

The comic explosion

Contrasts and influences of the great masters of North American comic strips (1895-1955)

The comic strip, or "historieta" as we call it in Spanish, is such an important form of artistic expression, at least among scholars, that experts were unable to agree on exactly when it originated. After discussing it for decades, they eventually agreed that the new, ninth art was born with modern newspapers in the United States, at the start of the last century.

In just a few years the number of series and characters multiplied and became interlinked. "Comic" or funny at first, they quickly became "serious" and "realistic." Prior to World War II, comic strips were born, bred, reproduced and even looked as if they could die peacefully in the United States. But their story had only just begun.

A story we will explore in this exhibition, by comparing and contrasting. The contrast will enable us enjoy of one of the most intensely creative periods of the 20th century. A glorious explosion now available to us in the form of some of its most representative originals.

In 1895 the United States press established itself as the most innovative in the world. Joseph Pulitzer was competing with William Randolph Hearst to sell more newspapers. Richard Felton Outcault, a talented but still raw illustrator, was working for Pulitzer, who started printing in colour. Pulitzer commissioned Outcault for some picture stories portraying the deprivation and struggle for survival in the most humble neighbourhoods. Thus the Yellow Kid was born, so named because that was the colour of his nightshirt. A sequential story arranged on a page, with a set character and dialogues that would soon be recorded on spherical surfaces marked the new style.

The modern comic was born and the competition between the two editors would give wings and aeroplane engines to the new sequential kids. From the Yellow Kid to Buster Brown, from Buster Brown to the Katzenjammer Kids, and from the Katzenjammer Kids to Little Nemo, to Mutt & Jeff, to Krazy Kat and so on. The list is endless.

Then, suddenly, it occurred to someone that they did no have enough with just humorous characters, that there was another, more adult world of adventure out there. A world of adventurers like Buck Rogers and Tarzan, or the gangsters of Dick Tracy, who would give way to Secret Agent X-9 from a budding Alex Raymond and a tortured Dashiell Hammett. And then Madrake, Terry and the Pirates, Jungle Jim and Flash Gordon – both in one go. And the Arthurian saga of the great Prince Valiant: the best series that would ever be done on a character. The comic was growing up.

Comics were an industrial art, as much industry as art. Or more industry than an art. And the survival of their artists, better and better paid but never enough, was as important as their pride or their creative instinct. This premise defines Richard Felton Outcault, but also Ricard Opisso, Manuel Gago, Josep Sanchis or Francisco Ibáñez.

The art lay in combining pen and brush marks. Later the dry brush, dotted patterns and colour gradients were introduced. With two objectives. One was to go further and overcome the expressive barriers of earlier cartoonists. The other was to bring down the cost and speed up the production process. That is also industry. Soon, "studios" started to spread. Workshops or factories, depending on each case, of assistants and "ghost cartoonists" that inked and coloured the creators' lines.

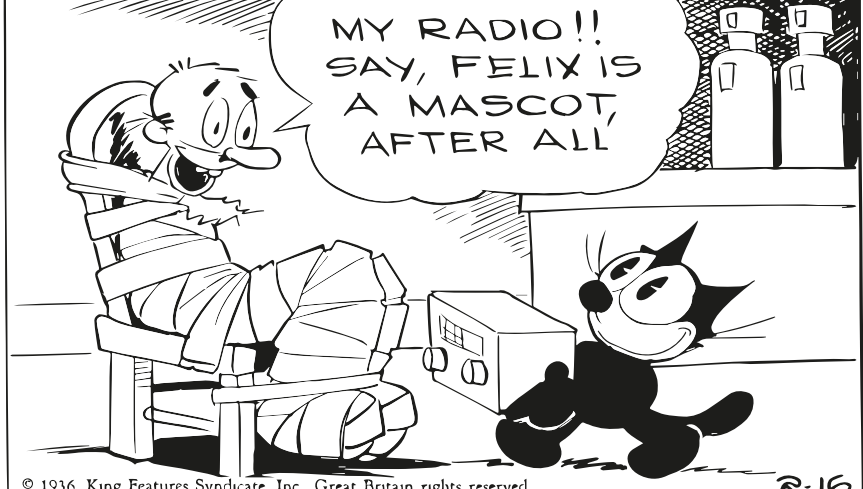
Comic technique always moved between those two extremes. Responding to creators' artistic demands but, at the same time, producing quickly and reducing dispensable work as much as possible so they would make their obligatory daily or weekly appointment in a fit state. The comic was born out of art and industry. And its great creators had to remain equidistant. Leaning on one side of the scales has produced art or industry, but not comics.

As with other arts, fine or not so fine, comics have always been a school. A righteous school in the case of the United States between 1900 and 1940. Each cartoonist was superseded by another, who burst on the scene with all the previous knowledge gained from the published pages. Who influenced who? No creator is willing to accept that he or she is not unique in origin and trajectory. But influences there were. Suggested, clear, hidden superimposed multilined etc.

Original ideas, the relationship between a comic strip and illustration or painting, exchanges between creators, copies and plagiarism, tributes, fights, lawsuits and trials, teaching acknowledged and rejected, and so on. Comic strips in the United States in their most classical stage defined a world full of geniuses and mutual influences. Those who grabbed, in turn, let go. They came, blossomed and conquered.

The comic explosion in the United States spawned some characters which were so appealing and convincing that they quickly began to cross borders. North American daily strips and Sunday pages spread through France – where they surpassed local papers and magazines, which still had a 19th-century appearance – Italy and, from there, Spain. Readers and cartoonists of the "old" continent were quick to grasp the meaning of that adjective: they were old and "the other" was "new". The novelty of the United States fascinated them and North American comics opened their eyes. Firstly, those of European businessmen producing magazines for children and teenagers and, subsequently, those of artists stuck in the rigid moulds of their predecessors.

Very quickly, Felix the Cat, Mickey and all Disney's characters, including Popeye and many more stars of the North American fantasy firmament, entered European homes and started to be celebrated, while copies, plagiarised versions and derivatives multiplied. Soon after Tarzan, The Phantom and Flash Gordon appeared on American newsstands, the publishing house Vecchi "imported" them into Italy, enjoying huge success. And thanks to Lotario Vecchi then, later, his nephew, Jorge Parenti, they rapidly spread throughout Spain, featuring in: Yumbo (1934), Aventurero (1935) and Tim Tyler (1936). These three magazines, which created a stylised, cultish Hispanic Americano de Ediciones into the



limelight, opened the door to the modern comic in Spain.

to build on this success, the Barcelona publishing house Molino took the heroes Parenti did not publish and put them in Mickey, a magazine launched in 1935 where Disney's characters, exclusively, added to the huge success they enjoyed at the cinema. The influence of this entire universe on Spanish cartoonists was enormous. Although TBO, the strongest, longest-running local magazine was apparently not suffering and refused to yield to the new styles, for example, speech bubbles, some of its cartoonists did. Like those of many other publishing houses, Who could resist?

The outbreak of war in 1936 cut short that success and that influence. Franco's victory weakened the names of North American heroes, at a time when the new Spanish regime was lining up with Italian Fascism and German Nazism. But publishers did not give up on the adventures and characters which had taken root among readers before the war and which would flourish in the post-war period. Thus, although publishers Hispano Americana hid the fact that Flash Gordon had been created by a North American author from the censors and portrayed him as "Flas" in order to "de-Americanize" him, and despite the fact that The Phantom did not fight against the Japanese on cartoon pages under Franco, but against an army with Japanese faces, uniforms and weapon that nobody would recognise as such, comic strips and whole pages of North American characters continued to be published in Spain.

How can we deny the influence of those heroes, of that drawing style, on Manuel Gago or Jesús Blanco, to mention just two of the biggest names in comic strips in Franco's Spain? El Guerrero del Antifaz, Cuto, El Pequeño Luchador, even someone as Spanish as Roberto Alcázar, owed a great deal to the American heroes. Not everything, obviously, because Spanish tradition also carried some weight, but a lot. It is true that there was a clear influence of this "own" tradition on the scripts, which were inspired by both the North American series and the earlier Spanish soap operas. But there was also the "other" influence, although the new authorities played it down and tried to avoid it until the German star began to

In children's and humorous cartoons, Disney hovered over the shadows of Emili Boix and Josep Sanchis. "Hipo, Monito and Fifi" or Pumby, Chivete and Blanquita, are Disney factory derivative characters. At publishers Editorial Valenciana, the alma mater, Josep Soriano Izquierdo, came from a tradition forged in the Catalan and Valencian satirical press, with a drawing style that linked him to L'Esquerra de la Torratxa or La Traca. His Jaimito, the character the magazine was named after, was like that, but he was also inspired by the influence of North American cinema. Sanchis, on the other hand, had already been through Disney's blender. Like the "Fallas" themselves, until well into the 1970s.

Today, Spanish comics from the 1930s, whether humorous or realistic and produced mainly in Catalonia and the Valencia region, would have been something else without the solid presence of North American stories and heroes, which took hold among cartoonists and scriptwriters. Despite the initial Francoist rage, which considered "old Anglo-Saxon liberalism" finished, the strength of the comic that emerged with Yellow Kid imposed itself without any resistance. Post-war Spanish comic books are also an offspring of North American comics. Less so than in France, where the end of World War II imposed vetoes and censorship and boosted an art with unique claims, but just as in Italy. Today Mickey Mouse or Flash Gordon are as much ours and as "Spanish" as El Guerrero del Antifaz or Capitán Trueno, who would not pass a DM-A test for reasons quite different from those of the first.

With the perspective that time gives, no one can deny that everything American comics have given us in the subsequent decades, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, has always survived. Of course, there is a French-Belgian school, the Japanese have come a very long way with styles undeniably their own, while other styles have developed in other corners of the world too. That is all very true. As is humbly acknowledging the effect on world culture of some creators who felt as big as they wanted their bank accounts to be at the end of the month and who sweated ink for that. *Gloria to the horses!*



l'Esclat del Còmics

CONTRASTOS I INFLUÈNCIES DELS GRANS
MESTRES DE LA HISTORIETA NORD-AMERICANA
(1895-1955)



Copyright Editorial Maga/Manuel Gago, 1962

**SU NOCHE
ANGUSTIOSA**

**UNA
AVENTURA
DEL
INSPECTOR**

DAN Y STELLA

DAN Y STELLA

¡CIELO SANTO!
¡MIRAD!
¡UNA MANCHA DE SANGRE!

¡ES SANGRE HUMANA...
¡MIRA! ¡AQUÍ HA OCURRIDO UN CRIMEN HACE POCO!

¡QUIZA! TENÍAS RAZÓN, STELLA. ESTO DEBE DE SER UN CASTILLO ENCANTADO.

-LA VERDAD ES QUE NO ENTEN-
DO LO QUE HA
OCURRIDO AQUI.
DEBERIAMOS
INVESTIGAR.

-EN ESTA FINCA SIEM-
PRE HAN OCURRIDO
COSAS MUY BARBAS. TO-
DO EL MUNDO DICE
QUE ESTA EMBRUJADA
PORQUE SE HALLA CONSTRUIDA
DA SOBRE UN ANTIGUO
CEMENTERIO DE
LOS INDIOS.

-YA ES
MUY TARDE.
LO MEJOR
SERA QUE
NOS VAYAMOS
A DORMIR Y
NOS TAPEMOS
LA CABEZA CON
LAS SABANAS.

PERO A LOS PO-COS MO-MENTOS...

TLAC TLAC

-¡CIELOS! ¡OIGO PASADAS EN LA ESCALERA! ¿ALGUIEN SE ESTÁ DEBANDO A ESTA HABITACION!

- ME PARECE QUE NO VOY A PODER DORMIR ESTA NOCHE. SORY Y GLADYS NO SE DAN CUENTA DE LA SITUACION. EN ESTA CASA SE HA COMETIDO UN CRIMEN. HACE ROBO. Y LO PEOR ES QUE EL CRIMINAL DEBE DONAR ROBO AQUI TODAVIA.

- MIENTRAS MIS AMIGAS
DESCANSAN TRATARE DE IN-
VESTIGAR POR MI CUENTA
NO QUISIERA ASUSTAR-
LAS.

CE 509

- DESGRACIADAMENTE, NO CONOZCO ESTA CASA Y ME TEMO QUE NO OBTENDRE NINGUN RESULTADO. PERRO... ¿QUE EXTRAÑO! TENGO LA SENSACION DE QUE ALGUIEN VA SIGUIENDOME.

¡DIOS MIO! HE OIDO UN GRITO EN LA HABITACION DE GLADYS Y AL OYERLO ME DIERON ALI... ¡ACABA CON EL ASESINADOR! ¡ME HAZEN ALGO MALO! ¡PRONTO VAYO A DAR!

JHAI BUR

Stella: ¿QUE ES LO QUE HA OCURRIDO, STELLA?

Don: -POR LO PRONTO, EN LA PUE-
TA HAY UNA MANCHA DE SANGRE
Cuyo ORIGEN FALTA ACLA-
RAR. HAN OCURRIDO TANTAS
COSAS, DON, QUE NO SE COM-
CONTASELAS. ~~INFORMAR~~
~~ACARA DE COMETER~~
COMEN. PERO ESTANDO
USTED
AHORA YA
NO HAY
PELIGRO

¿QUE OCURRE, STELLA?
¿ME OÍDO RUIDO DE PASOS Y...

-MAY ALGUIEN EN LA CASA, SUZY.
CREO QUE AQUÍ CORREMOS PELIGRO: AVISA A GLADIS.


¡DIOS MIO!
¡ESTU MUERTO!

-MURIO HACE UN PAR
DE HORAS, POR LO MENOS.
DE ESTE HOMBRE DEBE
SER LA SANGRE QUE HAY JUNTO AL
UMBRAL. GREGO QUE EMPLEO
A VER EN ESTE MISTERIO,
UN PEQUEÑO
RAYO DE LUZ.



- EL PELIGRO ALECHA EN TODOS LOS RIN-
CONES DE ESTA CASA DAMN. ANTES DE INICIAR
UNA INVESTIGACION ME DE DONER EN GOLAR
DIA A SUZY, ~~SUZY~~ ESTE MUNDO.

- ESTA USTED PASANDO UNA
BONITA NOCHE
DE VACACIO-
NES, STELLA.



- NO TE INQUIETES, STELLA. ESTA CASA TIENE LA VIRTUD DE ALTERAR LOS NERVIOS. EN ESTE CASUAL SE HALLAN LAS TOMBAS DE MÁS DE CINCUENTA LEPROSOS. HACE MUCHOS AÑOS, QUE SE GAVIDÓ SU EMPLEAMIENTO EN ESTO. PERO LA GENTE DE ESTOS CONTORNOS DICE QUE DURANTE LA NOCHE SE VEN APARICIONES ENTRE LOS ARBOLES

EL INSPECTOR DAN AL HABLA.
¿PERO QUE DICE?
¿ES USTED STEW?

A black and white comic book panel. On the left, a man with a large nose and a worried expression is shown from the chest up, wearing a suit and tie. He is gesturing with his hands as if in a state of panic or confusion. To his right, a speech bubble contains the text '¡OOOON! ¡SOSORRO!'. On the right side of the panel, the back of another person's head and shoulders are visible, looking towards the man in the suit. The background is dark and indistinct.

A black and white comic panel. In the center, a man in a suit sits on the ground, looking up with a distressed expression. To his left, a man in a striped shirt is partially visible. To his right, a woman wearing a headscarf and a long dress stands looking on. Three speech bubbles are present: one from the man on the left saying "IAAAH!", one from the man in the suit saying "ESPERABA ALGO SEMEJANTE, ROMA!", and one from the woman on the right saying "JIE LU SAN TO!". The words "BANG BANG" are written in large, bold letters near the man in the striped shirt. The background is simple, with some vertical lines suggesting a setting.


- EN ESTA CASA ESTAN OCURRIENDO COSAS MUY EXTRAÑAS. INSPECTOR **DON. ACABO** DE VER UNA APARICIÓN HORRIBLE... NO ESTOY SONANDO, NO... ¡LE SORP! CO QUE VENGAS INMEDIATAMENTE

- DENTRO DE OCHO MINUTOS SALE UN TREN PARA LA COSTA. TRATARE DE ALCANZARLO.

- ME DÍA A ANTES HA AV COMPRA CORRE SERIO GEO. A HAY MO DE QUI MEE P RENUEV DE LOS LIGEROS CUENT TEORA AQUEL

- POR LO VISTO SE ESTÁN INTENTANDO NOS A PASAR LAS VACACIONES EN ESTA FINCA. AQUÍ ESTÁN OCURRIENDO COSAS DEMASIADO EXTRAÑAS. EN FIN, AHORA QUE HE AVISADO A DON VÍCENTE HE CERRADO TODAS LAS PUERTAS. CREO QUE LO MEJOR SERÁ INTENTAR DORMIR.

-¡CARAMBA! ¡NADA ME-
NOS QUE DOUGLAS ERNE-
VOLT, EL DESPIADADO ASE-
SINO! ¡ESTA VEZ TENDRÁS
QUE RESPONDER DE DOS
MORTES ANTES DE LA SORTE SUPREMA
DE LA GUERRA! ¡BUENA IDEA LA DE
PONERTE ESA HORRIBLE MASCA-
RA DE GO-
MA!



PAS MAS DEPARTA UN EXPRE- NEGRESADA PES.

-¡CIELOS! ¡QUE NOCHE! DESPUES MUERTE DE LA POBRE GLADIS NO

- ERNEKOLT Y MOP- TIMER HABIAN ATRAI-

DO A UN HOMBRE A LA FINCA PI- RA ASE SIN ARRE, UNA VEZ CONSE- GUIDO SU PROPOSITO, LLEGARON INO PAINADAMENTE USTEDES TRES PARA PO- DER SACAR EL CADAVER EN UN BOUL SIN SER DESUBIERTOS, DECURRIERON A ASUSTARLES PARA QUE ABANDONSEN LA FINCA, PERO TENIAN QUE PASAR POR EL CARGO DE GLADIS, Y COMO LES OJO LA ASE SIN ARRE, DESPUES DE MI LLE- DA SE ENFADARON, LA SEÑORA CINDY LE

RIA UNA I MAS EN LA CASA A ME HIKIEREN DE LLAVES PRIMER M- TEO.



DE LO PASA AHORA QUE CUANDO EN AMBA DEL INIS-

- DESPUES DE ESTO TODAS LAS VACACIONES QUE TENGA ME LAS PASARE LEYENDO REVISTAS EN SCOTLAND YARD.

- EL CORONEL HIGGINS NUNCA MAS PODRA DECIRLA QUE LE FALTABA A CUESTO UNA NOCHE DE TEBBRO. ESTE HA SIDO SU NOCHE MAS GUSTOSA, STELLA. AHORA ES MAS QUE NUNCA, UNA DETECTIVE COMPLETA.

- GRACIAS, DAN.

FIN