

The Comic Book Art of Arthur Pinajian

Richard J. Boyle

Men who had been reading newspaper comic strips . . . for most of their lives, many of them young and inexperienced with the pencil, the ink brush and the cruel time constraints of piece work, struggled to see beyond the strict spatial requirements of the . . . strip.

— Michael Chabon

When the immense cache of Arthur Pinajian’s work was found in the garage of his sister’s cottage in Bellport, Long Island, there was no indication that the artist got his start in comic books — an industry that by the mid-1930s had become the most popular art form since the advent of the movies. Yet, his voluminous archive of notes, plus letters to and from publishers and his family, soon revealed that he was an important pioneer in the field. He was, in the words of Michael Chabon, one of those “men who had been reading newspaper comic strips . . . for most of their lives.”ⁱ In one letter, Pinajian wrote, “I wanted to illustrate. I did not know what fine art was. I was brought up on commercial fare, Tarzan, westerns, mysteries, magazine illustrations, comics. So I began in comic books and thought I would go into illustration, as it paid more.”ⁱⁱ

The study of Pinajian’s comic book strips comes at a time when, during the last decade, art historians have found increased interest in this art form — an interest that might have been sparked by the revival of the Graphic Novel, where serious political and psychological issues are embedded in the comic form, and which from the beginning “offered the kind of art that reaches outside the . . . boundaries of the comic book audience.”ⁱⁱⁱ Beginning with Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, who admired the English children’s book illustrators Randolph Caldecott [1846–1886] and Kate Greenaway [1846–1901], through Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who admired American cartoons and comic strips, this new art form was of serious interest to venturesome modern artists. Some, including Lyonel Feininger [1871–1956] and George Luks [1867–1933], even created their own strips.^{iv} In the 1920s and 1930s, such American poets and critics as e.e. Cummings and Gilbert Seldes, among others, were great admirers of George Herriman’s long-running *Krazy Kat*, which made its debut in 1913, the year of the celebrated Armory Show.^v More recently, cartoons and comics have inspired the work of such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Philip Guston, Red Grooms, and Carroll Dunham.

ⁱ Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Random House, 2000) 75.

ⁱⁱ Letter to Peter Najarian, Bellport, April 10, 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ Miles Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically: Krazy Kat, Maus and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon," in *After the Machine: Visual Arts and the Erasing of Cultural Boundaries* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 141.

^{iv} Richard J. Boyle, *Double Lives: American Painters as Illustrators, 1850–1950* (New Britain, Conn.: New Britain Museum of American Art and University Press of New England, 2008) 38–40.

^v Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically," 131.

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