

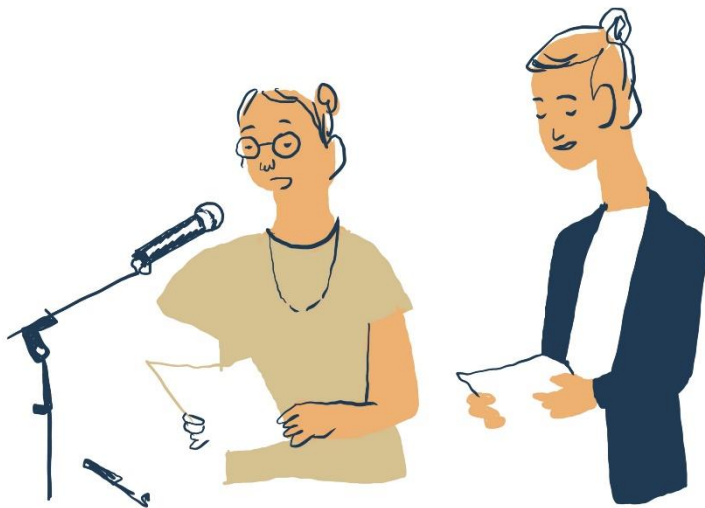
Report Comics @ the Museum

6 September 2022 | Comics Art Museum, Brussels

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On the 6th of September 2022 FARO organized, together with the Comics Art Museum and Stripgids, the conference 'Comics @ the Museum'. The key question of this conference was how museums can successfully use comics in their operations and communications. The speakers, experts by experience, came from all over Europe: with testimonies from the Louvre, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid), the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Brussels (on behalf of the Italian Fumetti nei Musei-project), the Musée de l'Homme (Paris) and the Jüdisches Museum (Berlin).



As mentioned, the common thread was the question how museums use comics in their operations and how this is handled in very concrete terms. It soon became clear that there are major differences in this regard. For instance, Fabrice Douar, the publishing director of the Louvre, considers the comic as an autonomous work of art. This implies that the comic book author is given a 'free hand', literally and figuratively. After an initial agreement on the broad outlines of the

comic's content, there is *carte blanche*. In contrast: in other institutions and projects there is a stronger emphasis on the educational and on historical and scientific correctness. Of course, one does not exclude the other. The diversity in approach and vision became clear throughout the day in the respective presentations and the questions following them.

Tension field author-historical correctness

After the welcoming by Isabelle Debekker (director of the Comics Art Museum) and the introduction by Olga Van Oost (the general director of FARO), Marie Neumann and Katharina Wuffius of the Jüdisches Museum of Berlin kicked off the conference by explaining the history of origin of the graphic novel [Moishe. Six Anecdotes from the Life of Moses Mendelssohn](#).

Immediately, the tension field of author-historical correctness was raised: sometimes it happened that, consciously or unconsciously, the author included anachronisms because he was guided by visually attractive pictures that did not correspond to historical reality. The 2010 exhibition [Heroes, Freaks and Super-rabbis](#) on the impact of Jewish comic book authors was also discussed. It focused on an important part of the history of comics and pop art. Although the museum did not achieve some of its predetermined goals in its graphic novel project (such as: attracting a younger audience through comics) - the exhibition on the famous 18th-century, Jewish-German philosopher Moishe Moses did not reach the predefined visitor numbers - the Jüdisches Museum would like to continue working with comics in the future. Furthermore, Germany has currently a rich comics scene.

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https://faro.be/sites/default/files/bijlagen/blog/1_J%C3%BCdisches_Museum.pdf

André Delpuech, until recently director of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, discusses Sylvain Savoia's [Les esclaves oubliés de Tromelin](#) a comic book about the horror of slave transports. [An exhibition](#) on this theme ran at the museum in 2019. More recently, the exhibition [Aux frontières de l'humain](#) ran concerning the impact of technological progress on humans (May 2021 - March 2022). The exhibition [Carte blanche à Enki Bilal](#) followed (March 2022 - June 2022), concerning the same theme.

Since the 1970s, Bilal has gained star status in the world of comic books with his magically realistic and often dystopian works. Hence it was no surprise that the Q&A session focused quite a bit on Bilal's work. André Delpuech remarks that due to the collaboration with Bilal a very different kind of audience suddenly found its way to the museum.

Recently, the museum collaborated with the publisher Editions 2024 concerning the publication of the comic book [Des Vivants](#). This comic book presents the gripping account of a resistance group created by the museum team during World War II. Delpuech points out that it is important that everything ("every sentence, every image, every scene") is based on research. So that's how it really happened. Yet this is not a dry 'historical' comic: it is also an



overwhelmingly artistic product that can appeal to both comic fans and those interested in the history of WW II, the resistance, repression, collaboration, etc.

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One question about the attitude of the first three speakers regarding the use of comics in museum contexts was mostly addressed positively. How comics published by museums were advertised highlighted the role of publishers. It is important to also provide space and time (and hence budget) to launch and promote comics. There is certainly a big role for a (competent) publisher. A publisher basically knows what works both narratively and graphically. Museum people don't have that experience (or barely).

An independent art form

After the coffee break, Fabrice Douar of the Louvre takes the floor. He talks about the evolution of comics as an art form and how the Louvre has been integrating comics as 9th Art since the late 1990s. In that way, comic authors working on the Louvre or its collections are given full artistic freedom and access to buildings and collections.

As an example, Douar cites [Periode Glaciaire](#) by Nicolas de Crécy, the wacky comic strip that started the series. This story is about the 'rediscovery' of the Louvre in a future ice age when any notion of what a 'museum' is has been completely forgotten. It is part of a [collection](#) of about 20 works built around the Louvre. Just about all registers and perspectives are covered in this range of comics: humor, seriousness, procedures and even eroticism.



Ana Cela of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid thinks offering items at the museum shop, including comics, is an excellent way of offering a lasting memory of the museum visit. In other words, people take a piece of the museum home. At the moment, Thyssen-Bornemisza offers five comics from different perspectives. Ranging from a comic about two young people wandering through the museum and giving their thoughts free rein, to a graphic novel about Georgia O'Keeffe, an artist that is represented with several works in the museum collection.

The Q&A covered topics such as the involvement of educational contributors and the issue of publishing rights. Douar is firm: he refuses to put an educational layer on it; it would "dumb down" a comic. Ana Cela warns that if you want to make a comic about an artist whose copyright has not yet expired, you have to be careful.

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Italy: land of comics

After the break, the *Fumetti nei Musei* is presented, a project launched by the Italian Ministry of Culture. This project (°2018) aims to boost the declining number of, especially younger, museum visitors. During the Covid pandemic, it was ironically co-deployed in a digital form to make Italian people stay more at home. It has the intention

Our objective, Fumetti objective
is to promote Italian language
and Italian culture around
the world



making
exhibitions,
lot of workshops
with kids and
adults, lot
of different
smarts and
artistic
activities

of ensuring the link between Italians and their cultural heritage. There is also the participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as part of the country's cultural diplomacy. Through these comics, people abroad with an interest in Italy, the Italian language and culture can get to know and learn (more) about it.

Meanwhile, 51 comics have already been produced about as many museums

and by different authors each time. Another 18 are in the pipeline. The authors are imposed a number of conditions, including scientific correctness, but are otherwise given a free hand stylistically and narratively. Allegra Iafrate of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Brussels introduced the project on behalf of inspirer Mattia Morandi, who was unable to attend the event. She also announced the creation of a fund for the comics world by the Italian state.

Download the presentation:

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Following this, break-out groups were formed to share experiences and concerns. Afterwards every group reported. A lot emerged, too much to list. Yet a few main points.

- Everyone agreed that comics have great potential within the museum landscape. "An image is worth a thousand words" someone postulated. The universality of an image, independent of language, can bring an object to life.
- Museums, and by extension other heritage organisations, have a huge reservoir of stories and images: the material with which great comics can be created.
- There is also an almost universal consensus on whether or not to work with a publisher. Experts by experience say that a good publisher is worth its weight in gold: they are by far the most likely to find the right target audience and assess promotional opportunities.
- The question is raised whether FARO and/or the Comics Art Museum would like to act as a broker in a network that could deepen the relationship between the comics and heritage sectors. Today's conference is evaluated as very positive, but should or could be deepened.
- Wanting to create a full-fledged comic right away is a very big step. There are also other opportunities to work with comics creators and illustrators. The Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille gives comic book creator François Boucq carte blanche in his museum hall, [with extraordinary results](#).



5.000 euro support

A special moment is the passage of *Stripgids* director Karl van den Broeck. He proposes an incentive bonus, worth €5,000, to be paid to a comic book author in 2023. There are accompanying regulations that you will find at the end of this report. With this, *Stripgids* wants to encourage museums to make work of a (first) comic.

Rooting, searching, sweating and métier

Meanwhile, as usual, the classic lack of time announced itself and the concluding panel discussion was kept short. Author and Comics Art Museum chairman Pieter Depoortere underlined the power of visual language. With his comics around the figure "[Boerke](#)", he succeeds in marketing his work far beyond his own country and language borders. Also practically in a multilingual country like Belgium. Brussels, Magritte and financial aspects were also discussed. Also on the panel were publisher Wiebe Mokken (Scratch Books), author and doctoral researcher Gabri Molist, author Judith Vanistendael and Abdel de Bruxelles. The latter is a guest illustrator and regaled the audience with a series of amusing caricatural drawings made during the event.



Judith Vanistendael says very clearly that making a comic book costs money as well as time: making a comic book is not fun, but a professional occupation. It is rooting, searching, sweating and *métier*. This is confirmed by Wiebe Mokken, who published the Jüdisches Museum book in several languages and at the same time. The production of a comic - like any other book - involves a lot of work. It is good to call on the expertise of specialists. Finally, Gabri Molist suggests that it could be interesting to investigate the effect and impact of comics by museums.

It was the last really hot day of the Belgian summer and the guests and speakers knew it. It got hotter inside the beautiful Horta-designed building than outside. But in the end, everyone returned home sweaty, but wiser.





RULES SUPPORT FOR A 'HERITAGE COMIC'

Stripgids (Strip Turnhout vzw, see www.stripgids.org) wants to financially support the production of a comic for a museum, archive, heritage library (or another cultural heritage organisation). It does so with an amount of €5,000 (VAT incl. and all other costs), which is to be used for the artistic labour of a comic book creator (illustrator and/or scriptwriter). To receive this amount, the comic author directly invoices *Stripgids*.

How do you stand a chance of winning this prize of encouragement?

Submit a file in English, Dutch or French by 31 December 2022 to redactie@stripgids.org. Your submission should include at least these parts:

1. A short presentation of the museum, archive, heritage library or other cultural heritage organisation
2. A brief presentation of the comic book creator (scriptwriter and/or illustrator)
3. A presentation of the comic project (including a synopsis of the story, number of pages, target audience, special features, etc.)
4. A brief overview of the project planning
5. A clear budget
6. A brief distribution and promotion plan
7. Any partners you wish to work with (e.g. publisher or institution) - declarations of intent are recommended

Only proposals from heritage organisations located in Belgium are eligible.

What's next?

An independent jury consisting of representatives from the comics, media and heritage sectors will examine the proposals and decide by 1 February 2023 at the latest. Those involved in the winning proposal will be notified personally. A (partial) pre-publication in *Stripgids* (www.stripgids.org/stripgids) and/or *faro* (www.faro.be/tijdschrift) will be determined in consultation with the museum, archive, heritage library or other heritage organisation.

In further communication of the project by the heritage partner, *Stripgids* will always be mentioned as a partner, and if possible, with the logo.

The invoice must be delivered to *Stripgids* by the end of 2023 at the latest, even if the comics project is not yet completed.