

Wham! Bam! Thank you, MAM!

"Masters of American Comics" packs a punch in Milwaukee.
By **Ruth Lopez**

Comics have been finding their way into museums for years, but their import as works of art—not just beloved pop-culture artifacts or subject fodder for contemporary painting—is just starting to be recognized. The "Masters of American Comics" at the Milwaukee Art Museum represents this shift in our collective attitude.

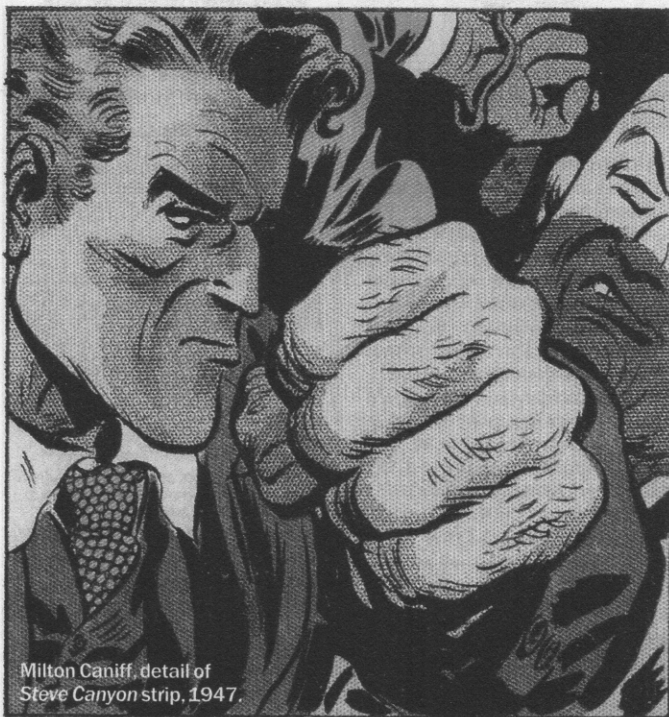
The traveling exhibition originated in Los Angeles and its curators, Brian Walker and John Carlin, took a bold approach: They focused on the work of just 15 artists from a period of 100 years and created a first-run at a canon in the process. Comic-art aficionados will probably wonder why certain artists were not included, but it's doubtful they will wonder about the ones who were. The show features work by Winsor McCay, Lyonel Feininger, George Herriman, E.C. Segar, Frank King, Chester Gould, Milton Caniff, Charles M. Schulz, Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Harvey Kurtzman, R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Gary Panter and Chris Ware.

"We were trying to tell the story of the American comics' evolution in the 20th century and these 15 artists represent chapters in that story," said Walker in a recent interview.

Comics first appeared in newspapers in the 1890s, and this show—which is arranged chronologically—contains drawings, sketches, comic books and vintage newspaper pages (known as the Sunday Funnies by the 1920s).

The show begins with McCay (1867–1934), a character worthy of his own biopic, who started his career drawing in the Dime Museum in Detroit and was also an animation pioneer. On display here are original pen and ink drawings of his various series (along with newspaper pages), including the comic-art masterpiece *Little Nemo in Slumberland*—a visually opulent tale of a boy's dream adventures, which ran on one colorful full page on Sundays from 1905 to 1913.

In Los Angeles, the 900-item exhibition was split between the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art—a situation that, according to various sources, was far



Milton Caniff, detail of *Steve Canyon* strip, 1947.

from ideal: The historical material stayed in one place while the contemporary work was displayed across town. Milwaukee had to pare the bounty down a bit, but by putting it all under one roof, it's easy to see how the early artists influenced subsequent generations.

"The comic world is a very self-referential world," says Margaret Andera, coordinator of the exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Being able to see the work of, say, Chicagoan Ware in the same gallery as the artist he says most inspired him—Frank

"We were trying to tell the story of American comics."

King (*Gasoline Alley*)—is a plus.

The Milwaukee exhibition also clearly shows the shift in visual storytelling over time from simple tales of pranks and dreams (Herriman's *Krazy Kat*) to dramatic crime fighting (Gould's *Dick Tracy*). Cultural satire in the form of *MAD* magazine came later, followed by the work of Crumb—the daddy of underground "comix."

When newspapers trimmed down

and began reducing the size of the strips, along came Schulz in the early 1950s who dealt with the shrinkage brilliantly with his almost minimalist *Peanuts*. Schulz's genius was in creating uniquely recognizable figures with the simplest of lines. While the visuals may have been spare, the stories were rich and the humor sophisticated, and he was able to convey all of that in such a confined space. "You could read his work on a postage stamp if you had to," Walker says.

The main proponent of this show was Spiegelman, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for *Maus*, his graphic book on the Holocaust. In 1990, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture"—an exhibition that included comics, albeit in the "low art" category. The show irked Spiegelman (and countless critics for various reasons), who made it a mission to get comics back in an art museum.

There could be no better press for pissed-off comic artists than this exhibition.

"Masters of American Comics" is at the Milwaukee Art Museum through August 13. See Museums & Institutions.