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# Comics Art



## Synopsis

A fascinating overview of the history and influence of comics, ranging from the late 19th century to present-day graphic novels and the Internet. The narrative possibilities of comics art and the accessibility of the form have made it one of the more innovative contemporary genres.

Self-publishing and the Internet have given rise to new, autobiographical forms and an increasing number of authors draw from outside the mainstream, whether sexually, ethnically, or politically.

— In this richly illustrated and accessible survey, acclaimed author Paul Gravett considers the vast output of comics culture from the late 19th century to today, including syndicated comics, graphic novels, and contemporary art and illustration. From foundational masterpieces such as Rodolphe Topffer's and Wilhelm Busch's albums, George McManus's Art Deco "Bringing Up Father," and Alex Raymond's "Flash Gordon" to the later retro stylings of Robert Crumb, Gravett considers lines of influence from around the world and examines how comics have shifted from supporting the status quo to becoming the voice of alternative subcultures. Gravett traces the major themes taking place in contemporary comics, noting the rise of publications that function as questioning, transgressive outlets for outsider stories and ideas, and includes the ways that folk art traditions are reinvigorating the form.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

— "A remarkable achievement. Intensely detailed but never intimidating, [Comics Art]

approaches this bizarre, wonderful medium with complete enthusiasm and a keen, articulate critical eye. If you're looking for a primer on comics history, you won't find one better.

Alasdair Stuart, *Comic Heroes* (five-star review) (Alasdair Stuart *Comic Heroes*)

"A gem of a book"

Rachel Papachlimitzou, *Aesthetica* (Rachel Papachlimitzou *Aesthetica*)

"Richly illustrated and hugely informative"

Rachel Cooke, *Observer* (Rachel Cooke *Observer*)

"There's no better guide to the undiscovered wonders out there . . . [Comics Art] is the culmination of a lifetime's reading, collecting, and thinking. There are mind-blowing images on every page turn."

Toby Litt, *New Statesman* (Toby Litt *New Statesman*)

"Sumptuously illustrated, internationalist in outlook, and very much up to the minute"

Teddy Jamieson, *Sunday Herald* (Teddy Jamieson *Sunday Herald*)

"Wide-ranging . . . [and] compelling"

J.J. Charlesworth, *ArtReview* (J.J. Charlesworth *ArtReview*)

"Always thought-provoking and informative . . . stunningly conveyed with an incisive selection of illustrations . . . insightful, celebratory, and a powerful advocate for its subject."

Andy Oliver, *Broken Frontier* (Andy Oliver *Broken Frontier*)

"[A] profusely illustrated analysis of the medium . . . Comics Art is valuable for its insights."

David Luhrssen, *Shepherd Express / Express Milwaukee* (David Luhrssen *Shepherd Express / Express Milwaukee*)

"One of the most important and influential writers, curators, and thinkers about the medium . . . [Comics Art] covers a lot of ground and approaches comics in a number of very interesting ways."

Alex Dueben, *Comic Book Resources* (Comic Book Resources)

"Every fan seeking to connect to his or her deeper creative, appreciative, respectful inner geek needs to read Comics Art."

Daniel Rasmus, *Pop Matters* (Daniel Rasmus *Pop Matters*)

"[A] fast-moving, responsible overview"

Stephen Burt, *Artforum* (Stephen Burt *Artforum*)

"Multi-faceted . . . lavishly illustrated [and] international in scope . . . a book that will be read with interest by both comics fans and occasional readers of graphic novels."

Louis J. Kern, *Key Reporter* (Louis J. Kern *Key Reporter*)

"[Comics Art] is wonderfully designed with lush color but also a rich sense of an irreducibly complex history. . . . Any reader interested in the subject . . . veteran comics fan or hardly at all a comics fan . . . will benefit from the book, and enjoy it to boot."

Paul Buhle, *Science & Society* (Paul Buhle *Science & Society*)

"For lovers of comics and the stories they tell, Comics Art provides another reason to draw a line between speech bubbles and serious literature . . . the book is an excellent treasure trove of ideas, history and analysis."

Peter Zimonjic, *NGC (National Gallery of Canada) Magazine* (Peter

In this fascinating survey, acclaimed author Paul Gravett considers the vast output of comics culture from the late 19th century to today, tracing international lines of influence and examining major themes in contemporary comics.

Gravett gets better & better every time he publishes a new book! He knows we want to see, (and read), the comics themselves, as well as listen to his wise, enthusiastic, sophisticated commentary.

I like all of Gravett's books. Beautiful visuals and excellent commentary.

Excellent in depth review of the art of comics and graphic art

Paul Gravette is petit in height and was nicknamed the *petit crevette* in his schoolboy days being that his second name is *Gravette*, similar to the French translation of prawn *crevette*. Yet despite this etymological twist the comics industry hails Paul Gravette with gravitas, regarding him as a scholar in the subject of Comics - recently quoted in the Times as *the greatest historian of comics and graphic novel form in the country*. This week he has released a commentary on the modern history of comics titled *Comic arts* published by Tate Publishing. Here Comics Bubble asks some questions. In your recent publication *Comics Art* you say that *Mixing and contrasting techniques is opening up fresh avenues of expression for graphic novelists* such as the recently published *Black Project* by Gareth Brookes who uses linocut prints with embroidery in his comic. Could you talk a little bit about the new wave of heightened realism in comics, how unexpected mediums such as this outsider art that allows *the continuous flow of reality* to *opens up new possibilities*. Why is it important that artists experiment with new mediums in the comic book format? I suppose traditionally comics have been made for print and made to be easy to print and this is obviously what Roy Lichtenstein exaggerated with his painted hard black outlines and clunky bold colours and this is how people have assumed comics look, and still do today. Now there is no end to drawing styles and printing techniques that can be applied, you know, even

knitted comics - why not! Photograph comics, for example are hugely under-explored, if I had another hundred pages for this book there would be a chapter on photographic comics because its absurd that you have photographers who surely want to tell stories, surely some of them realise that they could do more than one photograph, yet they don't there is a very small number of photographers doing this, it seems photography needs to wake up to the idea that it could be doing more narratively. There is also the notion that comics don't need to look the same, that a multitude of styles can be used in the same book such as Glynn Dillon's *A Brown Nao of Brown* where he has two stories being told simultaneously. In *Comics Art* there is a particularly interesting discussion you make over the dualist nature of marrying images and words in graphic novels, the idea that words are a higher form of communication and don't need the excess of pictures to explain thoughts. What would you say to the idea that it is the nature of subversion that is the essence of the comic art medium? Well in one sense they are very subversive because they don't behave and keep words and pictures separate, and certainly in historical terms, the mad German Gotthalde Lessing, a critic, was very concerned that there should be an absolute divide - that the two should never blend and this sentiment is still around - even Wordsworth published a poem in about 1850 that was against the illustrated page and was horrified that pictures were invading the wonderful world of words, and we still have this going on, this nervousness from the literary world that somehow pictures debase and simplify, so we can't pretend that the whole medium is subversive in terms of its content, but I do think in terms of its form, its actual structure, it is counter to a lot of peoples thinking. Tate publishing is obviously part of the Tate gallery whom occupy the old power station building. It has been noted that hosting art within this building is an intended narrative about the history of art and how industrialization and the subsequent commodification of culture has had an influence on artistic output. Roy Lichtenstein's recent retrospective is an example of this, how his paintings contain a playful irony by inverting the throw away comic into high brow status. Could you tell us in your own words why this publication of *Comics Art* published by such a large cultural institute such as Tate is such an important step for 'comics as art' as stated in the title of your book. Well the book *Comics Art* is joining a list called the contemporary art series, which are sort of like surveys, accessible introductions to all kinds of subjects from installation art, land art, and also interestingly street art, a guy called Cedar Lewiston who is a very knowledgeable curator, put together an impressive show about street art which is one of these things that has come off the street and into the gallery,

perhaps a little like comics art. And at one point we were hatching together an exhibition for street art and comics and partly out of that dialogue and proposing that project and possibly a book to go with it, came the idea from Tate that they wanted to do a book about comics. Tate is of course an important entree because ideally the book is possibly a toe, maybe not a big toe, certainly not a foot in the door at Tate for them to consider doing an exhibition about comics as art, but generally I am feeling that it is too big a leap for Tate to actually consider, possibly even in the next decade for doing an exhibition about comics, as art, it would upset the art world too much. But didn't they do an exhibition on Robert Crumb's cartoons? No that was Whitechapel and that's because the director there is alert to the fact that comics are art, and plenty of other prestigious galleries around the world have done it. It could happen, maybe I'll be surprised. When Crumb had his major show last year at the Musee du Modern in Paris at the press conference he was talking to the director saying "Why have you chosen my work to put here, it's not made for the gallery wall it's made for reproduction." And of course, Crumb is one of the few who have been adopted by the art world. The director admitted he did not know a lot about Crumb's work or even his heritage of satirical art, and the director said that it was simply because a lot of contemporary artists cite him as a major influence in their work. Can you tell us a bit about how you came to be involved with comics yourself, you mentioned you have a law degree from Cambridge why did you choose a less financially rewarding occupation? What magnetizes you to comics, why are you so drawn to its counter-culture? A crucial thing was that when I was studying at Cambridge and getting completely bored with Law, I did it because my father was a lawyer, I discovered a lot about art, I had not had much exposure to art but going to Paris, reacting naively, having this friend of mine Augustus Martine, who never really accepted my enthusiasm for comics, nonetheless really opened up my ideas about art, stuff I hadn't even thought about and that's important because up until then my taste in art was defined by comics to a large extent, and defined by thinking the best evolution of comics was toward a greater and greater realism, artists like Neil Adams, who brought in this kind of slick photographic madison avenue advertisement art style, which influences artists today such as Alex Ross, who is this incredible painter of hyper-realist, slightly kitsch - kind of fantastically realistically drawn superhero's with bulge's and wrinkles, and it was a high point, and I remember being in the Pompidou for the first time and looking at a Paul Klee painting and thinking it's comics! And it is! Its beautiful abstract comic panels! And crucially that has meant that my prejudices were put aside and horizons broadened. After all these years of reviewing and writing

about comics, often in a very poetic way, do you think we will ever see a graphic novel by Paul Gravette? Well I am not going to say never, actually one thing that might happen which a publisher mentioned which is were I could write about comics in a comic book, rather like MCloud, I wouldn't draw it but it would be explaining comics, so well shall see! Finally do you have any interesting projects coming up that we should know about for our Comics Bubble readers? Yes myself and John Dunning are currently organising a project at the British Library that is going to be the biggest comics exhibition in this country has ever had, titled "Comics Unmasked, art and anarchy in the UK" there was an equivalent exhibition like this one in France, back in 1990 for the Engelem festival which was the first major survey of British comic art, with lots of original pages it was called "God Save the Comics" and it was there at the opening of the amazing comics center that the Engelem in South of France has, it was opened by the Jack Lang Ministry of Culture. Finally in Britain we get the chance to do a big exhibition about British comics next year at the British library - a fantastically prestigious venue, they are getting known now for doing really top class exhibitions and of course it is a literary prestigious place which will lift comics to a level where they have not really been seen quite before because absurdly there hasn't been a show that focuses on just British comics before in the UK. The Book: Published by Tate Publishing £18.99 ISBN: 978-1-84976-056-0 Quote: "Listen closely. It never stops. You can almost make out the scratching of pens and pencils onto paper, the tapping of typewriters, the clicking of computers, the buzz of printing presses and binders, all the assorted sound effects of writers, artists and printers creating more comics every minute all over the world"

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