

EUROPEAN GRAPHIC NOVELS: THE RICH DIVERSITY OF THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT SINCE 1960

Definition

Even before the widespread use of the English term “graphic novel,” works were published in Europe that, in retrospect, can be considered belonging to this category, because the themes and visual narration of these works had artistic ambitions and they aimed at an adult readership.

Introduction

Though the one-shot is the prototypical form of the graphic novel, in practice, most graphic novels are published in limited series of albums. For comics publishers worldwide, it is more lucrative to split a graphic

novel into various volumes than to compile the work in one expensive volume. For example, the 361 pages of *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (1996-2003; *Epileptic*, 2005) were originally published in six albums, and it took the author, David B., about seven years to finish the work. Only in exceptional cases (such as the French or Dutch translations of *Jimmy Corrigan*, 1993-2000, or *Blankets*, 2003) have companies risked publishing a work in one volume.

Just as the material presented in a graphic novel may be varied, the themes, narratives, and graphics can be extremely diverse. Furthermore, it is important to stress that graphic novels, or comics in general, do not



Blueberry comics, set in the American Old West, began publication in Europe in 1963. (Courtesy of Dargaud)

have the same impact in every European state. In Greece or the Baltic states, for example, comics remain a marginal cultural form, while in France or Belgium, for example, comics seem almost constitutional to their respective cultures. This explains why critically acclaimed graphic novels of non-French authors (such as the Italian Lorenzo Mattotti, the Argentinean José Muñoz, or the Spanish Miguelanxo Prado) were first published in French—and often in better quality—before they were published in the native language of the authors.

Historically speaking, some European graphic narratives published before 1960 can be considered forerunners of the adult graphic novel; examples include Gustave Doré's *Histoire dramatique, pittoresque et caricaturale de la Sainte Russie* (1854) or Frans Masereel's *Histoires sans paroles* (1920). However, from the early twentieth century until the mid-1960's, most comics produced in Europe were primarily targeted to children and were considered low cultural phenomena without any artistic value.

One can see various stages in the evolution of graphic novels in Europe beginning in the 1950's, and the genre evolved somewhat differently in each country. One could argue that, in general, the first period of the graphic novel in Europe ran from the early 1960's to the late 1980's, followed by a second period of further growth and development beginning in the 1990's.

Major Shifts from 1960 to 2010

There are remarkable differences between the European comics culture of 1960 and that of 2010, in terms of both production and public reception. In 1960, almost all European comics were meant for children and were published in serial form. By 2010, however, a considerable number of one-shots were targeted specifically to adults. In 1960, the title of the series was the most important selling point; however, in the contemporary marketplace, who wrote and illustrated the book has become more important than the title.

Though Europe is not a homogenous cultural market, the media industries (helped by European Union legislation) are paving the way for a more integrated approach to dissemination. Since the 1980's,

publishing houses that started small as family enterprises have merged into international conglomerates. For example, three important francophone publishers (Dargaud, Lombard, and Dupuis) became part of Média-Participations, and they occupy more than one-third of the French comics market.

Though the number of comics publishers has increased enormously since 1960, the comics market is dominated by a limited number of conglomerates. On the whole, the number of book editions has increased; from 1960 to 1980, the number of graphic albums increased in France tenfold. Since 2000, the industry has exploded, with a record number of more than five thousand titles in 2010. In 1960, comics production was still strongly rooted in the press, be it in the general press or in specialized comics magazines; book editions (called "albums" in French and Dutch) existed, but in limited number. Since 1960, the perception of comics has shifted drastically from a cultural form perceived as entertainment for children to a medium with a rich and varied culture, capable of producing high quality works for adults. Admittedly, not all has changed; some of most popular series of the past, such as *Astérix* (1961-1979), *Lucky Luke* (1949-1967), and *Blake et Mortimer* (1946-) remain best sellers in many European countries.

Emergence of Graphic Novels

Cultural recognition of the comics medium began in the 1960's, when comics specialists and fans began forming associations, such as *Club des bandes dessinées* and *Het Stripschap*. These associations organized festivals (Lucca Comics and Games in Italy, Angoulême International Comics Festival in France), gave exhibitions (for example, *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative* in 1967 in the Louvre Museum), and published fanzines (such as *Stripschrift*, *Linus*, and *Phénix*) and books on comics. The first generation of comics scholars came soon after.

Furthermore, in the 1960's, the comics market was evolving. The baby boomers became young adults in the 1960's and 1970's; consequently, some publishers tried to deliver products adapted to their age and taste. The new protagonists, seen in *Blueberry* (1963-) and *Corto Maltese* (first published in 1967), for example,