



Wordless Books

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Comic art has entered an unprecedented global upswing. If comics now signify art, then the wordless graphic novel has a claim on the highest art yet achieved. Perhaps the absence of dialogue impels the artist—a small number of artists at least—toward a pantomime with its own rules. At any rate, devotees of the comic art history will recognize the Belgian artist Frans Masereel and the New Yorker Lynd Ward for extraordinary achievements, probably also Milt Gross, whose 1930 *She Done Him Wrong* is arguably the one historic crossover from the newspaper comic strip style. They will not likely recognize the names or styles of the other vitally important comic artists recalled in *Wordless Books*. This volume constitutes, therefore, a revelation.

Editor Berona is a librarian at Plymouth State, in New Hampshire, a teacher at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont, and an extraordinary scholar. He covers the period 1918-51, and here we find artists from across Europe as well as the U.S. His careful introductions and annotations to the excerpted work of Masereel, Ward, Otto Nuckel, Helena Bochoravkova-Dittrichova, William Gropper, E.O. Plauen, Milt Gross, Myron Waldman, Istvan Szegedi Szuts, Giacomo Patri, and Laurence Hyde bring readers closer to the artists and their intent than one could have imagined in one compact, beautifully-designed volume. Anyone interested in the field, as artist, scholar, or reader, will want to start here.

Generalizations are difficult, and that is part of the point of the book. Some artists worked in woodcuts or linoleum cuts, some with the cartoonist's pen. Only one is "conservative" in the sense of a straightforward religious motif, and that is also the only example of a woman's art here: Bochorakova-Dittrichova's "Childhood" recalls her little village in the early twentieth century in what is now the Czech Republic. The others tend toward the spiritual, even in their radical secularism, a doubting of traditional faiths in the era of war and fascism, but also a search for something to explain the horrors and what hopes can be salvaged.

Masereel and Ward set the tone in these ways, and they surely influenced others; Masereel because he was widely read in Europe, Ward because he was so treasured by artists of his time. But a forgotten figure like Giacomo Patri, without any political declarations, is as radical as the most radical artist of the day, because his view of white-collar life, the craving for personal success, and the reality of disillusionment (he was himself an advertising artist doomed by the Depression). Imagine, then, "Southern Cross" by another forgotten figure, Laurence Hyde, about the effects of atomic bomb testing upon the population of Polynesia.

Even in the work of William Gropper, cartoonist of the English- and Yiddish-language U.S. Communist press, didacticism disappears before personal observation, the tragic romances, and uncertainties of circus performers' private lives, in *Alay-oop* (1930). The lives seen in the work of his contemporary, Otto Nuckel (who pioneered the lead cut, which added a moodiness to the woodcut en-graver's toolkit), display a penetrating Naturalism, gloom and tragedy of lower class German life. Myron Waldman, an animation cartoonist by trade, the most commercial and most successful of the crew (he created Betty Boop's sidekick dog, and received an Oscar nomination for the charming Hunky and Spunky series), has his protagonist actually find a sweetheart, but her personal ungainliness, her office job, and her fantasies of a Hollywood star reveal another side of modern American life in a modestly cheerful fatalism in *Eve* (1943).

Why didn't the form flourish, in the U.S. or elsewhere? Berona offers few clues, but perhaps Masereel

attracted most of his readers with introductions to his books written by famous European authors. Or maybe readers, both today and yesterday, find books without dialogue altogether demanding. Peter Kuper, who provides an introduction and himself has drawn five remarkable wordless graphic novels in recent years (and has done the classic wordless strip "Spy vs Spy" in *Mad Magazine* for a decade), suggests that the artists "were interested in illuminating the darkest corners of the human experience," and that may be another clue. The message can be hard to take, as the best of art has so often been. (2008)

PAUL BUHLE (December 15, 2008)

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