

FRENCH CULTURE COURSE

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

From Töpffer and Tintin to Astérix, Moebius and Persepolis: the story of bande dessinée.

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FRANCO-BELGIAN COMICS: BANDE DESSINÉE

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Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · What Is Bande Dessinée? Scope & Sources

In Britain a comic is usually something for children, a weekly such as The Beano or a superhero magazine. In France and Belgium the equivalent form, bande dessinée, fills whole sections of bookshops, wins prizes, is taught, exhibited and collected, and is read by adults as well as children. This first chapter explains the term, why the form is taken so seriously, how a typical album is built, the vocabulary needed to read about it, and how the course will work. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Term

"Drawn strip"

Bande dessinée means literally "drawn strip", and is usually shortened to *BD* (spoken "bay-day", often written *bédé*). The wording describes a strip of pictures, not anything comic, which is why the French term never carried the idea of "funny" that the English word "comic" does (check).

The "ninth art"

French writers call comics the *neuvième art*, "the ninth art", in a numbering that puts it after cinema and television in a list of arts. The phrase became popular in the 1960s as critics and fans argued that comics deserved the same respect as film (check the origin).

Franco-Belgian

The label covers French-language comics made in France and Belgium. The two countries share publishers, magazines and readers, and some of the best-known creators, such as Hergé, were Belgian. The course keeps the shared name and notes where the countries differ.

A form, not a genre

Bande dessinée is a way of telling stories with pictures in sequence, and it holds adventure, humour, history, science fiction, crime, memoir and reportage. Calling it "a

children's genre" is the same kind of mistake as calling film a children's genre. The course treats it as a form with a history, a business and an audience.

Why Is It Taken So Seriously?

- **Early recognition.** French and Belgian critics and fans began to write about comics as art in the 1960s, founding clubs and journals, and the form moved into museums and universities during the following decades (check).
- **Public institutions.** There is an annual international festival at Angoulême, founded in 1974, a comics museum in Brussels and a national centre for comics and images at Angoulême (check the dates and names), and the state has supported the form through prizes and libraries.
- **A large market.** Comics are among the biggest sectors of the French book trade, with a very large number of new titles each year, including translated manga (check the figures).
- **A mixed readership.** Adults read BD for pleasure, and the shelves at a large bookshop run from picture books for the under-fives to historical biography and war reportage.

The Album and the Page

Term (check each)	Meaning
Album	The standard book format: a hardback, usually in colour, traditionally of 48 pages (the number varies). A series is a run of albums, and a hero's adventures are collected in this form after serialisation in a magazine.
Planche	A page of the comic, thought of as a designed unit as much as a sheet of paper.
Case or *vignette*	A single panel (frame) of a page.
Bulle or *phylactère*	The speech balloon. The second word is the more technical.
Scénariste, *dessinateur*, *coloriste*	The writer, the artist who draws the pages and the colourist. Many series are made by a team, so credits matter. Some creators do all of these jobs (the French term for a complete author is *auteur complet*).

Term (check each)	Meaning
Strip or *gag en une page*	A short comic form: a few panels, or a single-page gag. Many humorous series work in this way.
Roman graphique	"Graphic novel": a long self-contained story, usually for adults, a term that became common in France from the 1990s (check).

Shaped by Magazines

For much of the 20th century most stories first appeared in weekly or monthly magazines, one page at a time, and were gathered into albums later. This explains much about the form: stories built from short, cliffhanger-driven episodes, heroes who return for dozens of volumes, and a "house style" in which artists worked in the manner of a magazine's editors. Later chapters follow the main magazines in turn, *Tintin*, *Spirou*, *Pilote* and *Métal hurlant*, and then the move from the magazine to the album and the bookshop.

Scope of the Course

Part (check)	Chapters	Topics
Roots	2	Töpffer and the earliest picture stories, the first strips and children's weeklies
The magazine heroes	3, 4, 5	Tintin and the Brussels school, Spirou and Franquin, Pilote and Astérix
Adults and auteurs	6, 7	Moebius and the 1970s, Tardi, Persepolis and the independent scene
The business and the world	8, 9	Publishers and albums, festivals, museums, translation
The method	10	Reading a page and testing a "best of" list

The course discusses comics and their makers but does not reproduce pages, and it uses only brief attributed quotations. It is a survey of the French-language tradition, not a complete catalogue, and it leaves out many fine creators for reasons of space.

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
Comics are for children.	Who reads BD, and what do the shelves contain? (Chapters 6 to 9)
Tintin and Astérix are the whole of BD.	What else is there, and who reads it? (Chapters 4 to 9)
BD was invented by Hergé.	What came before? (Chapter 2)
Franco-Belgian comics are one tradition.	Where do Belgian and French practice differ? (Chapters 3 to 5)
The French have always respected comics.	When and how did the change come? (Chapters 6 to 9)
The "greatest" comics are an objective list.	Who makes the lists, and why? (Chapter 10)

Sources to Use

- **The albums themselves,** in French or in the English translations that exist for the best-known series (check which are available).
- **Museums and festivals,** including the Angoulême festival and its national comics centre, and the comics museum in Brussels, each of which has an exhibition programme and a library (check current details).
- **Libraries.** French municipal libraries (*médiathèques*) stock BD heavily, and many British libraries now have graphic-novel shelves, including translated Franco-Belgian titles (check locally).
- **Histories and criticism,** by comics scholars and journalists, which place the works in their time (check which are available in English).
- **Interviews and memoirs,** read with care, because creators' accounts of their careers are often polished.

A British comparison

Britain has a strong comics tradition of its own, and a Scottish one in particular: the Dundee publisher D. C. Thomson launched *The Dandy* (1937) and *The Beano* (1938), and Scottish writers and artists have been prominent in *2000 AD* and in American superhero comics (check). The difference is largely one of status and format. British comics were mainly weekly papers for children, thrown away or kept in boxes, while the French-

language tradition built the hardback album and a literary reputation, and the two traditions are worth comparing throughout the course.

Check the details

Dates, titles, print figures and the names of institutions come from general knowledge and are marked "check" where uncertain. Many stories about comics and their creators are retold without sources, so verify them against the publishers' and museums' own pages and against reference works.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in your own words why the English word "comic" and the French "bande dessinée" suggest different things, and what that might mean for how each is regarded.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose a comic or graphic novel you know, and describe it using at least five terms from the vocabulary table (album, planche, case, bulle, scénariste and so on).

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Pick two claims from the "Myths to Test" table and for each say what evidence you would look for and where you would find it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Term:** bande dessinée = "drawn strip"; BD or bédé; "the ninth art"
- **Format:** the album (traditionally 48 pages); planche, case, bulle
- **Roles:** scénariste, dessinateur, coloriste, auteur complet
- **Institutions:** Angoulême festival (1974), Brussels comics museum
- **Method:** describe the works, check the dates, test the claims

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Roots: Töpffer to the Early Strips

Chapter 1 asked whether Hergé invented bande dessinée. He did not, and this chapter shows what came first: a Swiss schoolmaster who drew picture stories in the 1830s and wrote about how they worked, the popular prints of Épinal, the first serial strips in French children's magazines, and the early weeklies that built a young readership. It ends in 1929, when Tintin begins (Chapter 3). Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Rodolphe Töpffer

Who he was

Rodolphe Töpffer (1799 to 1846) taught at a school in Geneva and wrote and drew humorous picture stories for friends, first as a private amusement (check). Switzerland was French-speaking in Geneva, so he belongs to the French-language tradition even though he was not French or Belgian.

His stories

Titles include *Histoire de M. Jabot*, *M. Vieux Bois*, *M. Crépin* and *Docteur Festus*, published in the 1830s and 1840s (check the dates and the order of writing and publication). Each tells a comic tale, usually of a vain or foolish man, in a series of drawings with a line or two of handwritten text under each.

His theory

Töpffer wrote an essay on the physiognomy of his drawings (1845, check) in which he explained that the combination of drawing and text makes a kind of reading that neither can achieve alone, and that a quick, simple line works better than a finished picture. Many later critics treat him as the first theorist of comics.

What he got right

Töpffer saw that the sequence is the story: a few frames per page, each showing a change from the one before, with a simple, expressive line that readers fill in for themselves. He

also used the technique of autography, drawing on transfer paper so that the line looked like his own hand and could be printed cheaply (check the method). Both ideas run through the whole history of the form.

Prints, Caricature and Popular Pictures

- **Épinal prints.** From the late 18th century the town of Épinal in the Vosges produced cheap coloured sheets of pictures with captions, on saints, soldiers, fairy tales and fables (check). Their name gave French the phrase *image d'Épinal*, for a simple, idealised picture. They show an appetite for sequences of pictures for ordinary readers.
- **The satirical press.** Caricaturists such as Honoré Daumier, Cham and Nadar made drawings for newspapers in the 1830s to 1860s, and some published longer sequences of pictures for comic effect (check names and dates). Satire and the picture sequence grew up together.
- **Gustave Doré.** The illustrator Gustave Doré produced an illustrated history of Russia in cartoon form in 1854, a work often cited as an early long comic (check).

The First French Strips

Work (check each)	Note
La Famille Fenouillard (1889)	By Georges Colomb, who signed as "Christophe", serialised in the children's magazine *Le Petit Français illustré*. A comic family's misadventures on holiday and abroad, with the text set under each picture and full-page drawings. Often called the first French strip in the modern sense.
Le Sapeur Camember (1890s)	By the same author, a comic soldier whose logic goes wrong in a series of gags.
Le Savant Cosinus (1890s)	Again Christophe, an absent-minded scientist: one of the first of many comic professors in the tradition.
Bécassine (1905)	Launched in the weekly *La Semaine de Suzette*, written under the pseudonym "Caumery" and drawn by Joseph Pinchon (check the credits). A young Breton housemaid whose literal-mindedness drives the humour; over the next decades

Work (check each)	Note
	she became one of the most popular French heroines of children's comics, with albums from 1913 (check).
Les Pieds Nickelés (1908)	By Louis Forton in the weekly *L'Épatant*: three crooks whose schemes and slang made them popular in France for decades (check).
Zig et Puce (1925)	By Alain Saint-Ogan, two boys and a penguin on adventures, in *Dimanche-Illustré*. Often credited with bringing the speech balloon into French strips, where earlier stories had put the words below the picture (check).

Weeklies for the Young

Most of the early strips appeared in magazines for children, many of them with Catholic or family-minded publishers and a mixture of stories, serials, puzzles and moral tales. These magazines trained a generation of young readers to expect a regular weekly page, and gave the artists a regular income. In the late 1920s and 1930s the market widened with imports of American newspaper strips and with new Franco-Belgian magazines (check, for example *Le Journal de Mickey* in 1934). The weekly was the home of the form until the album took over in the postwar years (Chapter 8).

A British comparison

Britain has its own early history: William Hogarth's picture series of the 1730s, such as *A Rake's Progress*, are often cited as ancestors, and *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (1884) is commonly called the first British comic with a recurring hero (check). The two countries followed a similar route from print satire to weekly papers for the young. What differs is what happened next: British comics stayed in the weekly paper, while the French-language tradition developed the album (Chapter 8).

Check the details

The history of the first comic is argued: scholars name different works as "the first", depending on what they count (a sequence of pictures, text and picture combined, a continuing hero, speech balloons). Dates, credits and magazine titles above should be

verified against a standard history. Bécassine has also been discussed as a stereotype of Breton servants, a point that should be read in the critics' own words.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain two ideas of Töpffer that remain central to comics and give a modern example of each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Why is it hard to name a "first comic"? List three different definitions and the work each would pick.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Discuss Bécassine as a commercial success and as a stereotype, giving the view of an admirer and of a critic without taking a side.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Töpffer (1799 to 1846):** picture stories, the sequence as story, a theory of the line
- **Before comics:** Épinal prints, caricature, Doré
- **First strips:** Christophe (1889), Bécassine (1905), Les Pieds Nickelés (1908), Zig et Puce (1925)
- **Speech balloon:** arrives in French strips in the 1920s (check)

- **Home of the form:** the children's weekly, until the postwar album

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Tintin and the Brussels School

Tintin is the best-known name in Franco-Belgian comics, and its creator Hergé shaped the look of the whole tradition. This chapter follows Hergé from the newspaper supplement of 1929 to the studio of the 1950s, explains the "clear line" style, describes the magazine named after the hero and the artists who gathered round it, and deals factually with the arguments about the early albums and the war years. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Hergé and the Birth of Tintin

The artist

Hergé was the pen name of Georges Remi (1907 to 1983), a Brussels artist. The name comes from his reversed initials, R.G., pronounced in French (check). He began as a scout magazine illustrator and then worked for a Catholic newspaper.

The first appearance

Tintin, a young reporter with a dog, Snowy, first appeared in January 1929 in *Le Petit Vingtième*, the children's supplement of the Brussels newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle*, in a story set in the Soviet Union (check). The newspaper's editor wanted a young hero with a political message, and the early stories reflected the views of that paper.

A growing craft

The albums that followed took Tintin to the Congo, America, Egypt and China. *The Blue Lotus* (1934 to 1935, check) is often cited as the point where Hergé began to research his settings carefully, after meeting a Chinese student in Brussels, and where the stories became more serious and exact.

What made Tintin work

A clear hero without a back story (Tintin has no family), a supporting cast that grows over the series, a plot that moves at speed with a cliffhanger at the foot of each weekly page, and a visual style that any reader can follow at a glance. Captain Haddock appears in *The Crab with the Golden Claws* (1940 to 1941) and Professor Calculus a few years later (check). The comic humour of the supporting characters is as important as the adventure.

The Clear Line

- **What it is.** A style of drawing with an even outline, flat areas of colour, little or no hatching and a precise, uncluttered background. The French term is *ligne claire*, and it was named by the Dutch artist Joost Swarte in the 1970s (check).
- **Why it works.** Every figure and object reads at a glance, and a page can be followed with no confusion. It lets Hergé pair cartoon characters with realistic backgrounds: simple faces, accurate cars, aeroplanes and buildings.
- **Its descendants.** Later artists in Belgium, France and the Netherlands worked in the same manner, and the style is a point of reference even for creators who reject it (check).
- **Hergé's studio.** From 1950 Hergé employed assistants at his studio, which helped prepare backgrounds and keep the look consistent across the series (check the date).

Tintin Magazine and Its Artists

Item (check each)	Note
Tintin magazine (1946)	A weekly launched in Brussels with the publisher Raymond Leblanc, with Hergé as artistic guide and his hero on the cover. It carried Tintin in serial form and the work of other artists, and was sold in French and Dutch editions, and in a French edition in Paris.
Edgar P. Jacobs, *Blake et Mortimer*	A British scientist and an army officer in realistic science-fiction and detective adventures, starting with *Le Secret de l'Espadon* in the magazine from 1946. Densely detailed pages and long text, in a closely related style to Hergé's (check).
Jacques Martin, *Alix*	A Gallic youth in ancient Rome, with a historical setting and careful research (1948, check).

Item (check each)	Note
Bob de Moor and others	Assistants in Hergé's studio who became artists in their own right (check).
The "Brussels school"	A name for this group's shared look: careful, realistic, clear and suited to adventure stories. It is often contrasted with the rounder, more comic Marcinelle school (Chapter 4).

The Argument About the Early Albums

The Soviets and the Congo

Tintin in the Land of the Soviets (1929 to 1930) and *Tintin in the Congo* (1930 to 1931) reflect the views of their time and of the paper that published them. The Congo story shows African people in a colonial and racist manner, as Hergé himself later acknowledged, and he redrew the album in 1946 (check). Its availability and presentation have been argued over in courts and bookshops in Belgium, France and Britain, with a warning note or a reading of the book in historical context as common proposals (check the details).

The war years

During the German occupation of Belgium, Hergé published his stories in the newspaper *Le Soir*, which was then under German control (check). After the liberation he was investigated and for a time banned from working, and the debate about his choices continues. Biographers disagree on how far he sympathised with the occupiers and how far he was working to continue a career, and the account should be read in a range of sources (check).

Later reading

The later albums, such as *Tintin in Tibet* (1960 to 1961, check), are generally seen as more humane. Hergé left a final story, *Tintin and Alph-Art*, unfinished at his death in 1983 (check). The range of readings, from loving to critical, is part of why the series remains a subject of study.

Tintin Beyond Belgium

- **Translations.** The albums have been translated into dozens of languages, with English versions published in Britain from the late 1950s (check), and total sales are often given in the hundreds of millions (check).
- **Adaptation.** The stories have become animated television series and a 2011 film directed by Steven Spielberg (check).
- **A cultural landmark.** The series is shown in museums, and a museum devoted to Hergé opened in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, in 2009 (check).

A British comparison

The nearest British counterpart to *Tintin* magazine is *Eagle* (from 1950), an adventure weekly with a realistic, finely drawn hero, Dan Dare, whose pages have a good deal in common with Jacobs's (check). Both mixed serials with factual features and were meant to be improving as well as exciting. Tintin is also a favourite in British schools and libraries, and the English translations of the early albums have been revised more than once (check).

Check the details

The history of Tintin is well documented but heavily argued, especially on Hergé's wartime conduct and on the colonial content of the early albums. Dates and the order of albums, serial and book publication should be verified against a standard biography. Read the sources for yourself, since summaries differ.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the clear line in your own words, and explain why it suits a weekly adventure serial.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Tintin magazine with a British weekly you know, in what it contained, who read it and how it earned its money.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

How should a library or publisher present the early Tintin albums today? Give two options, the case for each and the evidence you would want to see.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Hergé (Georges Remi, 1907 to 1983):** Tintin from 1929 in *Le Petit Vingtième*
- **Style:** ligne claire, the clear line
- **Magazine:** *Tintin* (1946), with Jacobs's *Blake et Mortimer* and Martin's *Alix*
- **Debates:** the colonial content of the early albums, the war years
- **Reach:** translated worldwide, adapted for screen, museum at Louvain-la-Neuve

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Spirou, the Marcinelle School and Franco-Belgian Humour

If Tintin stands for the careful, realistic side of Belgian comics, Spirou stands for the comic side. The magazine published by Dupuis, from a town near Charleroi, gave the tradition its funniest characters: a clumsy office worker, a fantastical creature, a cowboy faster than his shadow, and small blue creatures who became a worldwide franchise. This chapter follows the magazine, its great artists and the humour of what is called the Marcinelle school. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Magazine

1938

Le Journal de Spirou was launched in April 1938 by the publisher Jean Dupuis, whose firm was based at Marcinelle, near Charleroi (check). Its hero, Spirou, was a bellboy in a red uniform, created by the French artist Rob-Vel. The word *spirou* is Walloon for a lively, mischievous child, or a squirrel (check).

Wartime and after

Jijé (Joseph Gillain) took over the hero in 1943, and in 1946 the young André Franquin took over from him (check). Under Franquin the series, *Spirou et Fantasio*, became a comic adventure with a journalist friend, a pet squirrel named Spip and a mad inventor, the Count of Champignac.

The rival house

Dupuis (Spirou) and Le Lombard (Tintin) stood for the two Belgian magazine camps in the 1940s and 1950s, one with a looser, funnier style and the other with the clear line (check). Artists sometimes moved between the two, and readers often chose a side.

The Marcinelle school

A name for the artists who worked for Dupuis in the 1940s and 1950s, most famously Franquin, Morris (Maurice de Bevere), Jijé and Will. They shared a rounded, energetic, caricatured style, sometimes called the big-foot or "fat nose" manner, in contrast to

Hergé's cooler realism. Together with Peyo they made Spirou the home of Belgian comic strips (check the names usually included).

The Great Series

Series (check each)	Note
Spirou et Fantasio	Adventure and comedy with fantastic inventions. Franquin created the Count of Champignac, the mad rival Zorglub and, in 1952, the Marsupilami, a long-tailed yellow-and-black jungle animal who speaks only its own cry (check the date). Later artists carried on the series.
Gaston (from 1957)	Franquin's gag-a-page strip about Gaston Lagaffe, a lazy, accident-prone office boy at the magazine's own offices, whose inventions and schemes bring chaos to his colleagues. In British publication he was called "Gomer Goof" (check). A rare case of a hero who is also a comic anti-hero: he does nothing useful, and readers love him for it.
Lucky Luke (from 1946)	By Morris: a cowboy who shoots faster than his shadow. The scenarios were written by René Goscinny from the mid-1950s, before he moved to *Pilote* (Chapter 5) (check). A parody of the American western by a Belgian artist, with real historical characters such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid.
Les Schtroumpfs (the Smurfs, from 1958)	By Peyo (Pierre Culliford): small blue creatures who live in mushroom houses in a village and speak with the word "schtroumpf" replacing nouns and verbs. They first appeared in another Peyo series, *Johan et Pirlouit*, before getting their own (check). An American television cartoon series in the 1980s made them famous worldwide (check).
Others	*Tif et Tondu*, *Buck Danny* (aviation) and many more; the magazine ran a wide mix of humour and adventure (check).

The Humour

- **The gag page.** Many Spirou series are built on single pages with a complete gag. Franquin's pages in particular have an exact comic rhythm, with chain reactions of cause and effect (check).

- **Slapstick and sound.** The drawings carry movement and noise: cartoon sound effects, faces that stretch and objects that fly.
- **The workplace and the village.** *Gaston* is a comedy of office life, and the Smurfs a comedy of a closed village with a clear social order. Both rely on a regular cast and familiar situations.
- **Wordplay.** The Smurf language and Franquin's puns and invented words show the French-language tradition's fondness for playing with sounds (compare *German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?*, Chapter 2).
- **A darker side.** Franquin also made a series of black-humour drawings for adults, *Idées noires* (from the 1970s, check), about war, cruelty and death. He is often cited to show that humorous comics can carry serious feeling.

A British comparison

The nearest British parallels to Spirou are the Dundee comics *The Beano* and *The Dandy*: the energy of the chaos, the sound effects and the troublemaking hero. *Dennis the Menace* (1951) and *The Bash Street Kids* (1954) are frequently compared with Gaston and his colleagues (check). The difference is the second life: the French-language gags were collected in hardback albums that adults bought for themselves, and the characters were treated as classics, not as disposable weekly fun.

Check the details

Dates, creators' roles and the names of English translations change from source to source, and several are from memory. The attribution of scripts and drawings on long-running series, which passed through many hands, is particularly easy to get wrong. Check a standard history or the publisher's own site.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Compare the "Brussels" and "Marcinelle" approaches to comics in style, subject and humour, using one named series from each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Gaston Lagaffe is a hero who does very little. Explain why this works as a comic premise and how it compares with a British comic character of your choice.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Smurfs and Lucky Luke were so exportable, and what each loses or gains in translation.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Magazine:** *Le Journal de Spirou* (1938), Dupuis, Marcinelle
- **Artists:** Franquin, Morris, Jijé, Will, Peyo
- **Series:** *Spirou et Fantasio*, *Gaston*, *Lucky Luke*, *Les Schtroumpfs*
- **Creations:** the Marsupilami, Count of Champignac, Gaston Lagaffe
- **Style:** rounded, energetic, caricatured; contrast with Hergé's clear line

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Pilote, Astérix and the French Weekly

The first great Belgian magazines were published in Brussels and Marcinelle. In 1959 the centre of gravity moved to Paris, with Pilote, a weekly for older readers edited by a team of writers and artists who wanted something sharper and more French. Its first issue carried a small Gaulish village, and Astérix became the best-selling comic hero in France. This chapter follows Pilote, its creators and the humour of Astérix, with notes on the artists who grew up alongside it. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

A New Magazine in Paris

1959

Pilote appeared in October 1959, founded by a team that included the writer René Goscinny, the artists Albert Uderzo and Jean-Michel Charlier and the radio station Europe 1, which promoted it (check the founders and backers). Its aim was to offer older children and teenagers a weekly with French talent, in competition with the Belgian magazines.

A different tone

The magazine had a lively, jokey editorial voice, a letters page with the editors' replies and a mix of serials, features and gags. Goscinny became editor-in-chief in the early 1960s (check). Creators were encouraged to write for readers who were growing up (check).

A stable of talent

Alongside Astérix, the early magazine carried Charlier's aviation story *Tanguy et Laverdure*, the western *Fort Navajo* (later *Blueberry*, with Jean Giraud, check), and the science-fiction series *Valérian* by Pierre Christin and Jean-Claude Mézières from 1967 (check).

Astérix

The Gaulish village

Astérix, written by Goscinny and drawn by Uderzo, started in the first issue of *Pilote* and appeared in album form from 1961 (check). In 50 BC, all of Gaul has been conquered by the Romans except one small village in Brittany, whose people hold out thanks to a magic potion brewed by the druid Getafix (*Panoramix*, check). Astérix, the clever little warrior, and his large friend Obélix, who fell into the potion as a baby, carry out comic adventures in Gaul and across the Roman world.

- **The humour.** Constant wordplay (names ending in *-ix* for Gauls and *-us* for Romans), visual gags, comic stereotypes of other nations and anachronism: a Gaulish village that behaves like a French provincial town.
- **The history.** Goscinny drew on schoolbook images of "our ancestors the Gauls" to gently mock them. Many readers also see a post-war comedy of a small community resisting a stronger power (check; a view often put by critics, not stated by the authors).
- **The travel albums.** From early on, the heroes visited other lands (Britain, Spain, Switzerland, Corsica and others), in each case with national stereotypes presented in a friendly spirit, though the humour has also been criticised as dated (check).
- **After Goscinny.** Goscinny died in 1977 and Uderzo went on writing and drawing the series; further albums by new teams appeared from 2013 (check). Uderzo died in 2020 (check).
- **Reach.** Translated into more than 100 languages and dialects, with sales in the hundreds of millions (check), adapted as animated films and, in 1999, as live-action films with Gérard Depardieu as Obélix (check), and with a theme park near Paris from 1989 (check).

Other Goscinny Series and the Pilote Stable

Work (check each)	Note
Iznogoud (from 1962)	Goscinny with the artist Jean Tabary: a scheming Grand Vizier in a fairy-tale Baghdad whose motto is that he wants to be "calif in place of the calif". Each story repeats the pattern of the plot that fails, with a stream of puns.
Le Petit Nicolas	Goscinny's stories of a schoolboy and his friends, illustrated by Jean-Jacques Sempé (from 1959, check). Mainly illustrated prose, not strictly a comic, but a classic of the same humour.

Work (check each)	Note
Achille Talon (from 1963)	By Greg: a pompous, bourgeois hero with a love of fancy words and an exasperating family (check).
Philémon (from 1965)	By Fred: a boy who falls down a well into a surreal series of islands, a fantasy of the absurd with a literary flavour (check).
Marcel Gotlib	A satirist who wrote and drew gags for *Pilote* in the 1960s, notably the *Rubrique-à-brac* series, then left to found his own magazine (see Chapter 6).

The Weekly as a Social Institution

For French readers in the 1960s, the Wednesday and Thursday arrival of the weekly (schools had a day off midweek, check) was a ritual, and magazines such as *Pilote* were read, swapped and collected. They worked as a stable of serials in which artists tried new ideas before the album, and the editors' voice made readers feel part of a club. When the readership grew up, its tastes moved on, and by the late 1960s *Pilote* faced competition from more daring publications, a story taken up in Chapter 6.

> **A British comparison**
>
> Astérix is also a British success, thanks to Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge, whose English translations from 1969 became famous for rebuilding the puns instead of translating them word for word (check). Names such as Getafix for the druid and Dogmatix for Obélix's dog come from this approach (check). Scotland has its own translations of Astérix into Scots, a lively example of how far the series travels (check). The British weekly most like *Pilote* is perhaps *Punch*, though for adults, or the satirical *Private Eye*, in its sense of humour about the establishment (check).

> **Check the details**
>
> Dates, founders, sales figures and translator credits are from memory and vary by source; sales totals for Astérix are given in many different ways. Treat the jokes about stereotypes in Astérix as a historical question as well as a comic one, and read the critics' arguments in their own words.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

What made *Pilote* different from *Spirou* and *Tintin* when it was launched in 1959? List three differences and say why they mattered.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose an Astérix gag type (a pun, a visual gag, a national stereotype or an anachronism) and explain how it works and what is lost in translation.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Some readers see Astérix as a story of resistance, others as a gentle joke about French identity. State each reading, and the evidence a historian would want in order to test it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Magazine:** *Pilote* (1959), Paris, for older readers
- **Team:** Goscinny (writer), Uderzo (artist), Charlier
- **Astérix:** from 1959, albums from 1961; Gaulish village, magic potion, puns
- **Others:** *Iznogoud*, *Le Petit Nicolas*, *Achille Talon*, *Philémon*, Gotlib
- **English Astérix:** Bell and Hockridge, rebuilt puns

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Adults and Auteurs: Moebius, Métal hurlant and the 1970s

By the end of the 1960s the readers of Pilote had grown up, and some of its artists wanted to make comics for them. The 1970s saw the founding of magazines for adults, a satirical press with a famous cartoonist roll of honour, and a science-fiction magazine whose images reached Hollywood. This chapter follows that change and shows how the idea of an author, a creator with a personal voice, came to the centre of French-language comics. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Satirical Press

Hara-Kiri (1960)

A monthly that called itself *journal bête et méchant* ("stupid and nasty newspaper"), founded by François Cavanna and Georges Bernier (known as Professeur Choron) with cartoonists including Reiser, Cabu and Wolinski (check). Coarse, irreverent and anti-establishment, it set the tone of French adult cartooning.

Charlie Hebdo (1970)

After *Hara-Kiri Hebdo* was banned in 1970 for a cover mocking the death of Charles de Gaulle, the team relaunched as *Charlie Hebdo* (check). It became the best-known satirical weekly in France and a regular source of argument about the limits of satire.

A tragedy

In January 2015 two gunmen attacked the magazine's offices in Paris and killed twelve people, among them several of its cartoonists, including Cabu, Wolinski, Charb and Tignous (check the names and number). The attack, which was an act of terrorism, led to large demonstrations in France and a worldwide debate on free expression.

Leaving Pilote: The New Magazines

Magazine (check each)	Note
L'Écho des savanes (1972)	Founded by Gotlib, Nikita Mandryka and Claire Bretécher after they left *Pilote*, as a magazine of humour for adults, with sex, politics and satire of daily life. Bretécher's strip *Les Frustrés* (1973) in *Le Nouvel Observateur* satirised Parisian left-wing intellectuals.
Fluide Glacial (1975)	Gotlib's second venture with Jacques Diament: a humour magazine of the absurd, with grotesque and parodic series, which has run ever since (check).
Métal hurlant (1975)	A science-fiction and fantasy magazine published by the group Les Humanoïdes Associés, founded by Jean Giraud (Moebius), Philippe Druillet, Jean-Pierre Dionnet and Bernard Farkas (check). Large format, full colour, adult themes and richly drawn.
(À suivre) (1978)	A monthly from the publisher Casterman for longer serial novels in comic form (check), preparing the ground for the graphic novel (Chapter 7).

Moebius

> **Two names, one artist**
>
> Jean Giraud (1938 to 2012) worked in two styles under two names. As "Gir" he drew *Blueberry*, a realistic western written by Charlier (Chapter 5). As "Moebius" he made dreamlike science fiction in a fine, detailed line, among them the wordless desert fantasy *Arzach* (from 1975) and *The Airtight Garage* (check). He later collaborated with the writer Alejandro Jodorowsky on the long space opera *L'Incal* (1980s, check).

- **The look.** Vast landscapes, strange machines, tiny figures, and a free, imaginative use of the page. It was a deliberate break from the tight, plot-driven page of the Belgian weeklies.
- **The influence.** His designs were used in films, and critics often cite *Métal hurlant* as an influence on the look of science-fiction cinema of the late 1970s and 1980s, including *Alien* and *Blade Runner*; Giraud worked directly on a number of films (check which, and how much; the influence is argued).

- **The export.** An American edition, *Heavy Metal*, began in 1977 and brought the French artists to a wide English-language audience (check).
- **Other voices.** Druillet's operatic *Lone Sloane*, Mandryka's *Le Concombre masqué* and many more (check).

The Author Arrives

These magazines shared an idea: the comic creator is an author, with a personal vision, not a craftsman working for an editor. Artists signed their work and kept their characters, and critics started to treat comics seriously. Readers, now adults, bought albums for themselves. The idea has a long reach into the later chapters: the graphic novel (Chapter 7), the independent press, the festival prizes (Chapter 9). It also changed what the content could be: sex, violence, politics and philosophy appeared in comics, and with them arguments about censorship. In France a 1949 law governing publications for young people had long shaped what could be printed for the young, and the adult magazines were partly a way round it (check the law and its effects).

A British comparison

The British adult-comics story runs on a different track. *2000 AD* (from 1977) brought Judge Dredd and a savage satirical science fiction to a young readership, with Scottish writers and artists prominent among its talent (check), and Alan Moore's work in the 1980s made British writers central to the adult comic. *Viz* (from 1979 in Newcastle) is the nearest cousin of *Hara-Kiri* and *Fluide Glacial*: coarse, absurd and anti-establishment (check). Heavy Metal, the American edition of *Métal hurlant*, was read in Britain too (check). On satire and its limits, compare *German Humour: Does Germany Have a Sense of Humour?*, Chapter 9.

Check the details

Founders, dates and cover stories are told in several versions, and the film claims about Moebius are often exaggerated; verify them in the artists' own interviews and a standard history. The 2015 attack is a matter of public record, and the names and numbers above should be checked against a news archive. Read the satirists' cartoons in context, since their jokes about religion and politics have been argued over for decades.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why artists left *Pilote* to found new magazines in the 1970s, and what each of the two main ventures offered that *Pilote* did not.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Critics claim that *Métal hurlant* influenced Hollywood science fiction. Say what evidence would support the claim and what would weaken it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe the French satirical cartoon tradition from Hara-Kiri to Charlie Hebdo, and the arguments about its limits, giving both sides without taking one.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Satire:** *Hara-Kiri* (1960), *Charlie Hebdo* (1970); attack on the office, January 2015
- **New magazines:** *L'Écho des savanes* (1972), *Fluide Glacial* (1975), *Métal hurlant* (1975), *(À suivre)* (1978)
- **Moebius (Jean Giraud, 1938 to 2012):** *Arzach*, *L'Incal* with Jodorowsky; "Gir" for *Blueberry*
- **Idea:** the comic creator as author
- **Export:** *Heavy Metal* (US, 1977)

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · The Graphic-Novel Turn: Tardi, Bilal, Persepolis and L'Association

By the 1980s adults read comics in France and Belgium as a matter of course, but most of what they read was still series in the classic mould. In the 1990s a new generation made a different kind of book: single, personal and often drawn and written by one person, on subjects that had rarely been treated in comics, from the trenches of 1914 to growing up in revolutionary Iran. This chapter follows two established "auteurs" (Tardi and Bilal), the small publisher L'Association that gave the independent scene a home, and the books that took the graphic novel to a world audience. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Two Established Auteurs

Jacques Tardi

Born in 1946, Tardi made his name with *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec* (from 1976, check), a comic adventure in a vividly drawn Paris of the early 1900s. He is best known for his work on the First World War, including *C'était la guerre des tranchées* (1993, check), and for his adaptations of Léo Malet's detective novels about Nestor Burma. In *Moi, René Tardi, prisonnier de guerre* (from 2012, check) he drew his father's Second World War memoir. His anti-war stance and dense, bleak linework are unmistakable.

Enki Bilal

Born in 1951 in Belgrade, Bilal moved to France as a child. His *Nikopol* trilogy (from 1980, check) is a political science fiction of a future Paris with an Egyptian god above it. He moved from collaborations with the writer Pierre Christin to solo works with painterly colour, and made films based on his own comics (check). A dark, politically aware strand of French science fiction.

What they show

Both treat the comic as a form for history, politics and anxiety about the future. They had been working for adult magazines in the 1970s and carried the "author" idea (Chapter

6) into the bookshop, with a single-volume or short-series format.

L'Association

A publisher of artists

L'Association was founded in Paris in 1990 by a group of young artists including Jean-Christophe Menu, Lewis Trondheim, David B., Killoffer and Mokeït (check the founders). They wanted to publish personal, formally inventive comics free of the series, album and genre rules of the big houses, and to put the author in control. Their books were small-press and often experimental, with irregular formats, black and white and autobiography. They are often credited with starting the French "independent" or "alternative" comics scene (check).

- **David B.**, *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (from 1996, check): an autobiographical account of growing up with a brother's epilepsy, in a black-and-white style full of symbols.
- **Lewis Trondheim**: a prolific writer and artist, creator of the animal-hero series *Lapinot* and, with Joann Sfar, the fantasy series *Donjon* (check).
- **Jean-Christophe Menu**: the group's critic and theorist, whose book *Plates-bandes* (2005, check) attacked the mass market for comics.
- **Influences.** American underground and alternative comics, and especially Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the story of his father's survival of the Holocaust, which showed the form could treat the gravest subject (check).

Persepolis and the World Audience

Work (check each)	Note
Persepolis (2000 to 2003)	By Marjane Satrapi, born in Iran in 1969: a black-and-white memoir of a girl growing up in revolutionary Iran and in exile in Europe. Published in four volumes by L'Association, translated worldwide, and made into an animated film (2007) that she co-directed (check). The book is often named as the work that took French comics to a general adult readership.

Work (check each)	Note
Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du rabbin* (from 2002)	A talking cat in 1930s Algeria, living with a rabbi and facing questions about religion, identity and colonialism.
Emmanuel Guibert, *La Guerre d'Alan* (from 2000)	A biography of an American soldier in Europe in the Second World War, drawn from interviews (check).
Guy Delisle, *Pyongyang* (2003)	A cartoonist's travel diary from North Korea, one of the first successful comic "reportage" books (check).
Riad Sattouf, *L'Arabe du futur* (from 2014)	A memoir of childhood in Libya and Syria with a French mother and a Syrian father, a widely read example of the autobiographical turn (check).

What Changed

- **The format.** The 48-page colour album remained the commercial standard, but large black-and-white volumes of 150 or more pages became common for personal stories.
- **The subjects.** Memoir, reportage, history, politics and everyday life, in addition to adventure and humour.
- **The readership.** More adults, more women readers and creators, and bookshops that put comics beside novels (check).
- **The big houses responded.** Publishers such as Dargaud, Casterman and Delcourt began lines of "graphic novels" and signed independent authors (check; see Chapter 8).

A British comparison

Britain has its own graphic-novel turn: Raymond Briggs's *When the Wind Blows* (1982) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986 to 1987) are the usual landmarks, with Bryan Talbot's *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (1994) and Posy Simmonds's newspaper serials *Gemma Bovery* and *Tamara Drewe*, both reworkings of French and English literary classics (check). The French-language scene differs in having a dedicated small-press publisher (L'Association) and public institutions to support it, while British graphic novels reached

the bookshop mostly through mainstream publishers. A Scottish reader might look for the Edinburgh and Glasgow small-press tradition and the festival programmes (check).

Check the details

Dates, founders and titles come from general knowledge. The history of the independent scene is also told in competing versions by the people who made it, and "the first graphic novel" is a contested label in every language. Verify with publisher catalogues and with the creators' own accounts.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Compare Tardi's war comics with a war novel or film you know, saying what the comic form adds and what it cannot do.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

What did L'Association do differently from the big publishers, and what effects did it have on the market?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Why might a black-and-white memoir like *Persepolis* reach a wider audience than a colour adventure series? Give three reasons and one reason against.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Auteurs:** Tardi (war, Paris, noir), Bilal (political science fiction)
- **L'Association (1990):** Menu, Trondheim, David B., Killoffer, Mokeït
- **Landmarks:** *Persepolis*, *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*, *Pyongyang*, *L'Arabe du futur*
- **New subjects:** memoir, reportage, history, politics
- **Influence:** *Maus* and American alternative comics

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Albums, Publishers and the Business

The earlier chapters followed creators and characters. This one follows the money: the publishing houses that own the classic series, the album format and its many editions, the bookshops and festivals through which comics reach readers, the economics of an author's life, and the two forces that changed the market since the 1990s, Japanese manga and the internet. Figures in this chapter are rough, vary by year and source, and all are flagged "check".

From Magazine to Album

The old chain

For most of the 20th century a story appeared first in a weekly magazine (*Tintin*, *Spirou*, *Pilote*), then in a hardback album, which was the real profit centre. The magazine paid the artist a fee and found an audience, and the album sold the story again as a book.

The break

The great weeklies lost readers from the 1970s onward. *Pilote* stopped in 1989 and *Tintin* magazine in 1993, while *Spirou* survives (check). Publishers moved to publishing the album first, with no serial, and the series became a product of the bookshop.

The one-shot

Alongside long series came the "one-shot" (*one-shot* or *récit complet*), a single book that stands alone, as in the graphic novels of Chapter 7. Publishers also reissue earlier series in collected editions (*intégrales*) (check).

The Publishers

House (check each)	Known for
Dupuis	*Spirou*, *Gaston*, *Lucky Luke* (for a time), the Smurfs; based in Belgium (Chapter 4).
Le Lombard	The Tintin magazine house, with *Blake et Mortimer* and other series in the Brussels tradition (Chapter 3).
Casterman	The publisher of the *Tintin* albums, and of *(À suivre)*; part of the Gallimard group (check).
Dargaud	*Pilote* and the Astérix albums; many leading series (Chapter 5). Dargaud, Dupuis and Le Lombard have been brought into one large group, Média-Participations (check).
Glénat, Delcourt, Soleil	Large independent houses from the 1970s and 1980s, strong in fantasy, adventure and later manga (check).
L'Association and other small presses	Authors' books outside the mainstream (Chapter 7).

Ownership has become concentrated, with a few groups controlling many famous series and the catalogue rights to the classic heroes. Estates and family firms, such as the Hergé estate, keep a close hold on their characters (check).

The Album and Its Editions

- **The standard.** A hardback of about 48 pages in colour, priced in the range of the low-to-mid teens of euros for a new album (check). Many titles now run longer.
- **Special editions.** Limited, signed or deluxe printings (*tirage de tête*), numbered prints, and sketchbook editions aimed at collectors (check).
- **The collector market.** Original pages by artists such as Hergé and Franquin have been sold at auction for large sums, and rare first editions of early albums have fetched high prices (check the records).
- **The rights business.** Merchandise, films, games and theme parks bring in more money for the biggest series than the books, which is why the owners guard them (check).

The Book Trade

- **The market.** France has one of the largest comics markets in the world outside Japan and the United States, with several thousand new titles a year (check the figure) and comics

making up a significant share of the book trade by value.

- **Where it sells.** General bookshops, specialist comic shops (*librairies spécialisées*), large chain stores and supermarkets; also libraries, which lend heavily (check).
- **Festivals as sales events.** Angoulême and others are also trade fairs, with signing sessions where artists sell and sign books for hours (Chapter 9).
- **Public support.** The state backs comics through the national book centre, public libraries and a themed year in 2020 (check).

The Author's Life

A hard living (check all)

Most authors are paid an advance and a royalty on each sale, usually a share of single digits to low teens of the cover price, split between writer and artist when they are different people (check). A series artist may spend a year on a single album. Surveys by author associations in the 2010s found that many creators earned little more than the minimum wage, or less (check), and that women earned less than men on average. These findings led to public meetings (*états généraux*) in 2015 and to campaigns for better contracts and social protection (check). The rich stars and the poorly paid majority exist side by side.

Manga and the Digital Change

Development (check each)	Note
Manga arrives	Japanese comics grew in France from the early 1990s, helped by translations of *Akira* and *Dragon Ball* and by television cartoons (check). France became one of the largest manga markets outside Japan, and manga accounts for a large share of the comics sold (check). French publishers such as Glénat, Kana and Pika were prominent.
The effect	A new younger readership, a different format (paperback volumes, reading from right to left in the original style), and a spur to French creators who borrow from the style (sometimes called "manfra", check). It also raised the question of what counts as "bande dessinée" in the shops.

Development (check each)	Note
Digital	Web comics and blogs gave authors direct access to readers. Pénélope Bagieu's blog, which became the book series *Ma vie est tout à fait fascinante* and later *Les Culottées*, is an example (check). Crowdfunding, vertical-scroll mobile comics from Korea ("webtoons") and online reading services have all expanded the market (check).

A British comparison

The British weekly comic system lasted into modern times without producing the album: *The Beano*, from Dundee, is still published weekly by D. C. Thomson but with a small fraction of its old circulation (check). Mainstream British comics publishing is split between children's weeklies, graphic-novel imprints in general publishing houses and specialist firms such as Rebellion, which owns *2000 AD* (check), with sales through the Diamond-style specialist shops and, increasingly, bookshops and libraries. The main difference is scale and public support: France treats comics as a part of its national book culture.

Check the details

Figures about sales, royalties and market shares are rough and change from year to year; the publishing groups and ownership have changed repeatedly and should be checked against current sources, such as industry reports and the publishers' own pages. Statements about authors' pay are drawn from author-association surveys and not from official statistics (check).

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the old chain from magazine to album, say why it broke down, and explain what replaced it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

An artist draws one 48-page album a year, earning a royalty of 10 per cent on a retail price of 15 euros, shared equally with a writer. Show how many copies would need to sell to reach a given annual income, and discuss what the calculation leaves out.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Assess the effect of manga on the French comics market: two benefits, two problems, and the evidence you would use.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Old chain:** magazine, then album; magazines decline from the 1970s
- **Publishers:** Dupuis, Le Lombard, Casterman, Dargaud, Glénat, Delcourt, Soleil
- **Album:** 48 pages, hardback, plus special and collected editions
- **Authors:** advance and royalty; many on low incomes; états généraux (2015)
- **Changes:** manga from the 1990s; web comics and webtoons

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Angoulême, Brussels and the Wider World

Comics need places as well as publishers: a festival where fans, artists and publishers meet, and cities that decide to show their comics to the public. Two places stand out, Angoulême in south-west France and Brussels. This chapter visits them, looks at how Franco-Belgian comics travel into English and onto the screen, and ends with a question the festivals have themselves had to face: where are the women? Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Angoulême

The festival

The Festival international de la bande dessinée d'Angoulême began in 1974 and is held every January in the small city of Angoulême, in Charente (check). It is now one of the largest comics festivals in the world, with exhibitions, signings, a book fair, and the awards. Entry is by ticket, and the town is filled with temporary pavilions.

The prizes

The festival's most prestigious award is the Grand Prix de la ville d'Angoulême, given for a body of work, and the Fauve d'or for best album (check). Winners of the Grand Prix then chair the following year's festival. Past winners have included Franco-Belgian classics, Japanese artists such as Katsuhiro Otomo and Rumiko Takahashi, and Americans such as Bill Watterson (check).

The city

Angoulême also has a permanent national comics centre, the Cité internationale de la bande dessinée et de l'image, which opened in its present form in 2009 with museum galleries, a library and residencies, and walls painted with comic murals (check).

Brussels

The capital of the form

Brussels likes to call itself the capital of comics. The Centre belge de la bande dessinée (the Belgian Comic Strip Center) opened in 1989 in a building designed by the architect Victor Horta, a landmark of Art Nouveau (check). Across the city, a "comic strip route" of large murals, begun in the early 1990s, shows characters such as Tintin, Lucky Luke, Gaston and the Smurfs on the walls of ordinary streets (check). The Belgian state treats comics as a national cultural asset, and several of the great publishers and magazines of Chapters 3 and 4 were Belgian.

- **Elsewhere in Belgium.** A museum devoted to Hergé opened at Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 (check), and Wallonia has its own comics sites in the Charleroi area, the home of Spirou (Chapter 4).
- **Other French festivals.** Quai des Bulles in Saint-Malo, and BD Boum in Blois, among many (check).
- **Beyond the French-speaking world.** Lucca in Italy, Leeds and London in Britain (Thought Bubble, Comica; check), San Diego Comic-Con in the United States, and the huge manga markets of Japan.

Into English

Route (check each)	Note
Classics	*Tintin* and *Astérix* in English from the late 1950s and the late 1960s (Chapters 3 and 5), published by British houses. Also *Lucky Luke* and the Smurfs.
Specialist translators	Cinebook, based in Britain, has published English editions of series such as *Lucky Luke*, *Blake et Mortimer* and *Largo Winch* since the mid-2000s (check).
Graphic novels	American independents such as Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly and NBM publish Tardi, Sfar, Satrapi and others (check). *Persepolis* is widely taught in schools and universities.
Magazines	*Heavy Metal* in the 1970s brought the *Métal hurlant* artists to English readers (Chapter 6).

Translation can be difficult for comics: the lettering must be reset in each balloon, the text must fit the space, and puns and local jokes have to be rebuilt (Chapter 5). English-language

publishers have taken in only a fraction of what is published in French each year (check), so the English view of the tradition is much narrower than the French one.

On Screen

- **Animation and live action.** *Astérix* and *Tintin* films, Luc Besson's *Valerian* (2017), based on the series of Chapter 5 (check), and the animated *Persepolis* (2007) (check).
- **Blue Is the Warmest Colour.** The 2013 film, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, was based on a comic by Julie Maroh (check); it was also controversial for its production and its depiction of its subject, with the author voicing criticism (check).
- **The influence goes both ways.** The Franco-Belgian artists drew on American strips and, later, Japanese manga, and Moebius was admired by Japanese artists such as Hayao Miyazaki (check).

Where Are the Women?

The history

Women have been creators from early on (the Bécassine illustrator Jacqueline Rivière, Claire Bretécher in the 1970s, Florence Cestac), but they were few in the big classic series (check). Florence Cestac was the first woman to win the Angoulême Grand Prix, in 2000 (check).

The 2016 row

In 2016 the festival's long list of nominees for the Grand Prix included no women, and many artists protested; some men asked to be withdrawn from the list, and a collective of women creators, formed in 2015, campaigned against sexism in the field (check the details). The festival changed its rules for the following years (check).

Now

More women now write, draw and publish comics, including Marjane Satrapi, Pénélope Bagieu, Julie Maroh and Catel, and women are a growing part of the readership (check). Surveys of the industry continue to find gaps

in pay and in prizes (check; compare Chapter 8).

A British comparison

Britain has no single Angoulême, but it has a lively festival circuit (Thought Bubble in Leeds, Comica in London, and comics strands at the Edinburgh International Book Festival; check) and a cartoon museum in London (check). Scotland's comics history, from Dundee to the creators in *2000 AD*, has also been celebrated in exhibitions (check). The British debate on women in comics follows the same pattern as the French one: a tradition once run largely by men, now changing, and the changes driven by creators' own campaigns.

Check the details

Festival rules, prize winners and museum details change frequently. Check the festival's and museums' own pages for current information, and read both the organisers' and the critics' accounts of the 2016 row, since they differ.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Plan a three-day comics trip to Brussels or Angoulême: what to see, which chapters of this course each stop relates to, and what you would check before travelling.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain three difficulties of translating a comic and give an example of how a translator might solve each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Summarise the arguments about women creators and prizes in French-language comics, setting out the evidence on each side and what further evidence would help.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Angoulême:** festival since 1974, every January; Grand Prix and Fauve d'or; national comics centre (2009)
- **Brussels:** Belgian Comic Strip Center (1989), comic-strip route of murals
- **English:** Cinebook, Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly, NBM
- **Screen:** Persepolis, Valerian, Blue Is the Warmest Colour
- **Women:** Cestac (2000), the 2016 row, growing presence

Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Reading a Page and Testing the Canon

The course has followed a form from Töpffer's picture stories to the festival halls of Angoulême. This last chapter does three things: it sets the story out as a timeline, it tests the common claims from Chapter 1 against what the course found, and it gives two methods you can use again: a way to read a single comic page closely, and a way to test a "greatest comics" list. Dates are from the earlier chapters and flagged "check" where they were.

A Timeline of Bande Dessinée

Period	Strand (see chapter)
1830s to 1900s	Töpffer's picture stories; Épinal prints; Christophe's first strips (Chapter 2, check)
1900s to 1920s	Children's weeklies; *Bécassine*, *Les Pieds Nickelés*, *Zig et Puce* (Chapter 2)
1929 to 1950s	Tintin and the Brussels school; *Spirou* and Marcinelle (Chapters 3 and 4)
1959 to 1960s	*Pilote*, Astérix, the French weekly (Chapter 5)
1960s to 1970s	Satirical press; adult magazines; *Métal hurlant* and Moebius (Chapter 6)
1980s to 2000s	Auteurs, L'Association, *Persepolis*; the shift to the album and manga (Chapters 7 and 8)
1974 onward	Angoulême, Brussels, translation, screen adaptations, debates about women creators (Chapter 9)

Myths and Evidence

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
Comics are for children.	False as a general claim: adult magazines from the 1970s, the graphic novel and a mixed readership. True of a large part of the classic output.

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
Tintin and Astérix are the whole of BD.	False: they are two peaks among a vast range, from Spirou to Moebius to Persepolis.
BD was invented by Hergé.	False: Töpffer, Christophe and others came first, though Hergé shaped the modern adventure style.
Franco-Belgian comics are one tradition.	Partly: shared publishers and readers, but distinct Brussels and Marcinelle schools and a Paris centre.
The French have always respected comics.	False: the respect came from the 1960s onward through critics, magazines, festivals and institutions.
The "greatest" comics are an objective list.	False: lists reflect who votes, which markets and languages are covered and which works are in print (see below).

Reading a Comic Page: Six Questions

1. Layout

How many panels, what shapes, how big? Where does your eye go first, and does the grid speed up or slow down the page?

2. Line and colour

Clear line, scratchy, painted? Flat or modelled colour? What does the style say about tone and period (Chapter 3 against Chapter 6)?

3. Words

Who speaks, in which balloons and lettering? How much text is there, and how does it relate to the picture: repeating it, adding to it, or contradicting it?

4. Sequence

What happens between panels (the gap, or *gouttière*)? How much time passes, and what must the reader infer?

5. Context

Which magazine, publisher, year and audience? Was it drawn for a weekly page or for a book?

6. Effect

What does the page make you feel or think, and which of the earlier answers produce that effect?

Worked example: a gag page in the Marcinelle manner

1. Layout: a regular grid of equal panels, which gives a steady rhythm for a gag that builds. **2. Line:** rounded figures, bright flat colour, exaggerated faces. **3. Words:** short speech balloons and a sound effect in large letters; the picture does most of the talking. **4. Sequence:** each panel shows one step of a chain reaction, with the last panel delivering the disaster. **5. Context:** a one-page gag from a weekly, to be read in a minute and collected later into an album (Chapters 4 and 8). **6. Effect:** comic satisfaction from a pattern that is familiar and varied. Doing the same exercise on a page from *Persepolis* or *Tintin* will bring out how different the answers are.

Testing a "Best of" List

- **Who chose?** Critics, readers, booksellers or sales? Each gives a different list.
- **From what pool?** French-language only, or all comics? Works in print and in translation have an advantage.
- **On what criterion?** Influence, popularity, craft, originality or personal taste?
- **Who is missing?** Look for women, small-press authors, manga and creators outside France and Belgium (Chapters 7 to 9).
- **What would change the list?** A different year, a different jury or a new translation.
- **Verdict.** A list is evidence of a taste at one moment, not a ranking of quality.

A British comparison

The same methods work on British lists, such as polls of the greatest comics or graphic novels, which typically favour *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *The Beano* and *2000 AD* characters and tell you about the voters as much as the works (check). Try the six-question page reading on a *Beano* page and a *Tintin* page side by side: the layout, the words and the context show most clearly how the two traditions differ.

Check the details

The timeline and tables summarise the earlier chapters, and their "check" items still apply. The verdicts are conclusions from the sources used in this course, not proof, and a different set of sources might shift the emphasis.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one page from a comic you own and apply the six-question reading to it in a short paragraph for each question.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Pick a published "best comics" list and test it with the questions about lists. What does it tell you about its makers?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Write a one-page personal canon of five Franco-Belgian works for a newcomer, justifying each choice by a different criterion and saying what the list leaves out.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Page reading:** layout, line and colour, words, sequence, context, effect
- **List testing:** who chose, from what pool, on what criterion, who is missing, what would change it
- **Verdict on Chapter 1's myths:** comics are not only for children, Hergé did not invent BD, respect was earned from the 1960s

Course complete

You have finished *Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée*: the term and the form, Töpffer and the early strips, Tintin and the Brussels school, Spirou and Marcinelle, Pilote and Astérix, the adult and auteur revolution, the graphic-novel turn, the business of the album, the festivals and the wider world, and methods for reading a page and testing a canon. Related courses include *French Film & Television*, *French Literature*, *French Music* and *Jeux Sans Frontières*.