

Dissecting the Norm

Research and the Modern Illustrated Periodical

Significance of the Modern Illustrated Periodical

The 20th century periodical is a product of a commercial culture fueled by the industrial press and the rise of the middle class. The illustrations used in magazines were created to advertise consumer products or illustrate stories, serialized novels and nonfiction pieces. These images reflect changing artistic styles and tastes, and also provide evidence of the prevailing social roles, cultural expectations and norms of the eras in which they were produced. From the 1880s to the 1970s in particular, illustrated periodicals played a significant role both in influencing and in reflecting contemporary life.

Despite their rich content, the traditional lack of academic interest in these items has rendered these images all but invisible. Recently, however, historians have begun to construct new narratives for these materials. Scholars are now approaching cultural studies by examining consumer culture, among other sources. This new interest in consumer culture encourages engagement with the periodical as an artifact. At the same time there is growing appreciation of the aesthetic and artistic value of many of these illustrations.

The biographical, professional and critical narratives that have tended to dominate art history are easily applied to the scholarship of illustration. As the field continues to gain credibility, scholars in art history are likely to gravitate to these figures and materials, in part because so much of this material remains unexplored. Collections such as ours that feature the work of celebrated or significant practitioners will attract increased scholarly attention. Other scholars and critics will draw on these materials as visual evidence for interdisciplinary work on culture such as gender and sexuality; race, class and ethnicity; and American History.

The Collection

The Dowd Modern Graphic History Library (DMGHL) at Washington University in St. Louis features more than a quarter million illustrations across its collections, which includes the recently acquired Walt Reed Illustration Archive. Over 150,000 works from this archive have been made publicly available as part of an award by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). The newly digitized assets have led to many new avenues of cross-disciplinary scholarship including addressing complex depictions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Through digitization we were able to create broad access to this currently hidden collection, and in turn support the growing number of scholars interested in these rich materials.

Periodicals in Use

In 2017, students used the DMGHL to explore specific topics that addressed complicated depictions of race published in predominately white, middle-class publications. The students addressed many themes: one topic examined how gender and ethnicity was illustrated in Collier's during the 1930s, while another reviewed the problematic undertones of Garrett Price's Whiteboy comics. This poster highlights a few of the many images and impressions they studied.

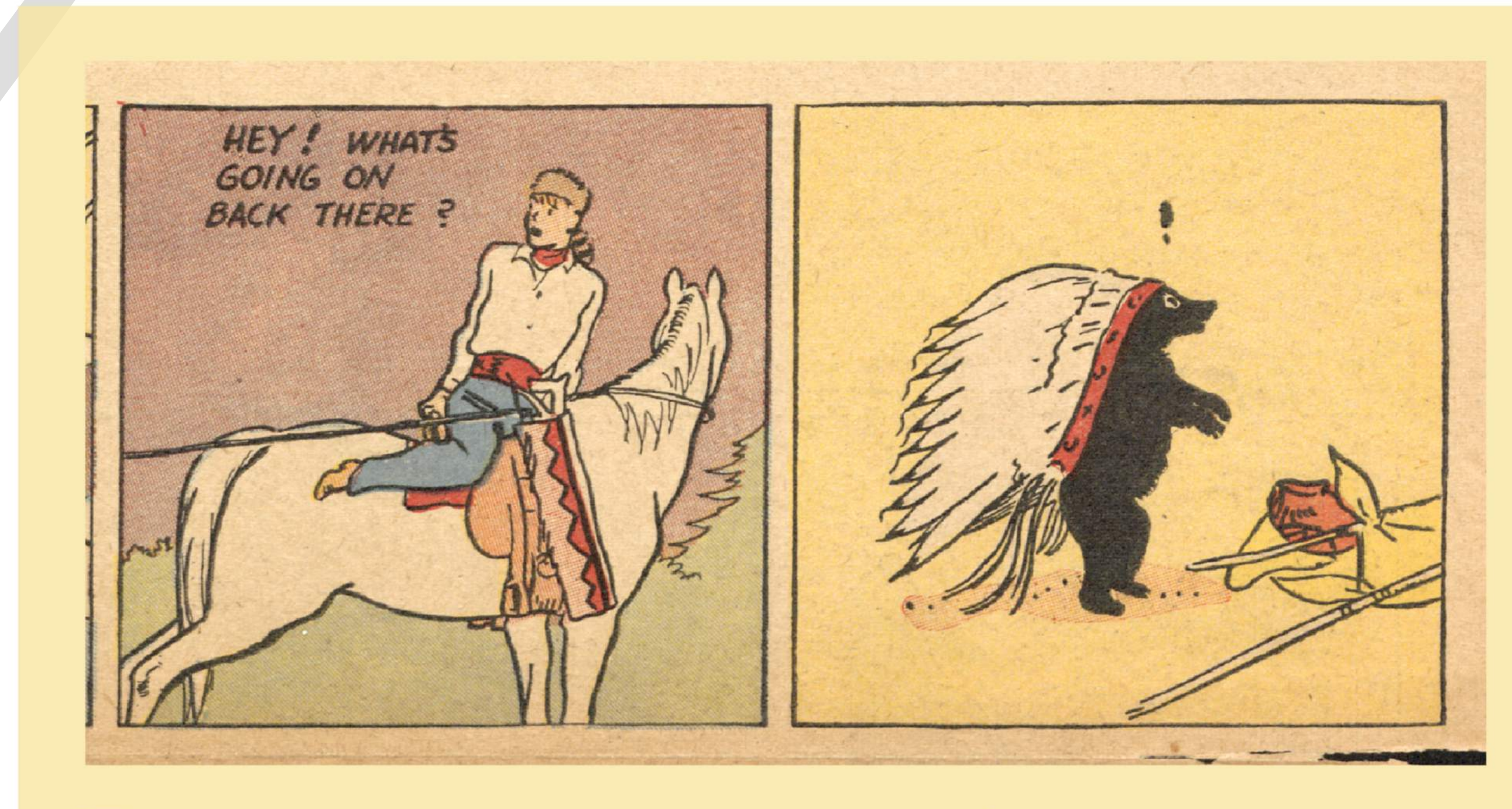
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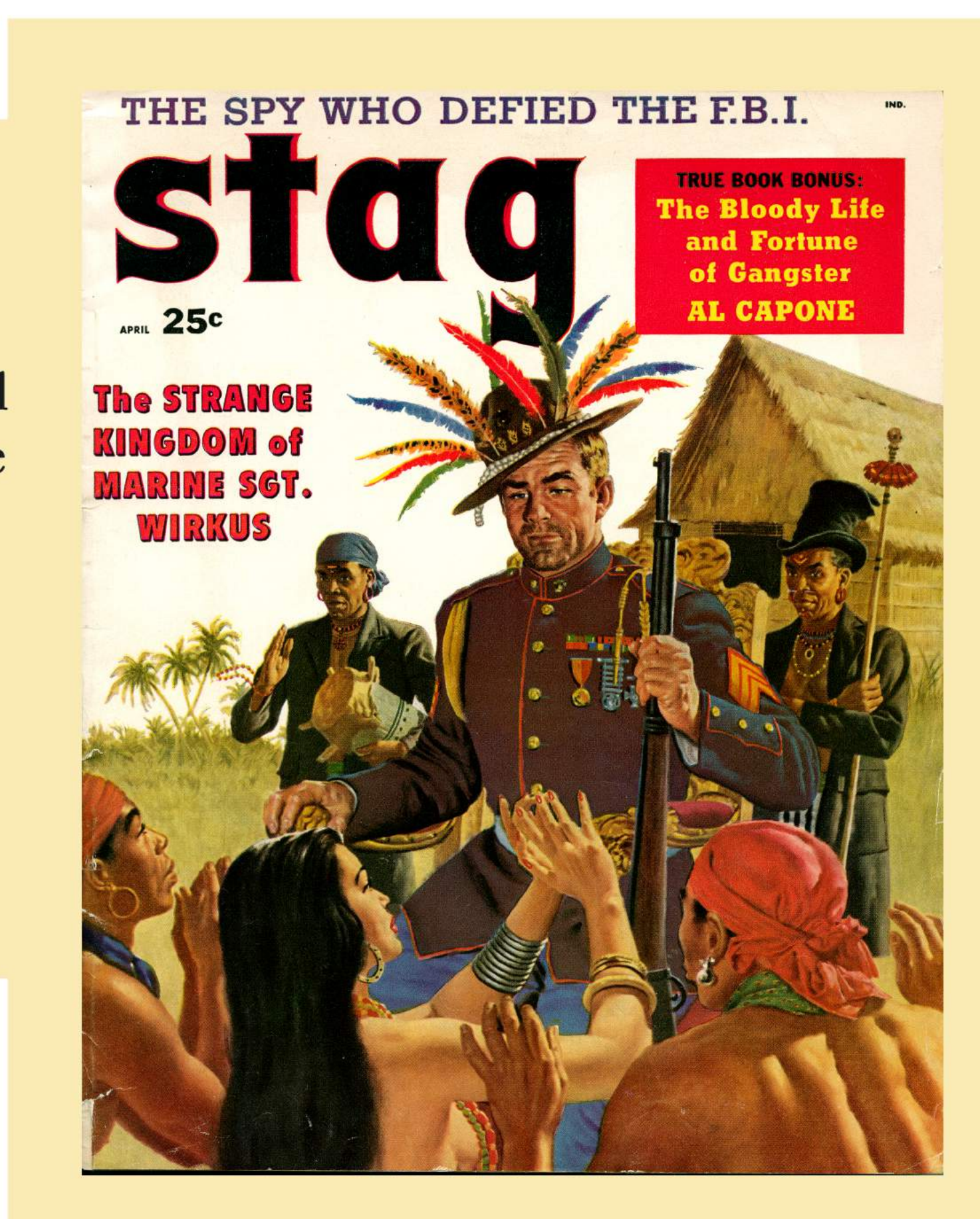
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“Generally speaking, the comics came out of a post-war and Cold War culture that prized stability over all else and saw marriage as the foundation of the country’s stability. It makes sense, therefore, that the romance comics—geared toward an audience of young women—would engage in so much implicit finger-wagging, repeatedly pushing messages through their stories that women should mold themselves into a particular breed to appeal to men and desire the life of a happy housewife above all other pursuits.”



“The image depicts a humorously misplaced signifier with Whimper wearing a chief’s headdress, a purely visual detail concretizing the association between Whimper and the condition of American Indian-ness without the character saying a word. Other images show Whiteboy making compromises for his bear companion despite the cub’s terrifying nature (an aspect of his which confounds the simple Whimper-American Indian correlation; he represents something more abstract than that, anxieties about race and belonging, loss and identity formation in the face of foreign surroundings). They travel at the back of the pack just so Whimper can tag along. The emptiness of this final panel speaks to Whiteboy’s loneliness in his condition as feeling not fully white, but obviously not American Indian. He is coming to terms with this weight.”

“In the 1950s-60s, the effects of World War II were prominent in American society. One aspect of society that the war impacted was gender dynamics. With the return of many male veterans, there was an overall turmoil for this population as they tried to get readjusted to peace times and civilian society. One of the ways to ease them back into civilization was through a genre of literature called ‘men’s adventure magazines.’ These magazines often portrayed (fictional) male characters as heroes going on crazy quests (perhaps to mimic the chaos many of the veterans went through) and, more importantly, showed women as prizes for these men’s heroism.”



“Imagery of Asians in mainstream American culture in the 1940s is hard to find. When it does occur, it is most often via white authors illustrating Chinese Americans with exaggerated features like slanted eyes and fishy-looking lips. These kinds of portrayals were not meant to be nice or drawn from real life; they were caricatures that simply perpetuated ignorant assumptions over and over again. Similarly, writing about other cultures often stemmed from an outsider perspective—a white traveler visits a foreign place once and writes about the culture as if they understand any part of it. This is the kind of writing that looks at other cultures through a white eye. This kind of writing was especially popular in magazines, filled with easily digestible and short articles. One of the most popular, Ladies’ Home Journal, was published by Cyrus Curtis in 1883.”