

Opposite: Bob Kane, *Detective Comics*
No. 31, cover art, September 1939

WHAM!

75 YEARS OF COMIC BOOK ART

The fantasy world of superheroes has a long and distinguished history. But it was the inspiration of DC Comics and others who gave us our modern equivalents, such as Superman and Wonder Woman—and with a graphic style that's had a far-reaching influence. **By Brendan Connolly**

Entertaining millions, weekly comic books and their spin-off annuals have been a cultural influence across some three generations at least. Not only has the comic strip entertained us, this vibrant form of graphic art has also influenced contemporary art itself, spawning a Pop Art phase in the fifties and sixties that saw artists such as Roy Lichtenstein blaze a trail with works such as *Drowning Girl* and *Whaam!* (both 1963). This was a trail first taken by Richard Hamilton among others, an art concept that took products designed for everyday consumption to an iconic status, such as Hamilton's collage of 1956 entitled *What Is It That Makes Homes So Different, So Appealing*—and later, and most famously, Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can*, 1964,

and his renowned Coca-Cola bottle image, the latter selling at auction in 2010 for \$35 million.

So what came next in this genre? It might be argued that Street Art is a direct descendent, when artists such as Banksy brought a surprising new respectability to what had previously been labeled graffiti, making social comments often in comic book style. With this new Street Art frequently paying homage to the comic book art, we must once again recognize the powerful influence of the comic book creators, especially that of Marvel Comics and DC Comics.

Ever since the first comic books appeared in the USA in 1932, which immediately caught the public's imagination, this form of pulp fiction has been extremely collectable. But the

market for comics in their finest CGC-graded state (an official grading system) remains volatile, with auction prices fluctuating according to trends. However, comics have been known to make the \$1 million-mark at auction—in 2010, for instance, a 10 cent 1938 edition of *Action Comics No. 1*, featuring the debut of Superman (from DC Comics) broke all previous records by selling for \$1.5 million to an anonymous bidder. The copy was in unusually fine condition and was said to be one of only a hundred copies printed.

Vincent Zurzola, who's ComicConnect set up this auction, says: 'Some of today's most successful entrepreneurs were yesterday's comic geeks. They don't want a Van Gogh or a Picasso. They want collectibles that mean something to them. Our society is built on pop

culture. Superman, Spider-Man, Batman... they're the icons now.' And not only today's entrepreneurs are comic book addicts, there are also a number of high-profile celebrities who collect—Ben Affleck, Nicolas Cage, and Jonathan Ross, to name just a few. Nicolas Cage, a longtime comics fan, amassed an impressive collection over the years, but in October 2002, he auctioned off most of his collection for combined proceeds of over \$1.68 million.

Also going into orbit around the collectors' world last year was a copy of the first Batman comic book, *Detective Comics No.27*, selling at auction for \$1,075,000.

To date, these are the most expensive comic

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books ever sold, although speculation is rife among collectors as to which comic book item will be the next to break the record and when.

The comic book industry is its own universe, populated by shrewd publishers, creative writers, talented artists, jittery auctioneers and collectors, and of course the superheroes themselves, who spend most of their time saving the world and overthrowing evil, while sometimes leaping the divide from the printed page to our TV screens, game consoles, and the movies (the 1978 film posters and billboards for the blockbuster *Superman*, seemed to make comic book fantasies a reality for millions of American fans who were gripped by the words splashed out: 'You'll believe a man can fly.')

Seventy-five years is a long time in comics and this year sees that anniversary fall for DC Comics with the publication of a suitably gigantic tome, subtitled 'The Art of Modern Mythmaking'. *75 Years of DC Comics* by Paul Levitz is a remarkable monument both to DC and to popular culture (the book is the recent winner of the 2011 Eisner Comic Industry Award for Best Comics-Related Book of the Year).

Levitz was until recently a DC Comics' executive and also editor/publisher of *The Comic Reader*, editor of the *Batman* titles and others, writer of over 300 stories—including an acclaimed run on *Legion of Super-Heroes*—finishing his 38-year stint with the company as president and publisher.

Levitz's tour of DC Comic's 75 years is a fascinating rollercoaster ride across the decades, from 1935 when DC Comics founder,



Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, published *New Fun No.1*, the first comic book with all-new, original material—at a time when comic books were mere repositories for the castoffs of the newspaper strips—taking us through the comic book eras 'Stone Age', 'Golden Age', 'Silver Age', 'Bronze Age', 'Dark Age', 'Modern Age', through to the 'Digital Age'.

Underlying the DC Comics history and the development of the comic book, is also a unique insight into social history in America, often reflected in the comics themselves. For example, an issue of *Fun Book, The Spirit*, 1948, with script and art by Will Eisner, gives us stories that were often parables of humanities foibles—again a Freudian obsession with flying—the stories centre on one Gerhard Schnobble whose secret identity enables him to fly.

Not all the public response to these comic book fantasies was popular, however. In 1948

FLASH!

In honor of DC Comic's 75th anniversary, TASCHEN has produced the single most comprehensive book on DC Comics, in an XL edition even Superman might have trouble lifting. More than 2,000 images—covers and interiors, original illustrations, photographs, film stills, and collectibles—are reproduced using the latest technology to bring the story lines, the characters, and their creators to vibrant life as they've never been seen before. Telling the tales behind the tome is 38-year DC veteran Paul Levitz, whose in-depth essays trace the company's history, from its pulp origins through to the future of digital publishing.

Left: Leo O'Mealia, *Action Comics No. 2*, cover art, July 1938

Below: Andy Warhol, *Large Coca-Cola*, 1962, reached \$35,362,500 at auction

there were communities across America that burned comic books on public bonfires, deeming them to be dangerous for children, and even into the 1950s some conscientious parents remained vigilant as to the type of comic books their children were allowed to read.

Apart from the comic book characters who have become legends over the years, it was the creators—the scriptwriters and artists—who rarely received much acknowledgement, apart, perhaps, from a byline. Paul Levitz, however, admirably addresses this by giving quotes, biographies and profiles of DC Comic's star cast, and an impressive array of talent it is.

Leafing through the hundreds of pages of artwork, covers, etc., that lavishly illustrate Levitz's book—both familiar and never-before-published material—it's easy to see why Pop Art seized on these comic book graphic styles with all their raunchy panache and immediacy, and also why collectors today continue to compete so keenly for original comic book art as well as for the highly-prized and fragile early editions published by DC Comics and others. ●

75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking, Paul Levitz, Hardcover, 29 x 39.5cm, 720 pages, £135, www.taschen.com