

COMICS:

For the Connoisseur, No Laughing Matter

By Martin Flusser Jr.

There are very few Caspar freaks today.

But then, the friendly ghost never was held in particularly high esteem by the cognoscenti of the comic-book world. Superman, on the other hand (ah, here was a man!), Batman, Spiderman, Captain America—these are characters with substance, comic books whose first numbers are sought like the original editions of Henry James novels. Which is why they held the 1971 edition of the Comic Art Convention. . . .

In the searing heat of downtown Manhattan, a metropolis of gargantuan proportions under siege at this very moment by the forces of evil, the hordes of comic-book cultists descended upon the Statler Hilton. Through the revolving door on Seventh Avenue they came, up the blood-red carpeted stairs, smudging the polished brass banister with the sweat of their prehensile forelimbs. The moving stairs ascending to the Grand Ballroom, where the three-day convention took place, were in disrepair. So this weird sect of aliens, with their suitcases and attache cases and brown paper bags filled with prehistoric comic books of the 1930s and 40s, strode onward past the failing glances of the hotel's aging keeps to the stall of self-service elevators at the rear of the lobby.

"Stop!" an alien shouts to a visitor about to enter the lobby, where the visitor is momentarily blinded by the iridescent glare of the glass chandelier—gigantic! shimmering! baroque! unreal!!

Inside there are at least 100 tables piled high with comic books. Standing behind them are aliens who, in their language, are called "dealers." They buy and sell these comics for profit. Suddenly, in one corner of the room, excited whispers pass through the crowd like a wave across the sea, as a dealer reveals his prize item, Detective Comics No. 27. Batman appeared here for the first time in May, 1939. He wants \$350 for this seminal tome. Another dealer possesses the same item in better condition, it is learned later. He is asking \$500.

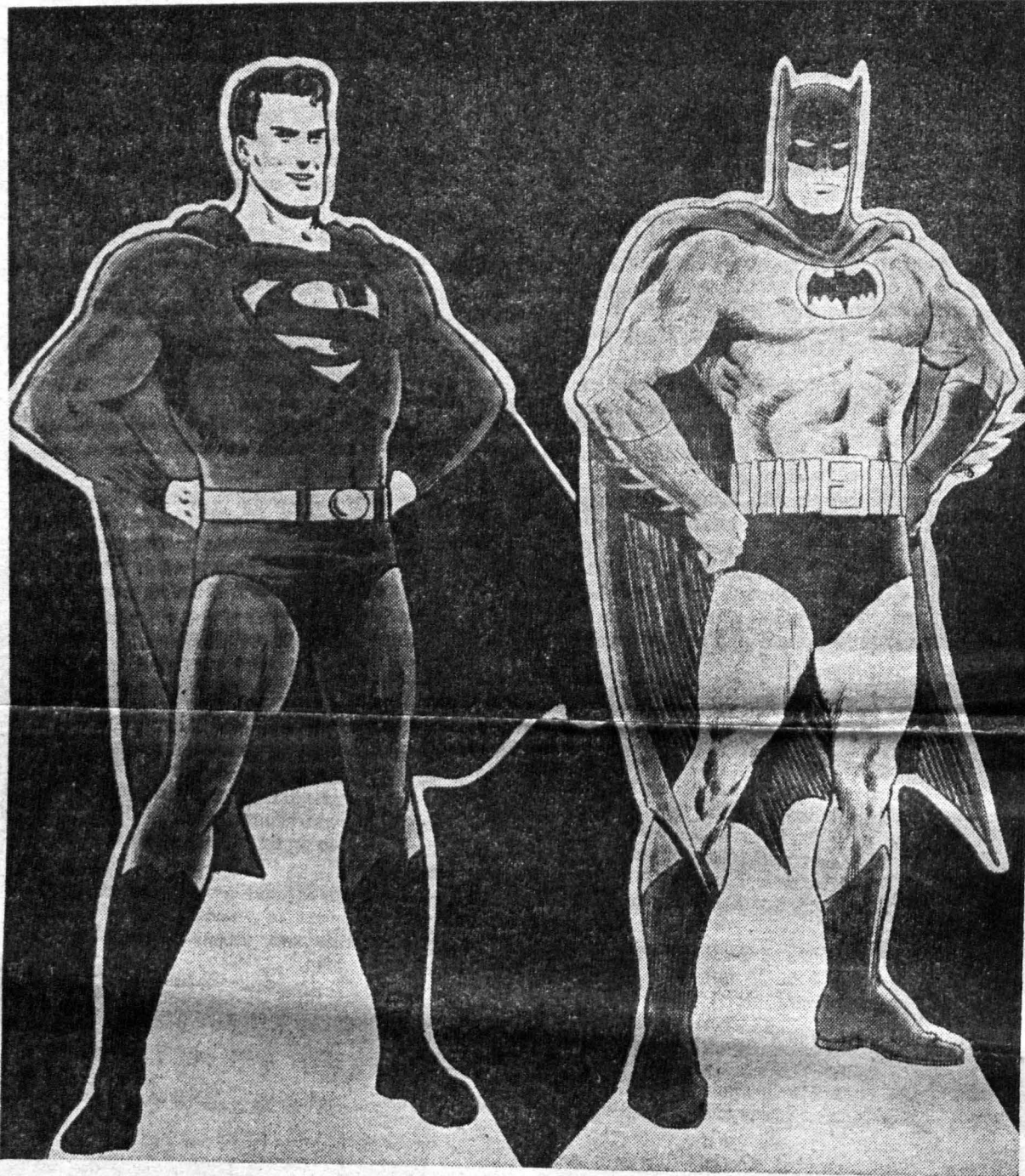
Why do these aliens value these books so highly? "It's nostalgia, pure nostalgia," comments one college-aged youth. Another who calls himself Roger Stern from Indiana says they are "pure Americana" and his country's "modern mythology." He wants to set up a trust fund that would purchase comic books like a museum. "No one saves this stuff besides private collectors," he says.

Most of the 3,000 visitors to the convention this summer were youths interested in augmenting their collection or unloading part of it for "some quick bread." There were a number of older people, however. One man of 50 said he used to collect and deal stamps. "I got out of stamps for personal reasons," he explained.

Of course, not everyone has the amount of money needed to acquire the really "historic" issues. George Kessler, a long-haired 18-year-old from Pennsylvania, said he never spends more than \$6 or \$7 for a rare 10-cent comic. "That's pretty cheap," he beamed modestly. . . .

Meanwhile near the front of the ballroom, a different type of selling was going on. Behind a table on which a hastily made cardboard poster had been propped up was an alien from Hollywood, tall, good-looking, with fine gray hair, his posture as stiff as a West Point cadet's. Here was at one time the mightiest of them all! Here was greatness!!!

Only years ago this Man of Steel had won his hardest battle over the gangsters terrorizing Metropolis. The poster identified the alien; it was Kirk Alyn in person, the predecessor of Steve Reeves—the cinema's first Superman! Even then



Life-sized cutouts of two revered figures greeted visitors to New York's Comic Art convention. The first Batman comic, in good condition, was being sold for \$500.

he was able to leap tall buildings at a single bound, travel faster than. . . .

"I'm writing a screenplay now. It's about a werewolf who falls in love. You see, he falls in love with this girl but he wants to kill her. He's torn between his love and wanting to kill her and he doesn't know what to do."

STORY OF CONVENTION CONTINUED AFTER BRIEF EXPLANATION.

The number of people at the Comic Art Convention is a reflection of the rebirth of interest in comic books that has taken place over the last five years. Only last year the industry sold more than 200,000,000 copies of the publications, which now range in price from 15 to 25 cents each. A great deal of this renaissance, as some have called it, is attributed to Stan Lee of Marvel Comics and the antiheroes (Spiderman, Thor, Submariner and Captain America) he created.

Lee's characters have real personalities. Instead of behaving like mere robots, they react with human emotion, pondering moral issues, fighting among themselves, questioning why they are doing what they are doing—basically acting as neurotic

as most normal people. Other companies in the industry followed suit and today, except for the animal comics, it is rare to find a story that does not touch upon contemporary problems and issues. In May, for example, Green Arrow discovered his ward, Speedy, was a junkie. And Spider Man decided to give up the superpowers that he uses to protect the world and remain Peter Parker, until the robbery of a welfare office helped change his mind.

Most of the artists and writers at Marvel and National Comic Books (the largest production house: Superman, Batman) believe that comics will deal increasingly with relevant social issues. Gil Kane, an artist now with National Comics who drew the original Green Lantern, said in a panel discussion at the convention, "We've just gotten the range on the social issues. Now we're trying to zero in. Comics are going where everything else is going. They reflect the people who do them and these are people interested in society."

Roy Thomas, writer and editor at National, added, "Five years ago if you put anyone in long underwear on the cover of a comic, it would sell out 60 per cent [a good rate]. Now we have to

A New York museum is now celebrating the 75th anniversary of U.S. comics with an exhibition. But the event of the season for the aficionado was the convention at which he could buy the precious pulp pamphlets himself . . .



Fans examine one dealer's stock, which ranged from 'Raggedy Ann' to 'Frontline Combat.' The only new comics on view were West Coast underground ones.

deal with everything around us. But readers are more sophisticated today. We no longer have to have a fight scene every four panels."

A recent issue of "Green Lantern" by Marvel writer Denny O'Neill tackles the political currents in the country head-on with his caricatures of President Nixon and Vice President Agnew. In the issue Agnew appears as Grandy, a whiny but vindictive private-school cook whose ward, Sybil, is the picture of Nixon. Sybil's gaze can cause great pain; one look and even the superheroes crumble in agony.

Grandy is continually justifying his viciousness: "Old Grandy doesn't kill. I simply do my duty. Punish those who can't respect order. You may die. But that won't be my fault." O'Neill said that issue had one of the highest circulations of the year.

(An easy lesson in where comics have been and where they are going is available at the New York Cultural Center in Columbus Circle. There, until Nov. 7, more than 300 exhibits are tracing the form's history since the appearance of the Yellow Kid.)

While much has been made of comics' newfound relevance, there are those in the comic-book industry who are skeptical of their contribution to social awareness. Philip Seuling is one. Seuling, a

long-time comic-book dealer and schoolteacher who for the last three years has organized the Comic Art Convention, uses comics to aid his students in learning to read. "Reading is reading," he says nonchalantly. "If the kids are interested in what they're reading, they try harder." But as for comics' additional worth, Seuling, 40ish with hair almost to his shoulders, shakes his head. "Comics are as relevant today as Jimmy Stewart was in the '30s. These guys are trying to pour out their abstractions into forms that won't hold them. I mean, how much relevance can a 12-year-old take?"

Marvel writer O'Neill, a transplanted journalist from the Midwest, concedes that comics have their limitations. "We're preaching," he says, "but our primary task is to entertain. If we blow that, we've blown the game. My first problem is how to make the story fun. If there's any room left over I think of editorializing." O'Neill says he hopes that comics will make 8- and 9-year-old children "aware of what is happening around them."

WHEN WE LEFT THE STORY OF THE CONVENTION, KIRK ALYN WAS IN THE MIDST OF SELLING HIS SCREENPLAY.

... Eventually he kills her then he kills him-

self. Heh, heh. It's going to be good when it's done."

In the same palatial room, only 10 feet away from Alyn's table, were the sole dealers selling new comics! What they have for sale came from the West Coast: the undergrounds that often deal with sex and perversion, selling from 50 to 75 cents a copy. These were the "unapproved" competitors that were challenging the Establishment. Though most of the Establishment writers spoke highly of Robert Crumb, the acknowledged underground pacesetter and author of Zap Comix, they were indifferent toward and sometimes very contemptuous of the authors of such underground journals as "Feds 'N' Heads," "The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers" and "Hydrogen Bomb and Biochemical Warfare Funnies." "They're very primitive, not much advanced from the obscene," one writer said.

MEANWHILE, ON THE 18TH FLOOR OF THE STATLER, AT AN ART EXHIBITION...

Yes, unlikely as it may seem, many of these cultists—their heads filled with Batman and Robin, their briefcases with the Incredible Hulk and the Avengers—are art lovers! There in the large room, bare save for the original drawings of a number of comic-book pages hung on the walls, was Nick LaRusso, 20, his face contorted with ecstasy. A large number of cultists, of which Nick is one, collect comics solely or the artwork on the pages and are as familiar with the technique of a particular illustrator as an art historian is with the style of El Greco.

SUDDENLY, A MAN OF AVERAGE BUILD AND HEIGHT, DRESSED IN THE AVERAGE BLUE SUIT, WALKS THROUGH THE 18TH-FLOOR HALLS. . .

He is Neal Adams, one of the industry's top artists. He is soon mobbed by youths demanding an autograph of their superhero. In this strange world, however, an autograph is a piece of original "art," and Adams obliges the kids with quick pencil sketches. (After all, they are his public.) Then, in response to a question, he defends the artistry of the comic illustrator's work:

"To tell you the truth, it's very difficult for me to go to the Guggenheim and figure out what's happening there. Not much, if you ask me. We, on the other hand, get letters from kids all the time. . . . You know, people bad-rap Norman Rockwell, but he's affected more people than anyone. When he dies, he'll probably be recognized as the artist of the first half of the century!"

AND THEN, NOT LONG AFTER. . .

In the busy entrance to the Grand Ballroom, there is a confrontation. "Naaah, I really can't," Roger Hill tells a younger youth with longer hair. Hill, originally from Wichita, Kan., is on weekend leave from the Navy to attend the convention. He and a friend had put out four editions of a fanzine, going broke on the fourth, and he had enlisted. His crestfallen interlocutor wanted a copy of the first issue.

Scores of fanzines, or magazines about comics, are cranked out privately each year. They talk about the inside world of comics—the writers and artists—and give amateur creators a chance to publish their work.

The first edition of Hill's fanzine, called Squa Tront, is rare, and Hill seemed reluctant to sell one of the two 75-cent copies he had left. But softened by the pleas of the younger member of the duo, he parted with the screed for \$10.

Good naturedly turning to a neophyte observer, Hill remarked, "You're probably wondering what the damned title means, aren't you? It means 'Good Lord!' in Venusualian. You'd know that if you read the early Superman comics."

He added, "We also had a sister publication, Spa Fon. That's 'Good Lord!' in Martian. You'd know that if. . ." /II