

Exhibition Pioneers of US Comics



The story of the American comic strip is closely tied to the world of the press, and especially the magnates William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, who competed fiercely to increase their readership by publishing cartoons in their papers.

In 1892, Hearst published humorous drawings by James Swinnerton in the daily *San Francisco Examiner*. Two years later, Richard Outcault created *Hogan's Alley* – a comic strip about a street kid dressed in a blue nightshirt – for Pulitzer's *New York World*. The character seduced the paper's readers. The following year, his nightshirt became yellow and readers named him the *Yellow Kid*. The success of *Hogan's Alley* boosted sales of *New York World*, stirring up jealousy in William Hearst. He struck back by hiring Outcault for *New York Journal* in 1896. A savage legal battle followed, which ended with Pulitzer being authorised to continue to publish *Hogan's Alley* but with illustrations by George Luks, and Hearst being authorised to publish the series under the name *The Yellow Kid*. Up until this point, Outcault had given his character a voice by writing text on his nightshirt. However, from 25 October 1896, the *Yellow Kid* spoke his first words in a speech bubble. Outcault returned to *New York World* in 1902, where he created the *Buster Brown* series about the tribulations of a wealthy New York kid.

At this time, cartoons published in the press were not what we would consider to be full comic strips, as there was no story told over several illustrations; the cartoons were rather a series of humorous drawings occupying a full page. Gradually, the drawings began to be spread over two or three boxes and were laid out horizontally across the page – the “comic strip” had been born.

In December 1897, Rudolph Dirks drew *The Katzenjammer Kids* as a story told through drawings with speech bubbles. It was the first series to use linear narration. It was immediately successful and also coincided with the disappearance of the *Yellow Kid* in 1898. Unfortunately the relationship between Dirks and his publisher deteriorated due to the autocratic attitude of Rudolph Block, who was in charge of comic strips for Hearst. In 1912, Dirks decided to move to Pulitzer's *New York World*, whilst Hearst took on George McManus (*Bringing up Father*) for the *New York Journal*! The move Dirks (and his series) made to the competition led to a two-year legal dispute with Hearst. An historic decision by the New York Court of Appeal led to Dirks being left with the characters' appearance and names, and Hearst being granted the name of the comic strip. Dirks therefore resumed his series, which was initially without a name. From the summer of 1918 he drew it under the name *The Captain and the Kids* for *New York World*, whilst the cartoonist Harold Knerr continued *The Katzenjammer Kids* series for the *New York Journal*. The two series coexisted for 65 years!

In September 1905, Winsor McCay created *Little Nemo in Slumberland* for Pulitzer's *New York Herald*. McCay's skill as a cartoonist immediately shone through due to his use of an innovative layout where the size of the boxes varied depending on the needs of the story. The colours also played an important role as McCay used pastel shades and pure colours in the Art Nouveau style. With this series, McCay was targeting an adult audience. It was extremely successful with the public and he was therefore quickly snapped up by Hearst in 1911, obliging him to rename the series *In the land of Wonderful Dreams*. It was published up until 1914.

The first cartoonist to regularly use the strip format in a daily series was Bud Fisher with his *Mister Mutt* series, which later became *Mutt and Jeff*. Comic strips were so successful that papers started including them every day of the week, with a full page version of a series in the Sunday papers. In 1910, George Herriman drew *The Dingbat Family* in the *New York Journal*. It was not particularly successful initially, but Hearst liked it and supported it. In 1913 it was named *Krazy Kat* and is now considered to be a major work of comic strip art thanks to Herriman's drawings, his mastery of the absurd and the surrealism of the dialogue.

In 1912, William Randolph Hearst created *International News Service* with the aim of selling comic strips for which he owned the rights to the international press. The agency was renamed *King Features Syndicate* in 1914. The initiative was quickly copied by other American daily press magnates, leading to the creation, among others, of *United Feature Syndicate*, *Chicago Tribune Syndicate* and *McNaught Syndicate*. With the syndicate model, cartoonists were simply employees of the agency (syndicate), which sold papers the distribution rights to their comic strips. Cartoonists could therefore be replaced at any time by someone else, who could then take over their characters. Cartoonists gave up all their rights to the press barons, and this was how the principle of a cartoon series with multiple authors came into being.

As cartoonists and their series became syndicated, the American comic strip branched out into series based on family life. Starting in 1912, Cliff Sterrett drew the series *Polly and her Pals* in the *New York Evening*. It was a particularly successful portrait of the American family. George McManus was another cartoonist to make a successful foray into the "family strip" in 1913. With *Bringing Up Father*, he told the story of a *nouveau-riche* couple who were torn between the social climbing aspirations of the wife Maggie and the working class drinking friends of the husband Jiggs. McManus drew *Bringing Up Father* using particularly clear, strong lines, influencing Hergé on the other side of the Atlantic.

Other family strip series followed in the wake of these two pre-First World War series. In 1918, Frank King introduced real life into his series *Gasoline Alley*. Under his penmanship, his characters aged, got married and had children just like in real life until 1951. In 1920, *Winnie Winkle* by Martin Branner was emblematic of social changes. American women had just won the right to vote and as a young, liberated woman, Winnie enjoyed all kinds of love affairs. It was the first American comic strip to be translated into French, under the name *Bicot et Suzy*. Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* – a series about the tribulations of an orphan cared for by a wealthy benefactor – followed in 1924. But the archetypal family strip really appeared in 1930 with *Blondie* by Chic Young. Blondie sacrifices her carefree life as a young aristocrat to help Dagwood Bumstead and was nicknamed "America's little sweetheart" by her admirers. She married Dagwood in 1933 and captivated readers.

Around the middle of the 1920s, comic strips really took off, with humorous and family strips being joined by adventure series. The first cartoonist to produce an adventure strip was Roy Crane, who created *Wash Tubbs* – an adventurer who travelled the southern seas in search of lost treasure – in 1924. From 1933, the series was known as *Captain Easy, Soldier of Fortune*. Other heroes followed in *Wash Tubbs'* footsteps in the pages of the daily papers: *Tarzan* illustrated by Harold Foster in 1931; *Dick Tracy* created by Chester Gould also in 1931; and *Mandrake the Magician* by Phil Davis, *Flash Gordon* by Alex Raymond and *Terry and the Pirates* by Milton Caniff, all three of which were created in 1934. The first comic books also appeared in the same year. These books were around 100 pages long and included daily strips from certain series. A few months passed before this new type of monthly publication became profitable, but the new format gave comic strips an impetus to develop, giving rise among other things to super heroes. But that's another story...