

A serious collection of comics

Ohio State gives cartoon history a big new home

BY RICH WARREN
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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Visiting the newly opened galleries at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum is like paying a call on old friends. There's Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown. Nearby, Beetle Bailey matches wits with Sarge. And there's Calvin and Hobbes lolling in one another's arms — or paws, as the case may be.

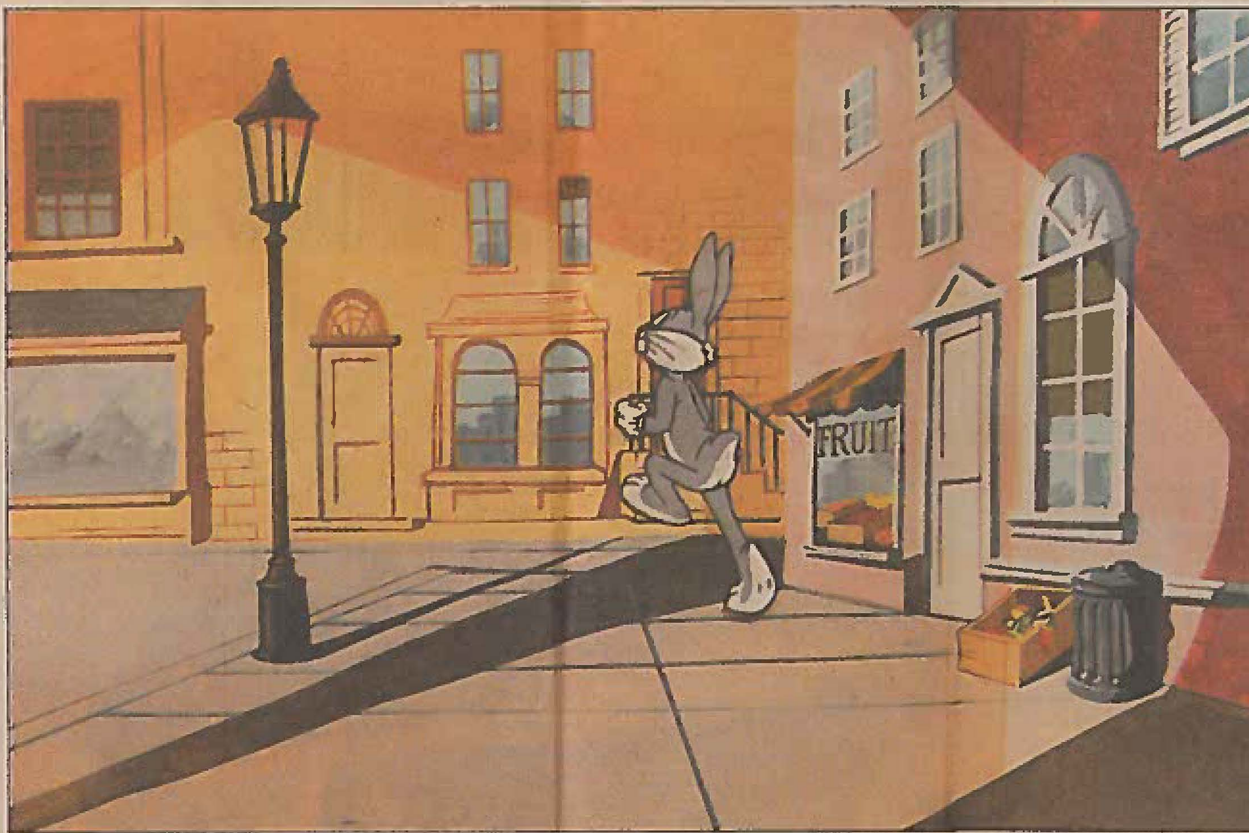
The largest repository in the world of cartoon art, the vast museum is named for a longtime newspaper cartoonist at the Columbus Dispatch. Tucked away in its archives on the campus of Ohio State University are 300,000 original cartoons and 2.5 million comic strip clippings, not to mention more than 45,000 books and 67,000 serials.

For decades it's been a mecca for scholars of cartoon art, but not so much so for casual fans. That's because its previous tiny quarters sat in the obscurity of a basement under the university's Wexner Center for the Arts, where the holdings were hardly known even to Ohio State students. As one employee put it, "I used to tell people to go down the passage beside the Wexner Center and look for the door beside the garbage can."

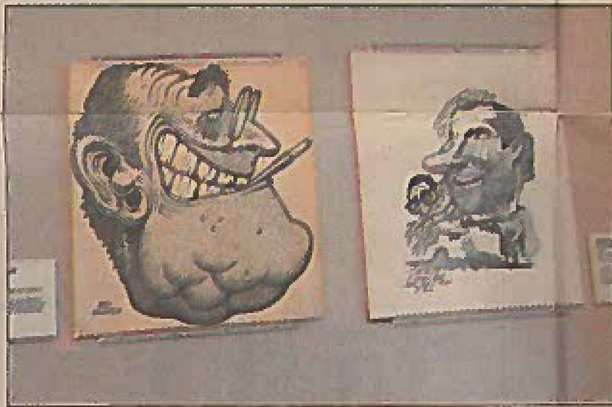
All that changed in November, when the museum reopened in spacious new quarters in the university's magnificently restored Sullivant Hall. The museum's 30,000 square feet lets scholars pore over the materials in the reading room, while three large galleries can highlight revolving exhibitions.

Now the public can visit those galleries to reacquaint themselves with the "friends" of their childhoods. A recent exhibit displayed "Cartoon #1," considered the first use of the word in 1843 in *Punch* magazine, and a political cartoon spoofing Abraham Lincoln.

Balancing out the serious are some just plain fun exhibits, such as a "Steve Canyon" lunchbox, a Little Orphan Annie decoder badge, B. Kliban cat hats and an illustration of one of Rube Goldberg's comically complicated contraptions, a "Snore Silencer." All these sit alongside objects of veneration for cartoon

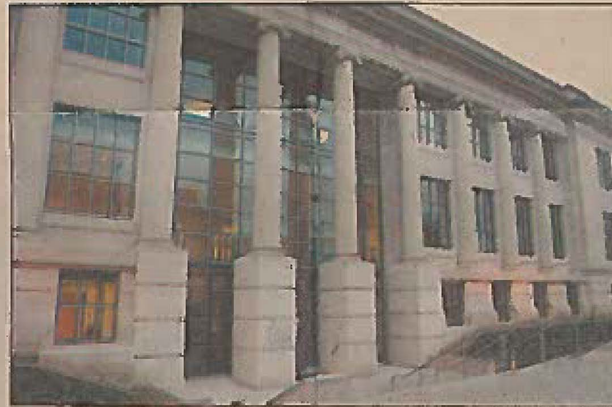


The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum features original cells like this one from a 1953 Bugs Bunny production.



RICH WARREN/PHOTO FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Political caricatures at the museum include an FDR by Basil Wolverton and David Levine's rendering of Richard Nixon.



JO MCCULTY/OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PHOTO

The cartoon museum on the Ohio State campus provides a much bigger, more comfortable home for the collection.

If you go

The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum is in Sullivant Hall, 1813 N. High St., on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus. The galleries are open 1 to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is free. The reading room, where items in the archives can be viewed, is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Its website, cartoons.osu.edu, contains a searchable database of the collection, resources for teachers and online digital exhibitions. For more information, call 614-292-0538.

enthusiasts, such as the very drawing table on which for decades Chester Gould made *Dick Tracy* come to life.

And, no, veneration isn't stretching it as a term to describe what visitors might feel in these galleries. When they first step inside, most visitors are stunned at the sheer size of the illustrations, which are matted, framed and hung like paintings — like the works of art they are. The subdued lighting, for preservation purposes, adds to the shrinelike atmosphere. It's not long, though, before visitors succumb to the "wow" factor, and their eyes begin darting back and forth among the works.

Meanwhile, they might just learn something while here; this is a university

museum, after all. Most exhibits have detailed notes giving the back story or other interesting facts. Did you know it was political cartoonist Thomas Nast who created the elephant as the Republican Party's symbol?

"We still suffer from the misimpression that comics are for children," said Lucy Caswell, the museum's recently retired first curator. "This is not a kids museum. There's substantial intellectual content here that we hope will prove stimulating to people's minds."

It was under Caswell's tenure that the museum grew to the giant collection it is today, starting in 1977 when OSU alumnus Milton Caniff, the creator of "Steve Canyon" and "Terry

and the Pirates," donated most of his life's work to his alma mater. Other artists soon followed suit, including Bill Watterson ("Calvin and Hobbes"), Walt Kelly ("Pogo") and Will Eisner ("The Spirit").

Over time, the museum also acquired the holdings of the San Francisco Academy of Cartoon Art via a collector and the International Museum of Cartoon Art in Boca Raton, Fla., which ran into financial trouble. Huge holdings of Japanese manga and underground comic books also were acquired, all of which makes Ohio State the go-to place for serious scholars.

"Chances are that for almost every conceivable cartoonist, we've got at least a few of their works

'Dick Tracy' joins the cast

The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum recently received a substantial donation of the works of Chester Gould, creator of "Dick Tracy." For many years, Gould was a cartoonist with the *Chicago Tribune* and drew "Dick Tracy" from 1931 until his retirement in 1977. He died in 1985.

Much of the material donated to the museum once was housed in the Chester Gould-Dick Tracy Museum in Woodstock, Ill. The museum closed in 2008. The donation, made by Gould's daughter and grandchildren, consists of 850 original Dick Tracy daily strips along with 64 Sunday strips. Highlights include the original art for the first 30 days of the strip.

— R.W.

been working on," she said.

Just as always, the museum will continue as a valuable research center. Every item in the vast archives can be seen, even if it's not on display. Just go to the comfortable reading room, take a tour through the database, fill out a form, and a library staff member will go back in the stacks and retrieve whatever you like, from *Mad* magazines to Revolutionary War cartoons.

But this is not a lending library, so nothing can be taken out. Nevertheless, access is available to everyone. Want to see "Superman," "Batman" or the "Legion of Super Heroes"? Check. Or how about scholarly studies of "Calvin and Hobbes" in Italian, German or Chinese? Not a problem.

Because programs in popular studies have exploded across the country in the last 10 years, Robb finds herself less and less having to answer the question "Why would anyone want to study cartoons?"

"Popular culture reflects society as much as anything else," she said. "And cartoonists are a reflection not just of the thoughts and ideas of the artists but also of the society they live in. It would be a mistake not to study them. And to study them, you have to have access. That's where we come in."

So pay a call at Ohio State's vast cartoon repository. You may well laugh. But you also may learn.

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