



Press release

Yaks, Yetis, Yogis – Tibet in Comics

14 July–10 November 2013

Levitating monks and mystical masters, gentle yaks and fearsome yetis, mighty monasteries and lonely mountain peaks – these western stereotypes of Tibet can be found in scores of comic books.

The legendary land on the roof of the world has been a source of inspiration for comic artists for more than 60 years. Superheroes such as the Green Lama, Doctor Strange and Thunderbolt acquire their supernatural forces through the teachings of wise Tibetan monks. Scrooge McDuck, recovering from a nervous breakdown, goes in search of the paradisiacal Shangri-La, a land without money. Even Buffy the Vampire Slayer retreats to Tibet where she hopes to find inner peace. The Tibet of comics is full of clichés and absurdities.

This exhibition looks at the origins of these popular caricatures of Tibet and explores our western fantasies about this still little-known country. Displays of more than 80 comic books – from Europe, the United States, India, Japan, China, and from Tibet itself – invite visitors to browse at leisure and immerse themselves in the mysterious alternative world of comics.

Back in 1971 the French writer and publisher Francis Lacassin coined the term «the 9th art» to describe comic books and magazines and these have now long escaped the label of formulaic «paraliterature» to be recognised as an art form in their own right. Today comics festivals in cities all over the world attract countless enthusiastic fans of all ages, the latest graphic novels are reviewed in the broadsheets, and universities have chairs in comics research. Comics are studied not only as a true fusion of literature and visual art but also as a mirror of social phenomena.

Representations of Tibet reveal human fears and dreams in a very particular way. The little-known and remote country perched between the highest mountain peaks of the world has long served as a projection screen for western fantasies. In the seventeenth century there was a widespread belief that Prester John had built his paradise on earth in Tibet. During the nineteenth century many people imagined that a group of wise men from legendary Atlantis had survived in Tibet and were guarding their secret knowledge there. Our contemporary image of Tibet in the west is strongly shaped by the teachings of non-violence of the 14th Dalai Lama. All these projections have found a place in comics.

The exhibition presents the sources of our contemporary image of Tibet and demonstrates how these have been treated in comics. Above all, it encourages visitors to explore the different comics themselves. More than 80 comic books and magazines are displayed and can be browsed and read at tables, or sitting comfortably on a chair or cushion. These comics span the last six decades and were published in the United States, in Britain, France, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland, in India, China and Japan. From the superhero genre to political propaganda, from Bugs Bunny to Lara Croft, from self-discovery to violent confrontations between superpowers – they encompass all the different genres and styles in which Tibet is represented in comics.

The **Biographical Comics** group includes religious hagiographies next to very unconventional representations of the lives of holy figures. The **Educational Comics** are written primarily for Tibetan children and illustrate old folk tales or texts of practical wisdom. The **Political Comics** reflect the world-political situation of their time. In the 1940s, American superheroes have to stop the Japanese from invading Tibet. In the 1980s, sinister SS henchmen are plotting to rule the world from their hideaway in the Himalaya, while in the last twenty years comics have increasingly focused on the destruction of traditional Tibetan culture by Chinese occupation and domination. The largest group consists of comics in the **Fantasy** genre. Superheroes and villains, wise lamas and unworldly monks, abominable snowmen and vicious criminals all mill around in this fabulous realm. The heroes go in search of the yeti or Shangri-La, they strive for wealth and glory or higher knowledge.

Tibet is always the place of the extraordinary and irrational: The Green Lama only has to recite the Tibetan mantra «om mani padme hum», and he swiftly transforms into an invincible superhero. The

French secret agent Pharaon has frightening visions in Tibet. The white lama learns from his master to leave his body and to explore the subconscious. Scrooge McDuck practises telekinesis to save travel costs. And his nephew Donald, in an existential crisis, visits the wise Lama Brahma in the Himalaya who conveys to him in truly Duckish manner the essence of Buddhism: «Know that we all are only lilies of the valley on the wings of the universal frog.»

The Comic Artist Cosey

The Swiss French comic artist Cosey has received many prizes in France, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, including, in 1993, a prize awarded at Europe's most important comics festival in Angoulême. Many of his comics, especially the Jonathan series, deal intensively with Tibet and Tibetan culture. Some of Cosey's original drawings and sketches can be seen in the exhibition. The artist will make a live appearance during the Long Night of Museums (see below).

Multimedia

Three films accompany the exhibition:

1. Yaks, Yetis, Yogis – Tibet in Comics (in German only)

This animated film offers an entertaining introduction to the exhibition.

A film by Stephen Knüsel and Momo Vilaitanarak

2. The Life of Milarepa – the religious biography of a Buddhist Master from Tibet (in German only)

Narrated and illustrated with images from the Ethnological Museum in Stockholm.

A film by Alexandra von Przychowski and Masus Meier

3. In the Minds of Tibetan Children: Tibet – a Myth (in German only)

Children from Tibetan families in Switzerland talk about their own images of Tibet.

A film by Tizian Tenzin

Concept of the exhibition

The exhibition, which has been newly staged by Museum Rietberg, was conceived by the Rubin Museum of Art, New York.

Lenders

Rubin Museum of Art, New York
Martin Brauen, Berne
Zentralbibliothek Zurich
Bernard Cosendai, Les Diablerets

Events

Saturday, 7 September 2013, 19.00–02.00

Long Night of the Museums: Comic, Comic, Comic

A range of events around the subject of comics

- In conversation with the comic artist Cosey and the comic specialist Cuno Affolter

- Comic corners for browsing and reading throughout the whole collection

- *Tim in Tibet*: Animated film in the lecture hall

Talks

Sunday, 1 September 2013, 11.00

Martin Brauen, «Dream World Tibet – the Many Images of Tibet in Comics» (in German only)

Wednesday, 18 September 2013, 19.30

Cuno Affolter, «A Short History of Comics» (in German only)

Guided tours and workshops accompanying the exhibition

For adults:

Public guided tours every Saturday 14.00

Private guided tours, tel. +41 44 206 31 11 / 31

Workshops for adults, children and families:

Every Sunday, 10.00–16.00

Open workshop (children of 5 and over)

Three-day animated film course «Tibetan Wonderland»

12–14 August 2013, 09.30–16.00

For ages 10–16

For detailed information and other offers, also for visits by school classes, see www.rietberg.ch

Events accompanying the exhibition

Songtsen House

Series of talks about comics in China, India and Japan

Information and registration: www.songtsenhouse.ch/programm

Volkshochschule des Kantons Zürich

Talk and guided tour in the exhibition about superheroes in comics

Information and registration: www.vhszh.ch

Exhibition

Curator

Martin Brauen

Co-Curator

Alexandra von Przychowski

Exhibition assistant

Linda Christinger

Exhibition design

Martin Sollberger

Graphic design and marketing

Jacqueline Schöb, Frédéric Tischhauser

Lighting

Rainer Wolfsberger

Registrar

Andrea Kuprecht

Marketing and communication

Christine Ginsberg, Anna-Katharina Thüerer

Web

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Media planning

Monica Stocker

Events

Caroline Delley

Information and contact

Information, texts and images for media use, see www.rietberg.ch

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Hours

Tue–Sun 10.00–17.00

Wed, Thu 10.00–20.00

Admission

Special exhibition

Adults CHF 18 | concessions CHF 14

Children 16 and under free

Collection

2013: free admission to the collections

Anreise

Tram no. 7 (towards Wollishofen), stop «Museum Rietberg» (4 stops from Paradeplatz).

No parking except disabled parking