



## A Brussels landmark turns 20, but celebrates a much longer history of the beloved Belgian comic

REBECCA BENOOT

**A**lthough Hergé's endearing Tintin (or Kuifje to the Flemish) has become a universal icon, the Belgian comic world has so much more to offer than these exciting adventures of a boy and his dog. It would be tough to find a better opportunity to familiarise yourself with the country's cartoon capers than to visit the Belgian Comic Strip Museum, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary with special exhibitions, including a show of photos of the most exciting events of the last two decades.

In fact, to commemorate the occasion, venues and organisations across Brussels marked 2009 as the year of the Belgian comic strip. Since February, Brussels has been hosting numerous events, exhibitions and walks that illustrate and honour one of the country's most flourishing art forms: the comic book.

Brussels has always had an intimate relationship with the comic strip. The hometown of many talented illustrators who are responsible for making the medium what it is today, the capital launched a comic strip tour in 1991. Nearly 40 murals brighten up the sides of buildings across the city – a celebration of cultural tradition combined with a playful urban community project.

Despite its modest size, Belgium contains the world's highest density of paper heroes and storytellers per square kilometre, making a museum inevitable. The non-profit Belgian Comic Strip Centre that resides in the museum was established in 1984 and consists of French- and Dutch-speaking comic strip artists and others from the comic world. Its first chairman, illustrator and Hergé collaborator Bob de Moor, was also partially responsible for the unique location.

The Belgian Comic Strip Museum is housed in the old Waucquez warehouse in Brussels, designed by Victor Horta in 1906. This stunning example of Art Nouveau architecture – a stone's throw from the Congres train station – offers an ingenious and exuberant contrast with its contemporary contents. Besides bringing attention to this protected monument, the Belgian Comic Strip Centre also wanted to promote the comic strip as a valuable cultural medium.

On entering the museum, you are immediately struck by its timeless grandeur, punctuated by statues of the Smurfs, Tintin and Asterix. To delve more deeply into the architectural history of the location, visit the small exhibit on the right side of the entrance hall. Also located on the ground floor is an impressive comic book library – the largest in the world – that offers the opportunity to browse and explore.

The museum's permanent collection is at the top of a majestic marble staircase and starts off with a brief illustrated introduction on how a comic strip is made, from the initial idea all the way through to the printed product. (The accompanying texts are in French and Dutch, but you can get the English translations at the front desk.)

Next stop: a movie theatre with films on the medium's evolution from illustration to animation. Ray Goossens, you'll learn, opened the first illustration studio in Antwerp in 1940. Despite his wonderful cartoons, he eventually went bankrupt. Les studios Claude Misonne were more successful. In 1946, they brought our most famous character, Tintin, to life using puppets in a form of stop-motion animation.



The entrance hall to the Belgian Comic Strip Museum, housed in a Victor Horta building in the centre of Brussels

You move on to the highlights of the Belgian comic strip industry: a highly entertaining history of original drawings, manuscripts and murals in imaginatively themed rooms. You'll meet the pioneers and their characters and explore their influence on generations to come. You'll also find early versions of the landmark comic magazine *Spirou*, still publishing more than 70 years after it was launched in 1938.

Alongside the permanent exhibition, there are two spaces for temporary shows. On the mezzanine that binds the wings of the upper level is a retrospective photo exhibition curated by Belgian photographer Daniel Fous that highlights memorable occasions from the past 20 years. Starting with the museum's opening in 1989, there are events such as Lucky Luke's 50th birthday, Garfield creator Jim Davis' visit and shots of the exceptional Japanese manga exhibition earlier this year.

Finally, the second floor is where you'll find the museum's central 20-year celebration exhibition. Canadian artist Daniel Couvreur has selected the most influential international comic strips and graphic novels that are available in Belgium. Each is representative of the evolution of comic strip art at one specific point in time. Here you can admire large reproductions of key works such as *Sin City*, *Black Hole*, *Persepolis* and *Bone*.

At the end of your visit, you'll find the obligatory gift shop, though this one is perhaps more fun than the average museum shop: a wide selection of comic strips, toys, graphic novels and figurines. And for those of you who just can't get enough, you only need cross the street to see the history of comic character Néro at the Marc Sleen Museum. ♦

→ [www.comicscenter.net](http://www.comicscenter.net)  
→ [www.brusselscomics.com](http://www.brusselscomics.com)

### Kieke-who?

You see them in the newspapers, in the bookshops, as murals and even as statues in town squares. But you don't have a name to put with the face. Here are some of Flanders' most popular comic book heroes (and the guys who draw them).

### Kiekeboe

This classic strip by **Merho** (Robert Merhottein), which follows the exploits of husband and father Marcel Kiekeboe, wears the crown as Flanders best-selling comic. Inspired by Vandersteen and Sleen, Merho first published the strip - decidedly aimed at adults - in *Het Laatste Nieuws* in 1977. More than 30 years later, he is still one of the illustrators and story writers for the strip, which runs daily in *De Gazet van Antwerpen*.



### Suske en Wiske

Known as *Spike and Suzy* in the UK, this boy-and-girl best friend duo get into all kind of trouble when they try to help out friends or others facing some kind of injustice. Creator **Willy Vandersteen** began publishing it in 1945, and the creative baton has been passed down ever since; the strip still runs every day in *De Standaard*. Vandersteen, an Antwerp native who died in 1990, was also responsible for launching the long-running *De Rode Ridder* (*The Red Knight*)



### Néro

What would Flanders be without oddball Néro and his ever-expanding family? A good-hearted if rather lazy family man, Néro is the centre of a strip of fantastic characters, including his genius son, who regularly wins Nobel prizes in this and that. First seen from the hand of legendary illustrator **Marc Sleen** in 1947, it was hailed as the first "family" comic of Flanders - appealing equally to both kids and adults. Sleen, in fact, has an entire museum dedicated to him across the street from the comic strip museum.

### Lucky Luke

This enduring comic cowboy wandering the American West was created by **Morris** (Maurice de Bevere) in 1946 and continues to this day, despite the illustrator's death eight years ago. Morris is also the genius behind other memorable characters such as the Daltons and Jolly Jumper.

### Jommeke

It was all over the news last month when **Jef Nys**, the creator of this light-hearted strip about the adventures of a little, blonde boy, died at age 82. *Jommeke* has been around for 54 years and has sold more than 50 million albums. See it daily in *Het Nieuwsblad*.

