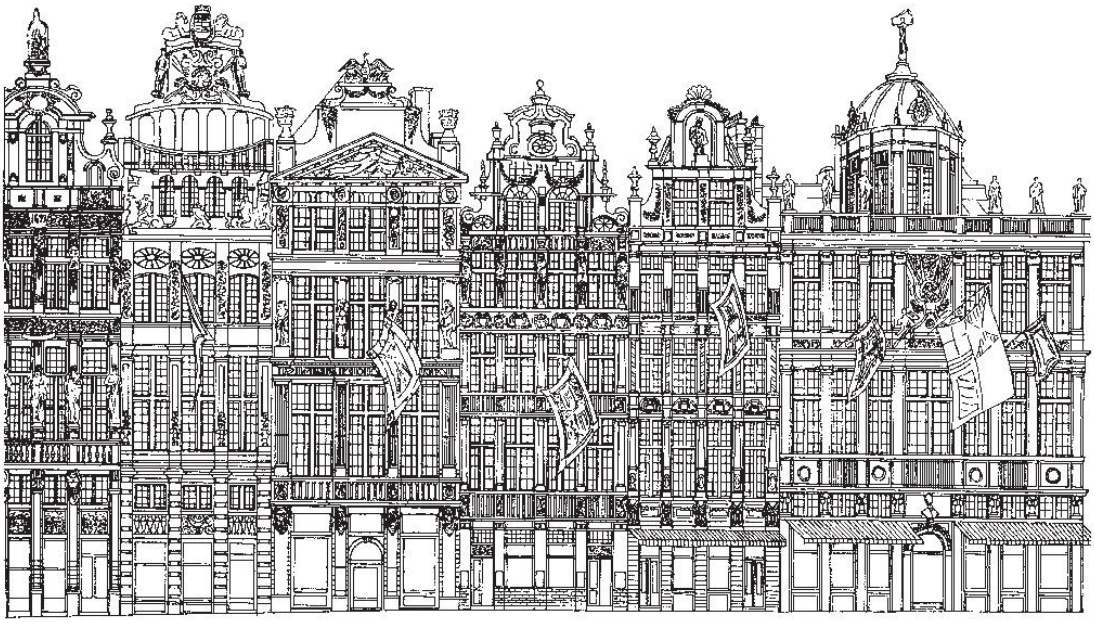


BRUSSELS WEEKLY

Unofficial Publication, U.S. Tri-Missions in Brussels ***February 3, 2006***

COMICS IN BELGIUM… HOW BELGIANS CAN LOVE A GUY LIKE BUCK DANNY

If I had to guess, I would say that about half of my solo trips to Carrefour include a slow stroll down the aisle filled with those big, eye-catching colorful comic books. Blake & Mortimer, Largo Winch, Buck Danny, and, of course Tintin. There are over 150 series in hardback. I know this is true because I counted them one day.

The first thing that I noticed about Belgian comics was how expensive they are. At nearly €8 per issue, buying all 24 of Tintin in French is not a decision to be taken lightly. During subsequent visits to the comic book aisle, I saw that they are arranged by series. Early episodes of, say, Blake & Mortimer are found on the higher shelves and later ones are nearer the bottom. Some series have so many episodes published that they take up an entire section of shelves, top to bottom. Like their flimsier paper American counterparts, Belgian comics have long-running story lines filled with details and nuance. On the visual side, some of the series feature artwork that is engaging without being realistic. Tintin and Gaston are good examples. Others, such as Largo Winch and Buck Danny, are very realistic. All are of high quality.

Belgium's population of 10 million supports some 650 professional comic artists; this gives Belgium the highest concentration of cartoonists in the world. Why are there are so many comics, and why do they all look so good? What is it about Belgium that makes its citizens this interested in comics?

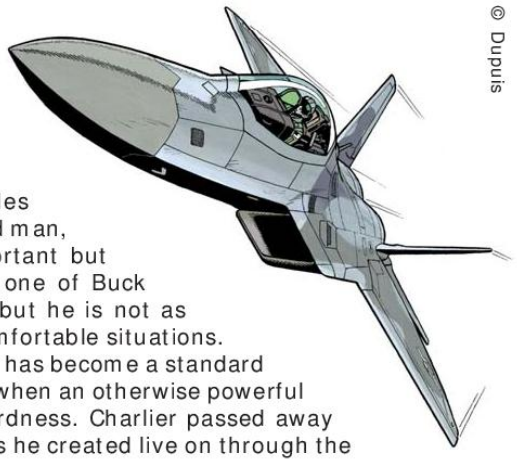
A GOOD PLACE TO SEE WHAT BELGIANS LIKE ABOUT THEIR COMICS is the Belgian Center for Comic Strips. It is conveniently located just 15-20 minutes by foot from the Embassy downtown. It houses a museum with permanent and temporary exhibits, a bookstore, a reading room, and even a restaurant named after the well-known Belgian art nouveau architect Victor Horta.

The museum building is enormous. It should be. Designed by Horta, it was built in 1906 to house the wholesale cloth business of the Waucquez family. Renovation work done in the late 1980s made it an ideal setting for a comic strip museum; windows at the top of the complex provide the kind of natural lighting that is best for seeing colors and details, whether they are in bolts of cloth or exhibits of cartoonists' work. The exhibits run the gamut from a step-by-step description of how comics are created (copiously illustrated, naturally) to life-sized 3-D figures of some of the more popular characters to dioramas. Even the signs for the restrooms are done in an eye-catching art deco style. A trip to the museum is certainly worthwhile.

SOMETHING ABOUT COMIC BOOKS appeals to Belgians. Maybe it is the colors and the detail of the artwork. Perhaps Belgians are just better than Americans at keeping alive the sense of childlike wonder that these comic books cater to. Whatever the reason, high-quality animation is such a part of Belgian culture that it has become self-perpetuating. Like baseball or basketball or football in the United States, Belgian comics have a wide following, and talented young people here can afford to dream of making a living in the industry. With such a good pool of talent producing such good material, it should be no surprise that comics many Americans assume are American come from Belgium. One example is the Smurfs. Yes, the Smurfs got their start here, and you can see them on local bookshelves as "les Schtroumpfs". "Smurf" is an Americanization of that original name. Buck Danny is another. He and his colleagues may fly their missions from American aircraft carriers, but they come from Belgium. Unlike the Schtroumpfs, however, Buck Danny is Buck Danny in any of the four languages he is published in: French, Dutch, German, or English.

BUCK DANNY is one of Belgium's oldest and most successful comic book series. It was started in 1947 by Victor Hubinon and Georges Troisfontaines. The settings for the early volumes were the skies and islands of the Pacific Ocean during World War II. As the years passed, Buck and his comrades flew newer aircraft, and the fields of battle shifted to Korea, Yugoslavia, and other places. In the most recent issue, the action takes place in Antarctica and involves ex-Nazis.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Hubinon and Troisfontaines were working for Spriou magazine. Spirou was at that time, as it is today, a thick volume containing short episodes of many different comic series published on a regular basis. A magazine like Spirou in the United States would have a few pages of Batman, another few pages of the Fantastic Four, and a few pages of Superman all in the same hardbound volume. Hubinon was a gifted illustrator with a flair for realistic, technical drawings; Troisfontaines was responsible for writing the stories, but he was soon replaced by another talented illustrator and writer, Jean-Michel Charlier. At that time Buck Danny was one of several illustrated series published in Spirou. You can find Spirou on the shelves of bookstores today, but Buck Danny hasn't been there for many years.



Charlier and Hubinon both came from Liège, about an hour's drive east of Brussels. Both were born in 1924. They were no different from the other major comic book artists of their day; they always had many pots on the fire. Charlier's work reflected a longstanding interest in history. His Buck Danny episodes are famously well-researched. Another series he wrote was 'Belles Histoires de l'Oncle Paul', stories told by a kindly old man, Uncle Paul. One of his trademarks is the unimportant but amusing detail; Sonny Tuckson, for example, is one of Buck Danny's fellow pilots. He is a very capable flyer, but he is not as lucky as Buck is, and that lands him in some uncomfortable situations. These kinds of fine points are an early form of what has become a standard feature of American action movies—light moments when an otherwise powerful and graceful character lapses into comical awkwardness. Charlier passed away in 1989, but many of the characters and techniques he created live on through the work of others.

As a student at the Academy of Fine arts in Liège, Hubinon studied decoration, painting, etching, and drawing. During the War, he served in England's Royal Navy. After returning to Belgium, he worked in advertising for a short time before moving to Spirou in 1946. Like Charlier, Victor Hubinon worked on several different series over the following decades. Buck Danny is what he is most remembered for, but it is far from his only body of work. Victor Hubinon died in 1979. Like the legacy of his longtime partner, his work continues today through the pens of other talented artists.

I had another chance this afternoon to walk down the comic book aisle at Carrefour. Today there were three boys about twelve years old sitting on the floor reading comic books. Their parents probably left them there so they could get through the shopping more quickly. These boys know more than most of us ever will about the characters in those books and the writers and artists who created them. Seeing them sitting there reminds one that, in addition to telling stories, those comics are a part of a story that has been going on for decades now here in Belgium.

The Belgian Center for Comic Strips is located at Rue des Sables, 20, 1000 Brussels. Hours are 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day except Monday. Admission costs €7.50 per adult, €5.00 for seniors, and €2.50 for children under 12. Telephone: 02 219-1980.

For information about the Belgian Center for Comic Strips:

www.trabel.com/brussel/brussels-museums-comicstrip.htm
and
www.awn.com/mag/issue4.03pages/moinsbrussels.php3

For information about Belgian comic book authors and artists, visit:
www.comics.be
and
www.brusselsdiscovery.com/wabxlint/components/discover/promenades.jsp?section=P&lg=EN&cid=V.DEC.PROM.BD

For information about comics in general throughout the world, visit www.lambiek.net.
Artwork appears courtesy of Dupuis Publishing, Inc. www.dupuis.com/lang.html

Jonathan Gallant