

THE REMBRANDT OF COMICS

Milton Arthur Paul Caniff (1907–88)

Born in Hillsboro, Ohio, on 28 February, Milton was surrounded by newspapers from the start. His father worked as a typographer for the local paper, and Milton demonstrated a strong attraction to drawing and theatre from a young age.

Having moved to California with his family during the winter months for his father's tuberculosis treatment, the young "Milt" found his first jobs as a newspaper seller and an actor in several low-budget films.

He became a boy scout at high school in Dayton and took part in debating classes, while cultivating a passion for acting, getting involved in theatre performances and working part-time as a gofer at the culture office of the Dayton Herald Tribune. His first illustrations were published in 1922 in local papers (*Dayton Daily News* and *Delton Journal*).

Milton studied Fine Art at the Ohio State University, Columbus. He became editor of the student magazine, *Sun Dial*, furthered his interest in theatre with the university troupe, got involved in the almanac and worked at the *Dispatch* studio in Columbus, where he created many illustrations of all different types and met Noël Sickles.

After graduating in 1930, Caniff worked full-time at *Dispatch* until he was laid off due to financial difficulties following the Great Depression of 1929.

After this, Caniff took the opportunity to start his own business, opening a commercial studio in Columbus with his friend Noël Sickles. Meanwhile, he pursued his dream of becoming an actor, following a troupe touring the Ohio valley, but a lack of success showed Caniff that this career held no future for him.

In 1932, he was contacted by *Associated Press* of New York, where he relocated to produce portraits, illustrations and primarily comic strips (*Puffy the Pig* and *Mister Gilfeather*). The following year he was assigned a new adventure strip: *Dickie Dare*, which he redesigned to his own taste, with a more realistic tone. He also took over the *Scorchy Smith* strip, created by John Terry and his partner Noël Sickles.

To keep up with the unrelenting rhythm of creating daily strips, Sickles used brushes to quickly ink large areas of shading.

This innovative technique, which Caniff adopted, introduced the "colour" of black India ink. This was new to comics at the time, normally limited to outlining figures and at most using lined shading, usually applied with a nib. This new "chiaroscuro" gave thickness to the lines and depth to the

drawing, creating contrast and volume amongst the shapes and areas of light and dark, in the same way as colour did, in this case the deep black of India ink.

In 1934, the *Chicago Tribune-New York News* (managed by Joseph Patterson) took on Caniff to create an adventure strip aimed at a broad target audience, based on the Dickie Dare model. Milton Caniff was 27 when, on 19 October, the first strip of *Terry and the Pirates* was published, incorporating all of the elements requested by the client: a charismatic hero, a younger companion to engage younger readers, women to be saved and a touch of humour.

The strip soon captured the imaginations of a broad readership, beginning the same year as five other hugely successful characters: *Secret Agent X9*, *Jungle Jim* and *Flash Gordon* by Alex Raymond, *Mandrake the Magician* by Lee Falk and *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp.

Milton Caniff's technique evolved quickly: his characters, initially rather timidly defined and caricatured, soon acquired a unique style. The starting cast grew with new and iconic characters. Set in Asia, the strip first fell into rather stereotyped choices, but Caniff soon read up on Asian locations and culture and the characters of the story became remarkably original. Influenced by Noël Sickles, amongst others, the drawing style and psychology of characters also evolved: the story is told through their expressions, and through the powerful black brushstrokes.

Unable to join the army due to the consequences of a childhood accident, Caniff made his contribution to the global effort by creating free parallel comic strips of *Terry and the Pirates* for American GIs, in which Burma takes the leading role. The curves of the beautiful blonde cheered the soldiers under the harsh conditions of war. However, this racier presentation of one of the lead characters from *Terry and the Pirates* quickly led to complaints and Caniff created a specific strip for soldiers under the name *Male Call*, presenting the divine and sensual Miss Lace.

In 1946, Milton Caniff abandoned *Terry and the Pirates* and *Male Call*, which he did not hold the rights to, and in 1947 created the new strip *Steve Canyon*, for the *Field Newspaper Syndicate*, which he worked on until his death on 03 May 1988.

His style has influenced generations of artists and is still a benchmark in the world of cartoons. Hugo Pratt, in particular, notes how he was profoundly influenced by Milton, as do Mel Graff, Frank Robbins, Will Eisner, Joe Kubert, Carmine Infantino, Alex Toth, Mike Mignola, José Munoz, Alberto Breccia and Frank Miller, to name just a few. Numerous contemporary cartoonists, including Enrico Marini, have original drawings in their collections from the master of black and white, Milton Caniff, to draw inspiration from.

THE STYLE

REVOLUTIONARY BRUSHSTROKES

His use of the brush, the adoption of chiaroscuro techniques and his focus on realism of the final

effect are three key graphic elements that characterise Caniff's art, which has inspired generations of cartoonists. Many of these characteristics and techniques derive from the experience of his friend and partner Noël Sickles, who sometimes enjoyed working together with him on Terry and the Pirates drawings. In the initial years of the strip, Caniff's style was somewhat less mature, with rigid lines and rather simplistic backgrounds, where setting and characters were drawn in the same way, lacking intensity. Over time, his style evolved towards greater realism, and vibrant drawings that were rich in detail.

Using brushwork to speed up the process, for the folds of clothing, faces of characters, expressions and shadows adding drama to the action, gave his drawings a sense of photorealism, with cinematographic framing and vivid storytelling.

Like Sickles, Caniff began with the brush, before returning to add definition to details with a nibbed pen. The goal was to create a sense of movement, the draping of materials, life itself, through the dramatic contrast of light and dark. The structure of elements was secondary, but the impression they created in the reader's mind was fundamental. The focus was not on formal accuracy but rather the representation of vitality.

STORYTELLING AND DRAMA

During his youth, Caniff had swung between drawing and theatre. His passion for staging is evident in his use of extremely ingenious, cinematographic shots. He was always looking for the best way to engage readers with the action, allowing them to "join" the adventure with his characters. Alternation of different shots in his skilful composition of sequences (panoramas, long shots, medium shots, American shots, close-ups and detail shots) was innovative at the time, as everything was generally presented frontally and very directly, like a theatre scene.

In this period, the world of cinema was innovating with hugely dramatic and revolutionary shots such as the low angle introduced by directors like Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, with the help of new wide-angle and multifocal lenses that allowed specific details and elements in the background to be brought into focus together. Meanwhile, cinematic photography saw introduction of backlit shots that allowed a greater distance between subjects and background.

Caniff showed a keen interest in these innovations, adopting them in his cartoons. Like a director, he would move around his characters with the "camera", allowing the reader to experience the tension, and revealing important details scene by scene or offering the reader different perspectives on the action. Each element of these scenes was very carefully thought out, even though it was then applied concisely in a few brushstrokes.

Caniff had developed a strong sense of realism in the structuring of his stories, with detailed research. He often used real models to build his scenes, allowing them to come to life and using highly memorable shots.

The author listened to his readers, asking them for their experiences and information. He treated dialogue as a fundamental component of the story. Despite sometimes using particularly long texts, they always read very naturally, and the dialogues are key to the unfolding of events. If texts took up too much space on the drawings, Caniff invented creative solutions to position them so that they did not interrupt the visual experience.

REAL CHARACTERS

Although at the beginning of the strip the characters were limited to rather basic clichés (handsome and brave heroes, a boy taken under his wing, beautiful women in danger, femmes fatales and a comic character) they evolved over time, together with Caniff's treatment of language in cartoons.

Milton Caniff felt that the characters who came to life every day in the newspapers had to have the same hopes and fears as their readers. They must laugh, cry, suffer, fall in love and die. When he penned the death of Dude Hennick's sweetheart, Raven Sherman, Caniff was inundated with letters of grief, telegrams, and flowers from readers.

What makes Caniff's characters so realistic that they inspire such passion? Caniff developed specific personalities for each character, developing them in sequences that did not move the action forward but showed the reader their most intimate thoughts. These characters are inspired by Caniff's friends (such as Colonel Corkin) or cinema actors (Burma is inspired by Sadie Thompson, played by Joan Crawford in *Rain*, Sanhurst is Charles Laughton and Dragon Lady is strangely reminiscent of Marlène Dietrich). But he also based characters on the readers that wrote to him for various reasons, recounting anecdotes that he threaded into the story.

Caniff also corresponded with readers that he had never met, yet who became sources of ideas, allowing him to stay as close to reality as possible. One of the most notable examples is his correspondence with Florence Hunter, an army nurse from Georgia who sent him notes and documents regarding her activities during the war, both professional and detailing relationships between nurses and patients, their uniforms, and their hobbies when off-duty.