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Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK

British Library, London

2 May – 19 August 2014

The *Comics Unmasked* exhibition, which opened at the British Library on 2 May, represents at least two firsts for that venerable institution: it is the first ever exhibition held there to focus upon the subject of comics, and it is the first ever to require parental guidance for children under the age of sixteen. And I would hazard a guess that the fluorescent pink colour being used on fonts, banners, and other official promotional materials is likely to be a first as well.

This brainchild of British Library curator Adrian Edwards and comics critics Paul Gravett and John Harris Dunning features over two hundred items from private collections and the BL's own extensive archive, making it the UK's largest ever exhibition of comics. *Comics Unmasked* is a celebration specifically of British comics – defined, it seems, as comics whose artistic creation has included British people – and while there is, of course, nothing new about telling stories with pictures, and humankind was doing that even before it developed writing, the curators see comics in the UK context as a uniquely subversive, even anarchic force throughout history. Because they have been a frequent target of moral and even legal condemnation, British comics have pushed the envelope on subjects ranging from sex to religion to politics.

The exhibition gallery is laid out in a roughly circular path, guiding visitors through six discrete, thematically arranged sections focused on 'Mischievous and Mayhem,' 'To See

Ourselves,' 'Politics: Power and the People,' 'Let's Talk about Sex,' 'Hero with a Thousand Faces,' and 'Breakdowns: The Outer Limits of Comics.' These titles are pretty self-explanatory. Each section has a rough historical arrangement; 'To See Ourselves,' for example, begins with the Victorian era comic strip working class anti-hero Ally Sloper and ends with contemporary works like Nicola Streeten's *Billy, Me, & You*, an autobiographical account of an English mother coming to grips with having lost her son to illness.

The lighting is dim to protect some of the more delicate manuscripts, and a dark background palette combined with clumps of mannequins wearing street clothes and Guy Fawkes masks (allusion to the anarchist Alan Moore comic *V for Vendetta*), gives one the impression of visiting an illicit underground space – a Batcave, perhaps or, less generously, a teenage boy's fantasy basement bedroom. There is plenty of interactive multimedia support throughout, from looping video to vintage audio recordings, as well as iPads with the full texts of fifteen of the exhibition's comics available for reading. The guest book is a table with drawing paper and pencils for doodling, and visitors are also exhorted to begin making their own comics upon exiting the gallery.

The great strength of *Comics Unmasked* is its emphasis upon obscure and lesser known works. As it is, the UK is not as famous for its tradition of sequential art as, say, France, Japan, or even the United States. Yet while the exhibition includes well known comics strips such as *Andy Capp* and famous writers such as Neil Gaiman, most of the items on display will be unfamiliar even to avid comics fans. Indeed, the British Library has long

maintained a fantastic collection of comics old and new, and this should serve as good advertising for what has been thus far a relatively underutilised scholarly resource.

Unfortunately, the exhibition's strength is also its greatest weakness. This is definitely *not* a good introductory lesson on British comics; if you had not already heard of D.C. Thomson & Co., you would have no reason to now know that *The Beano* is a classic Scottish cartoon strip. Nor had I ever realised, until it was mentioned in passing, that Garth Ennis, of US-based Marvel and DC Comics fame, is from Northern Ireland. Indeed, the exhibition was perhaps too preoccupied with the explication of its themes at the expense of other categories of basic background knowledge. Although some sample scripts and original artwork were on display to show how complicated a collage comics production really is, there were no systematic biographical sketches of writers or artists, nor was there much material history or even publication information about the works on display. Maybe comics are intrinsically subversive and anarchist, but they are also a mass-produced commercial medium, and some indication of whether the book I was looking at had an original print run of 20 or 20,000 would have been appreciated.

In sum, then, *Comics Unmasked* might not be the best first British Library comics exhibition in the best of all possible worlds. But it is, nonetheless, a truly excellent one, well worth the price of admission to any scholar of the history of comics, print, or visual media. The curators are to be applauded for their achievement.

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