

# Illustrating Damsels in Distress and Emissaries From Our Deep, Dark Ids

Mayor La Guardia was appalled. Out for a walk one day in Manhattan in 1942, he happened upon a store displaying a copy of a periodical called *Spicy Mystery*.

**KEN JOHNSON**

**ART REVIEW**

In lurid hues and slashing graphic style, its cover pictured a caucasous, terrified young woman in a partly shredded dress hanging by bound hands from a hook alongside slabs of meat. She was menaced by a demented, knife-wielding brute of a man who looked back over his shoulder at whoever was holding the gun that cast its shadow on him. Shocked and dismayed, the mayor vowed to ban all such scurrilous literature from his fair city.

Now the original painting by Hugh J. Ward that was reproduced on the cover of that offending publication is on view, along

"Pulp Art: The Robert Lesser Collection," is on view through July 30 at the Museum of American Illustration at the Society of Illustrators, 128 East 63rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 638-2560, societyillustrators.org.

with almost 90 other racy and bloodcurdling confections of similar ilk, in "Pulp Art: The Robert Lesser Collection," an entertaining and fascinating exhibition at the Museum of American Illustration at the Society of Illustrators. Each is framed, along with a copy of the periodical whose contents it so enticingly previewed. Almost all are from the holdings of Robert Lesser, a collector and connoisseur of popular visual culture.

The pulps — so called because they were printed on cheap paper made from wood pulp — were invented by an entrepreneur named Frank A. Munsey in the early 1880s. His first magazine, *The Golden Argosy*, was for children. It was later called just *Argosy* and eventually became for adult men only. Other publishers followed Munsey's lead, and for the first half of the 20th century pulp fiction supplied escapist fantasies of adventure and erotic excitement in abundance for a newly literate, mostly working-class population.

Despite the considerable amusement quotient, there is nothing here that you would mistake for seriously good art. These

## Pulp Art

The Robert Lesser Collection  
Museum of American Illustration

artists were all highly competent professionals well trained in the basics of figurative painting, but pulp illustration was hack work. It called not for original, personal expression and technique but for imagery appealing to the lowest common denominator of popular taste and imagination.

With screaming colors and stark contrasts of light and shadow, pulp artists put Expressionist style in the service of eye-grabbing sensationalism. It is what pulp art reveals about the desires and anxieties of the American collective unconscious — and how baldly it does so — that makes it interesting and often unintentionally comical.

The most common motif is the sexy damsel in distress. In one picture after another, an under-dressed young woman is menaced: tied to a psychotic archer's target; threatened by a ladle of glowing molten metal; attacked by submarine monsters; abducted by gangsters; grabbed by ghouls of indeterminate origin. One of the oddest and funniest pictures is Frank Rudolph Paul's illustration for a story titled "Planet of the Knob Heads" in a 1939 issue of *Science Fiction*. A nearly naked woman is carried away by a red, pear-shaped robot with a bumpy dome of a head; he is galloping on two legs, with gun-firing men on motorcycles in hot pursuit.

Occasionally a woman may appear more in control of her destiny. In a 1945 *Private Detective* cover by Richard Lillis, a blonde driving a red motorcycle fires a handgun at unseen followers, while her male companion in the sidecar holds his own pistol in one hand and bundled currency in the other. But strong female characters evidently were not



A cover of *Spicy Mystery* stories, April 1942, at the museum in the Society of Illustrators.

what the public most wanted.

The villains were often not Caucasian: Arabs, blacks and, especially during World War II, Asians. Racism and xenophobia are glaringly obvious. One of the few explicitly political images, by Harold Winfield Scott, pictures a concentration camp for women overseen by Japanese soldiers in San Francisco. That this vision was featured on the cover of the February 1941 issue of *Click* magazine, 10 months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, tells you something about American readiness to go to war.

But thinking psychoanalytically, it is also easy to read these abhorrent figures as projections of the pulp consumer's own fantasies. By identifying at least partly with the evildoer, the reader might imagine acting freely on instinctual impulses outside the

## Pulp art reveals the desires and anxieties of the American unconscious.

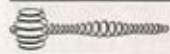
laws of civilized decorum. Admireable, muscular male heroes like Tarzan and Doc Savage offer a way to envision getting a grip on unruly urges and getting the girl too. But without scary emissaries from the deep, dark id, there is no story to tell.

The golden age of the pulps came to an end in the 1950s, as paperback novels, comic books and television became more popular means of delivering imaginary adventure and melodrama.

But the spirit of pulp is as alive and well now as it ever was. Contemporary pulp, as realized in movies like "Blade Runner," "Blue Velvet" and "Silence of the Lambs" (not to mention "Pulp Fiction"); TV shows like "24" and "Law & Order"; and novels like Cormac McCarthy's "No Country for Old Men" may be more sophisticated in terms of technology, aesthetics and psychology, but the animating issues have not changed that much.

Anxieties about sex, crime and the Other persist at a feverish pitch. Pulp sensibility infuses works by fine artists too, as in Cindy Sherman's noirish, simulated film stills and Richard Prince's nurse paintings. For better or worse, pulp fiction continues to provide therapy for the bewildered and beleaguered psyche of the modern masses.

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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

From left, pulp covers: "A Straw for the Thirsty," by Richard Lillis, from *Private Detective* Stories, 1945; Harold Winfield Scott's "Japs Invade Californial," from *Click*, 1941; and Frank Rudolph Paul's "Planet of the Knob Heads," from *Science Fiction*, 1939.