! also sets out to present works from what are traditionally two separate genres - a minor and popular art by "authors" and contemporary art by "artists" - on an equal footing. But reality is never that simple. The exhibition's underlying premise is that comics are art produced by artists, however else they may be dubbed and regardless of any other artistic activity they may or may not pursue. For Hergé and Giraud, easel painting was a hobby. Today, the lines between disciplines are blurred and artists such as Pierre La Police, Fabien Verschaere and Jochen Gernet move seamlessly from comic book to art gallery.

Contemporary artists took up with comic strips in the 1960s, when American Pop Art borrowed images from popular culture and gave them a new dimension. Warhol painted Popeye; Lichtenstein transformed comic strips

into large-format works. In France, artists of the Figuration Narrative group, led by Hervé Telemaque and Erró, were the first to include the characters and conventions of comic strips in their work. For them, and others who would follow, such as Hervé Di Rosa, Gilles Barbier and Bertrand Lavier, comic strips are no longer an underrated element of counterculture but a shared reference for all their generation. *Vraoum!* takes comics and shows how they are echoed in visual art by devising unexpected encounters and face-offs between works. *Vraoum!* is an exhibition of art that doesn't know it is art, and artists who thumb their noses at seriousness and whose works ultimately invite us to view comics in a different light.

A comic is a sequence of frames with characters who express themselves in speech bubbles. These bubbles distinguish between word and image, and the eye is constantly darting between the two. Frames and bubbles are so specific to comic strips as to have become symbolic of them and, consequently, are the elements which contemporary artists most often use to their own ends. **Sylvain Paris** has enclosed silhouettes of famous comic-strip heroes inside their own bubble. Many artists use the strip itself as their starting point. **Matt Mullican** draws up an inventory of our representations of the world using details cut from strips. **Jochen Gerner** explores the many possible relations between the image and the written word, a characteristic feature of comic strips. In one work, he blacks out the pages of *Tintin in America* to leave only isolated words that evoke violence and symbols of the American way of life. **Gerner** returns to this notion of masking as a means of revealing when he transforms the names on a map of Africa into a mish-mash of onomatopoeias.

Walt Disney characters are everywhere in the exhibition. They even leave behind the world of fiction for the real world in a series of works **by Bertrand Lavier,** entitled *Walt Disney Productions*. Here, the artist has created three-dimensional, human-scale replicas of the artworks Mickey sees when he visits a modern art museum in a 1947 comic. Whether standing before Lavier's yellow wall, or in front of **Philippe Mayaux's** cave whose walls make a Donald Duck face, visitors are invited to enter a different mental space, to step into a comic-strip frame. Mayaux's cave is also a reminder that comics have existed since the dawn of time, since Plato's Cave and even since the Stone Age, if **Will Eisner's** lesson on comic strips in Lascaux can be believed.

The exhibition's welcoming committee comprises a **Keith Haring** Mickey Mouse and a cyborg by **Shotaro Ishinomori**. They represent two of the major trends in comics today - Disney and manga – whose offspring the Brazilian artist **Nelson Leirner** presents as the new imperialist masters, extending their domination of the industrialised world.

Comic-strip pioneers

Like photography, their exact contemporary, comic strips appeared simultaneously in a number of countries and over a period of several decades.

Switzerland's Rodolphe Töpffer is credited as the father of European strips. In 1840, he produced what he referred to as a picture story using lithographs, told as a sequence of framed images with captions underneath. Speech bubbles appeared in the 1890s with Christophe, and were systematised several decades later by **Alain Saint-Ogan**, the creator of Zig et Puce (1925*).

Across the Atlantic, **Richard F. Outcault** created *The Yellow Kid* in 1896, the first newspaper strip. These strips were intended to keep readers loyal as they followed the adventures of their favourite characters, such as Blondie or Jiggs in *Bringing up Father*. They were printed in black and white **on weekdays and in colour in the Sunday supplement. Another of Outcault**'s characters was a wealthy and mischievous boy by the name of Buster Brown. In both these series, Outcault uses a prolific style, with an abundance of characters, bubbles and endless action.

Of all the pioneers, the work of **Winsor McCay** has achieved classic status, and rare examples of his original strips are shown further into the exhibition. McCay made the first animated cartoon, *Gertie The Dinosaur*, in 1914. He is also the father of Little Nemo (1905) who each night flies off to Slumberland where he experiences weird and wonderful adventures which are inevitably brought to an end when he falls out of bed… to begin again the following night. McCay was a virtuoso artist who set his stories against sumptuous Art Deco backgrounds, working in original angles and filmic effects such as high and low shots, close-ups, travelling shots and contrasting scales. **Peter Land**'s *Man in Bed* seems to give form to the dream-state sensations of McCay's night-shirted hero, this time experienced by a man who has left childhood behind.

George Herriman, the inventor of Krazy Kat (1913), was another pioneer as he introduced the nonsensical into strips. He would influence many other authors, including Will Eisner and Charles M. Schulz, the creator of Snoopy.

Go West

The conquest of the Far West, which reached its peak in the second half of the twentieth century, has fired the imagination of artists in every field: literature, painting, photography, music, theatre and, of course, cinema. European interest in the Far West as a comic genre grew in the 1940s and 1950s. Here was a chance to depict breathtaking landscapes, the wide open spaces of the American West with horses, cowboys and Indians in action. The heroes of these paper Westerns share the same qualities as their celluloid counterparts: they are virile, brave and solitary figures. One such hero is Jerry Spring (1954), a humanist cowboy who stands up for the Indians. He was created by the great Belgian comic-strip artist **Jijé (**the pseudonym of Joseph Gillain). Similar qualities can be found in **Morris'** Lucky Luke, the tongue-in-cheek cowboy who "shoots faster than his shadow." Morris, a huge fan of cinema Westerns, imagined the cool-as-a-cucumber lonesome cowboy in 1946 for *Spirou* magazine, along with his equally important sidekicks Jolly Jumper, the smartest horse in the world, Rantanplan, the stupidest dog in the

*Dates in brackets correspond to the character's first appearance.

universe, and the bumbling Dalton brothers. Morris and scriptwriter Goscinny rewrote the conquest of the West as a blend of parody, humour and well-researched fact. Though extremely realistic, Morris is less accurate in his portrayal of the Far West than **Jean Giraud**. Giraud and Jean-Michel Charlier created Blueberry in the early 1960s. They revisited the original legend of the Far West in a style that owes much to Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns. Few other genres have given comics the chance to invent their own version of cinemascope. Tellingly, one of the pieces shown in *Vraoum!* is the huge watercolour that hung opposite Giraud's drawing board, and which inspired him for his stories. The figure of the hero has changed: Lieutenant Blueberry is no angel. Bearded and unkempt, he is a double-crossing gun-slinger who sometimes loses his way, has doubts and, a rare occurrence in strips, grows old. Despite its climate of derision and self-analysis, Giraud's work, like that of Jijé, is a magnificent testimony to the vast open spaces of the great American West.

Throughout the exhibition, comic-strip characters form couples with their alter egos in contemporary art: the file hidden in the Dalton's bread by **Olivier Babin;** Little Nemo in his bed by **Peter Land**; the irascible Popeye by **Jean-Michel Basquiat**; the Flintstones by **Paul McCarthy;** Tintin's universally recognisable silhouette by **Henrik Samulesson**. Tintin also pops up in a wall painting by **Fabien Verschaere**, surrounded by other characters in a world that is teeming with figures, first amongst which is the hybrid figure of the artist as superhero.

Ann Lee

In an allusion to the original manga hero, a rare work on canvas by pioneering artist **Osamu Tezuka** leads into a room where contemporary artists and fictional heroes meet. Having bought the rights from a Japanese agency which supplies characters for manga and anime (animated series), **Pierre Huygue** and **Phillipe Parreno** have made animated films starring Ann Lee, before leaving her in the hands of other artists, including **Dominique Gonzalez-Foster, Melik Ohanian** and **Liam Gillick**. It's an unusual situation in which artists are not inspired by comic strips but are the only ones who can bring to life a character that doesn't exist outside their wor

Creatures and critters

Comic strips are filled with animals and other creatures. Some, such as Snowy or Jolly Jumper, are the hero's acolyte. Others, at Walt Disney in particular, are heroes themselves.

In Jean de La Fontaine's Fables, and in children's literature in general, animals are often used to draw attention to human foibles or to depict events from a recent or more distant past. Through this anthropomorphic portrayal, animals become masks intended to represent a particular psychological or social type. Examples are legion: the animals in *Chlorophylle* by **Raymond Macherot** (1954) live in a society identical to our own, and many of the stories

are inspired by specific historical events. **Walt Kelly's** stories of Pogo Possum (1943) make frequent references to American politics in the 1950s, while Fritz the Cat by **Robert Crumb** echoes the lives and concerns of American students in the 1960s and 70s.

While **Otto Messmer's** Felix the Cat (1923) is an innocent companion, as are the toy animals in **Andy Warhol's** screenprints, some animal strips can be read on several levels, thereby opening them to a public of both children and adults. This is especially true of animals who master absurd humour, such as **Jim Davis'** procrastinating, egocentric cat Garfield (1978), Snoopy, the neurotic, daydreaming dog in **Charles M. Schulz's** *Peanuts* (1950) **or Philippe Geluck's** philosophising, potbellied Chat (1983).

Walt Disney Productions

There can be little doubt, however, that the best-known creatures are those of Walt Disney, who built an entire empire on imagination. All Disney's activities, which range from publishing to film, television, toys, theme parks and other spin-offs, are centred on simply-drawn and instantly recognisable characters. Mickey, Disney's first character, made his debut in 1928 in *Steamboat Willie*, a short sound cartoon. He was rapidly joined by others, all destined for the same fame: Minnie, Pluto, Goofy and Donald the cantankerous duck with his prankster nephews and penny-pinching millionaire uncle Scrooge McDuck.

Disney's characters, led by Mickey, made the transition from film to print as early as the 1930s. Drawing them was the work of illustrators such as **Floyd Gottfredson, Al Taliaferro** and "Duck Man" **Carl Barks** who is said to have produced some 6,000 pages of strips of which only a handful remain.

Disney's characters did more than simply go from the screen to the printed page. When Warhol affirmed that Walt Disney was the twentieth century's greatest artist, he did so in all seriousness. Disney's powerful graphics and media presence have exerted their influence on numerous artists, and continue to do so today. Many of these references are displacements. Disney's characters are incongruously portrayed, as in the parody of abstract expressionism found in **Joyce Pensato**'s bold brushstrokes. Artists deconstruct the innocent world of their childhood heroes by enlisting them in scenarios where they rub up against cultural references from the adult world. Hence **Peter Saul** transforms Donald (and his clones) into characters from Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapale*, in a work more akin to Robert Crumb and underground comix than Disney. Many artists seem to derive sadistic pleasure from torturing innocent creatures: a crucified Donald in a tattoo by **Wim Delvoye**, or **David Mach's** sculpture of Mickey being devoured by a head. Others break down barriers between real and imaginary, such as **Hyungkoo Lee** who exhumes Goofy's skeleton with scientific precision.

Hergé and the *ligne claire*

It was **Alain Saint-Ogan** who laid the foundations for the Franco-Belgian *ligne claire*, pre-1930. The style entered its classic era with **Hergé** (who created Tintin in 1929). It continued in the work of **Edgar P. Jacobs, Jacques Martin** and **Bob de Moor,** all of whom worked alongside Hergé, and into the 1980s with **Ted Benoît** among others. While the term *ligne claire* describes a style which matured in the mid-1930s with the adventures of Tintin, it was coined in the 1970s by **Joost Swarte**, a Dutch graphic designer, illustrator and a fervent admirer of Hergé. *De klare lijn* in Dutch means a perfectly straight line, traced with garden string. This "clear line" style is characterised by bold lines, extreme clarity and areas of strong, uniform colour. All signs of the artist's hand are erased, meaning an absence of shading or different thicknesses of line.

When inventing the *ligne claire*, **Saint-Ogan,** whom Hergé acknowledged as one of his masters, was influenced by the drawing style of 1920s' architects, engineers and decorators. **Hergé** (the pen name of Georges Rémi) elaborated on this style in what may seem an obvious continuation but in fact draws on extensive study which only the original sketches can convey. Hergé would trace over these spontaneous pencil sketches to keep the single line that would bring the most clarity, fluidity and expression to his drawing.

Jacobs worked with Hergé from 1944 to 1947 to colour *The Adventures of Tintin*. His style differed from that of his friend in the abundance of realistic detail, background and speech bubbles, yet he still succeeded in imposing a clear, strong line. His *Blake and Mortimer* strip (1946) combines documentary precision with a fantasy atmosphere. In *Alix*, which relates the adventures of a young man in Ancient Rome in the first century B.C., **Martin** also stands out for the historical accuracy and architectural detail he introduces into an extremely well-researched strip.

Manga!

Alongside examples of the *ligne claire*, another selection of works illustrates a different graphic style. The Japanese word *manga* now denotes comics in general, but originally meant "random sketches" and was first used to describe the work of Hokusai (1760-1849). A coming-together of Eastern and Western traditions, the manga aesthetic was given its "accepted" form by **Osamu Tezuka,** who created Astro Boy shortly after the second world war. Manga can be distinguished from European comics by their greater emphasis on image over text, and by the importance of movement, using different shots and frames to produce a cinematographic effect.

Manga have evolved into their own world embracing fashion, language, art, culture and industry. Series and characters have been adapted in internationally successful books, films, video games and other merchandise.

Manga by **Ishinomori** and anime from the Miyazaki and Toriyama studios have all the ingredients - feudality, robots, raw sexuality and romance - to appeal to a teenage audience. Manga characters have also made the

transition to Hollywood. For *Kill Bill*, Quentin Tarantino looked to the beautiful yet dangerous Oyuki in *Lady Snowblood*, a story of revenge, illustrated by **Kazuo Kamimura.**

After Philippe Mayaux and Fabien Verschaere, **Pierre La Police** has produced a wall painting for *Vraoum!*. His work sits on the border of comic strips and contemporary art. *Baiser au Monstre* needs neither narrative nor speech bubble. Standing before this hybrid work, with its shift in medium and scale, the viewer feels they are being pulled into a comic-strip frame.

Sci-Fi

Originally a literary genre, science fiction rapidly sparked the imagination of comic-strip authors. The first sci-fi strips appeared in the United States in the 1930s, with heroes such as **Clarence Gay'**s Brick Bradford (1933) and **Alex Raymond'**s Flash Gordon (1934). Both travelled through space, thwarting the plans of evil creatures set on dominating the Earth. A sci-fi masterpiece, Flash Gordon would have a particularly strong influence on European authors, such as **Raymond Poïvet** for his series *Les Pionniers de l'Espérance*. The science fiction genre would reach its apogee in France in the 1960s and 70s, with characters who revived and updated the conventional forms of 1930s space operas and heroic fantasies. In 1975, **Philippe Druillet** and **Moebius** (Giraud's pseudonym for his sci-fi comics) launched *Métal Hurlant* magazine and the publishing company *Les Humanoïdes Associés*. Through their experimental drawings and narrative research, they, along with **Enki Bilal,** fathered a new form of science-fiction strip. Freed from the constraints of linear structure, **Druillet'**s mind-blowing single-page tableaux show how the comic lends itself especially well to portraying science fiction's absurd timescales. The illustrator's talent and the realms of his imagination are the only limits to putting his inner visions onto paper. These improbable worlds, futuristic cities and mutating creatures would give the cinema new avenues to explore. Barbarella (1962), the sexy space-travelling heroine created by **Jean-Claude Forest**, was reincarnated on-screen by Roger Vadim in 1968. Moebius designed the costumes for *Alien* and Enki Bilal adapted his *Femme Piège* to the screen in *Immortal*.

Laugh a minute

Born of cartoons and caricatures, the first comics, like the first films, were slapstick affairs. From its earliest days, as the name comics or, in the US, funnies suggests, the strip set out to raise a smile or even a belly laugh. Strips didn't take themselves seriously, happily embracing their pseudo-nature as a low art to be published in newspapers.

Humour can take several registers, from the burlesque antics of Blondie by **Chic Young** (1930) to the blustering Popeye, created by **Elzie Crisler Segar** (1919). Short formats - strips, half pages and single pages - are well-suited to comedies of intrigue that build up to the final frame and its punch

line. This is the format **Franquin c**hose for Gaston Lagaffe (1957), the genial yet accident-prone employee of Dupuis publishing house.

Comic strips make us laugh in a thousand different ways: outrageous characters with their predictable yet irresistibly funny quirks (such as Obelix and his urge to beat up Roman legionnaires), comedy of intrigue, visual absurdity (**Benito Jacovitti**), comedy of repetition, play on words, gags and onomatopoeias.

Little rascals

In comics as in literature, naughty children make better subjects than good little boys and girls, especially when addressing young readers. And so the world of comics is filled with back-chatting pranksters who spend their days getting themselves into, and talking their way out of, trouble.

Comics' first tearaways appeared early on, in the 1890s in the United States. First to take the stage was Outcault's The Yellow Kid, closely followed by **Rudolph Dirks'** The Katzenjammer Kids (published in *The New York Journal* in 1897). These little devils spend their time cooking up sometimes cruel jokes and tricks to play on adults. These inevitably end in frantic chases as the pranksters try to avoid, unsuccessfully, being soundly spanked. Newspaper magnates William Randolph Hearst (*The New York Journal*) and Joseph Pulitzer (*New York World*) wrought a huge legal battle over the series. The case rested on a distinct characteristic of intellectual property rights in the United States, whereby characters belong not to their creators but to their publishers. The court ruled that Dirks, who had moved to the *New York World*, could continue his series but under a new title, The Captain and the Kids, while Hearst retained the rights to the original Katzenjammer Kids name. **Harold Knerr** was hired to draw the strip for *The New York Journal* as from 1914, and the two series coexisted for decades.

In France, Zig et Puce, created by **Saint-Ogan** in 1925, blazed a trail for spirited youngsters with a taste for adventure which Hergé's Quick & Flupke (1930) would follow. Adults, whose sole function is to represent authority, take a backseat in both these series which are told by the children themselves. Strips such as these delighted young readers, who enjoyed their own illustrated comic magazines, with titles such as *Le Petit Vingtième* (1928), *Tintin* (1946) and *Pilote* (1959).

The time came when young tearaways were undaunted by the promise of spanked bottoms and early to bed. Comics showed they weren't afraid to bridge the chasm between little devil and devil child. The pages of certain manga are filled with ultra-violent young criminals, while **Tanino Liberatore'**s hyper-violent cyber-punk Ranxerox (1978) became one of the stars of comic-strip magazine *L'Echo des Savanes*.

Pictorial

In their early days, comic strips favoured black lines over colour. Printing techniques at that time meant colour was usually limited to "colouring in" with flat tints. More often than not, this task was delegated to assistants

who worked on blueprints. However, many pre-war comic strips were in black and white. In Europe, Hergé stood firmly by black and white until 1942, when his early albums were adapted into colour. In the United States, coloured strips only appeared in the Sunday supplements. In Japan, most manga are black and white.

Comics were therefore seen as a domain for illustrators, who worked horizontally in ink, as opposed to painters who worked vertically with a brush. However, the boundary between the two is often blurred, and many contemporary artists have found inspiration in the world of comics and, more especially, their conventions. **Roy Lichtenstein** is famous for his blow-up comic-strip frames. He sums up a key moment in art history with what amounts to a three-frame strip in which a cow illustrates the passage from figurative art to cubism to abstraction. **Gosha Ostretsov** parodies petit bourgeois painting with an elaborately signed strip in a gold frame.

Many comic-strip authors practice other forms of art with no commercial intent. Hergé, inspired by Miró, painted some thirty abstract canvases, and many authors have incorporated pictorial elements into their strips. The results are fascinating hybrids in which an enjoyable narrative is reinforced by the pleasure derived from colour, textures and expressive drawing. As early as the 1940s, **Milton Caniff** was applying ink with a brush. The 1970s brought an unprecedented range of possibilities, as innovative printing techniques opened up comics to pastels, watercolours, acrylics and oils. **Alberto Breccia** mastered a narrative style based on mixed media collages and ink wash. **Alex Barbier** was the first to use the "fully painted" technique where forms are not always outlined in black but painted directly in colour. He was followed a dozen years later by **Lorenzo Mattotti** and his fauvist colours. **Loustal** uses sumptuous flat tints to slow down the pace of his stories. **Jacques Tardi**, **Hugo Pratt**, **Didier Comès** and **Nicolas de Crécy** are some of countless other examples.

Monumental contemporary works fill the space around the patio. Wang Du has given an enduring and sculptural dimension to Gotlib's magazine, which would normally end its life crumpled and tossed in the bin. **Verschaere's** giant Mickey, in the centre of the patio, is a hybrid character and typical of the artist's imaginings. An avid reader of comics, and more recently the author of his own strips, Verschaere has stuck the loveable mouse's ears onto a skull in a symbiosis of two separate and antinomic worlds, each corresponding to successive childhood obsessions. **Alain Séchas'** sleekly anthropomorphic cats are more cartoon than strip, even though they express themselves in bubbles and onomatopoeias. In her wall painting, **Rivane Neuenschwander** has taken frames from *Zé Carioca* - a popular Brazilian comic about a parrot, developed by Disney in the 1940s - and stripped them of their background, characters and text. Chalk is available for visitors who want to use their own imagination to fill in the stories.

Top gear

Comics appeared in an age of trains, planes and automobiles, snapshots and cinematography. Rather than accept their inherent stillness, they invented their own ways of depicting movement. A movement can be broken down across several frames, in a kind of chronophotography. Conversely, persons and objects can be positioned in a suspended movement. Speed lines are another way of conveying movement, as are onomatopoeias and the ideograms, such as splashes and clouds of dust, which symbolically represent a moving object.

Authors go all out to portray the crashes, skids, falls, races, accelerations and accidents that are regular occurrences in the comic-strip world, with screeching tyres, roaring engines, crushed metal and sound-barrier booms. Some, such as **François Boucq,** let their imagination run riot while others prefer ultra-realism. These include **Jean Graton**, creator of racing car driver Michel Vaillant (1957) and **Victor Hubinon**, inventor of fighter pilot Buck Danny (1947), the heroes of small boys and their fathers alike. The Buck Danny series is well-known among aeronautic enthusiasts for its accurate and detailed depictions of aircraft and technological advances from the final months of the Pacific war to the present day.

Where heroes meet

Two rooms are reserved for the post-war comic-strip phenomena of superheroes and manga, and how contemporary artists have interpreted them.

On the upper level, artists gently poke fun at American superheroes. **Erró has imagined a super-rabbit by the name of *Thunder Bunny* while Hervé Di Rosa** has transformed superheroes into grotesque cyclopes. Meanwhile, **Virginie Barré's** Batman just about manages to get off the ground, despite his flabby midriff.

Facing these vast canvases are the visual extravagances which the world of manga has inspired East Asian artists to create. Best-known among them is **Takashi Murakami**. In 1996, he create the Hiropon Factory, now Kaikai Kiki Co Ltd. It markets its characters along the same commercial lines as manga figures. *Kiki* is one of these "kawai" ("cute") characters. **Chiho Aoshima**, **Mr** and **Aya Takano**, all longstanding collaborators of Murakami, now develop their own art within Kaikai Kiki. As for **Mariko Mori,** she portrays herself in the context of contemporary Japanese society as a "cosplay" fan, where participants dress up as their favourite hero. **Yi Zhou** presents a dream-like vision of nature in a state of perpetual transformation.

exhibition view, photo: Marc Domage

Superheroes

The lower level is home to a "mini museum" of superheroes. A number of characters debuted in nineteen-thirties America, such as Mandrake the Magician (1934) with his phenomenal hypnotic powers, and The Phantom (1937), comics' first masked hero. However, it was **Joe Shuster** who truly invented the superhero, in 1938, with Superman, the first in a long line that continues today. Superman owes his superhuman powers to his origins on the planet Krypton. As the unassuming Clark Kent, he works as a journalist, donning a tight blue costume and red cape to become the crusading superhero in the fight against Evil. Competition for Superman appeared a few months later in the form of Batman. He too wears a costume, but has no superpowers. Instead, he relies on his strength of character, intelligence and high-tech gadgets to triumph over his enemies.

As the number of superheroes multiplied during the 1940s, they became symbols of patriotism against the backdrop of war, such as Captain America. From their original newspaper strip format, aimed at children, they went on to fuel the comic-book industry, which operated independently of the press. After their popularity dwindled in the 1950s, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko gave rise to a new breed of superheroes in the 1960s. They adapted their characters to the era and a new teenage readership by giving them more complex, troubled personalities. Marvel Comics, which employed Kirby and Ditko, monopolised the superhero genre with Spider-Man, Daredevil, Hulk, the Fantastic Four and X-Men. This time their superpowers were gained as a result of chemical, bacteriological or nuclear disaster. These were dark times.

These heroes have fired the imagination of generations of American and French artists since the 1960s, with more or less well-meaning intentions: quotes and borrowings by Pop Art and Figuration Narrative (**Erró**), detournement by Situationists (taken up by **Art Keller**) and the mocking of the conventions and figures of this Manichean and fantastical world. But what happens when superheroes are no longer idealised beings but mere flesh and blood? In **Gilles Barbier**'s mind they grow old and are sent away to a

nursing home. As adults, readers become aware of their former idols' shortcomings and weaknesses. As artists, they look for new heroes**. Olivier Blanckart** explores this transition in his A-MEN series, which is shown in the neighbouring section. Marvel Comics' iconic figures go head-to-head with contemporary art's own superheroes, Robert Ryman, Cindy Sherman and Bruce Nauman. In the basement, Nauman is forever poised in one of his historic performances (*Fountain*), disguised as The Joker.

Hell

Hell (*l'Enfer*) is where the French national library once kept what it considered to be licentious books. There is also, to borrow Jacques Sadoul's delightful expression, "a speech bubble hell," a genre reserved strictly for adults who, let it be said, had to wait a certain time before the law permitted them to enjoy these delights.

Orgies, fetishism, perversions, bondage and writhing bodies... from the 1920s to the 1950s, comics parodied themselves in the form of Tijuana Bibles. These small and often badly-printed books, sold under the counter, showed the most popular children's characters in scandalous poses.

Nineteen-sixties sexual liberation had an immediate impact on comic strips. In the United States, **Crumb**, the inventor of "porno-cat" Fritz, drew a strip in which sex was an integral part of the hero's activities. In France, **Forest**'s Barbarella introduced a more toned-down version of the erotic comic with sci-fi overtones. She was the first in a line of sensual, lascivious heroines with names ending in *a*, all of whom enjoyed considerable commercial success. Next came the madcap adventures of the delightful Paulette, by **Georges Wolinski** and **Georges Pichard.** Pichard was also the author of sadomasochistic comics. Nor should we forget the sensual Valentina by **Guido Crepax**, who also adapted a number of erotic novels including *Story of O*. **Sylvain Paris** has created a complex montage from these erotic strips, cut from magazines.

Comics, with their tight frames, precise drawings and ellipses, are (also) made-to-measure for eroticism, as for pornography: the reader becomes a voyeur.