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Comic Art in (Comic) Art Museums: The Belgian Comics Strip Center in Brussels and the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk

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MA Arts and Culture, Museum Studies

Master Thesis

Comic Art in (Comic) Art Museums: The Belgian Comics
Strip Center in Brussels and the Museum of Comic Art in
Noordwijk

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Maatoomath', with a large, sweeping underline.

August 2022

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1. Introduction

Comic Art as we currently know it, is a relatively recent phenomenon, only starting to appear in the West in the early 20th century. We see the first comic art exhibitions taking place in the 1930s and 1940s and the first museums exclusively dedicated to comic art opening in the 1970s. However, since their inception, comic art museums have to combat the debate of comic art being a lower form of art and therefore deemed “unworthy” of being displayed in a museological environment or categorizing comic art museums as pop-culture museums and not art museums. This perception has been shifted drastically at the turn of the 21st century and with *nerd culture*, which comic art is a significant part of, gaining traction as a “respectable” form of entertainment and thus, culture, this influences Comic Art Museums. In Northwestern Europe, we see a boom in their popularity. As a result, we see them gaining agency and attracting a wider and more international audience. This thesis examines two comic art museums in Belgium and the Netherlands, namely the Belgian Comic Strip Centre in Brussels and the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, in terms of their response to the academic discourse surrounding comic art, expressed via the exhibitions, work with the audience and reflection on their social and cultural agency. Using these examples, I will explore how comic art museums are perceived, as well as their value and contribution to the museum world as an integral part of communities.

1.1. Research Statement and Sub-questions:

This thesis proposes an investigation of the topic of the cultural necessity of Northwestern European Comic Art Museums. More specifically, by utilizing two case studies, namely the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk in the Netherlands and the Comics Arts Museum in Brussels, Belgium, it examines their role in regards to their role and their relation to the local community and the museum environment as a cultural phenomenon and a form of organizing an aesthetic experience. I will argue that comic art museums help to expand the topics and experiential vocabulary of a traditional museum, diversify its public and further contribute to the democratization of museum culture. In other words, I will argue that the exclusion of comic art and comic art museums from the cultural history canon pinpoints at the current problematic nature of the museums and calls for immediate action into changing the status quo.

The sub-questions, which will outline the state of the research and will provide an outline, are the following:

- i) The cultural legitimization of comics. Does the status of comic art as part of pop culture and a form of entertainment prevent it from being displayed in an art museum and if so, how?
- ii) The debate of comic art as a “lower form of art”. What is the stance of the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk and the Museum of Comic Art in Brussels?
- iii) Which elements of comic art museums define their social and cultural value?
- iv) What are the challenges of comic art exhibitions? Can we overcome them and if so, how?

1.2. Thesis Outline

This section outlines the structure of the thesis. To begin with, the first chapter introduces the primary research question and sets its parameters, in the form of sub-questions. Following that, the next chapter defines the important parameters of the research by clarifying the terminology related to comic art, providing a brief historical context, which will be more detailed in Chapter 3, outlining the beginnings of the medium and sets a specific timeframe for where we are now and how we got here in relation to comics art in museums. This operates as an entry point to the state of debates. We will examine what has already been established in academic discourse, where do the viewpoints align, where there are contradictions and finally, where does the research fit in this discussion and what gaps it fills out. Lastly, we will be introduced to the two case studies, the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, the Netherlands and the Belgian Comics Strip Centre in Brussels. Moving forward, Chapter 3 moves around two primary axes: the debate of high and low art and the overall positioning of comics in this debate, and the process of the cultural legitimization of comics and how comics fit in art museums. The two axes often intersect. In order to understand the current situation, we will first dive into the history of comic art in museums. Then, I will research how the two case studies respond to the debate of high/low art and how could comic art legitimization could be achieved through exhibitions. The main focus of the chapter is the *Comics at the Louvre* exhibition, in BCSC, co-organized by the Louvre and the publishing house

Futuropolis. We will also examine how the two case studies position themselves in regards to their audiences. Furthermore, Chapter 4 dives into the topic of comic art museums through the lens of their agency, meaning their social and cultural value. To be more precise, by dissecting specific elements of comic art exhibitions, such as features of experience and architectural design held in the two case studies, as well as the biggest issues comic art museums face when organizing an exhibition, such as the removal of the very essence of comic art, which is that it is an inherently interactive medium and the lack of funding. Hence, we will pinpoint the cultural and artistic value those institutions bring to the art world. The final chapter of this thesis is the conclusion, which summarizes the results of the research and indicates where there is room for further investigation in academic research.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that this thesis is not limited to a single academic department, but rather it borrows elements from various ones and intersects them in order to have a clear understanding of where we stand in terms of comic art in (comic art) museums and how do we want to evolve in the future. To be more precise, the theoretical framework of the thesis is based on the intersection of art history, museum studies, visual history, and pop culture studies, defines the ground for each of them, and showcases how they contribute to the discourse. This aligns with the very nature of comic art, where two elements, drawing and literature, collide in order to bring to life the final result.

2. Parameters of the Research

This chapter analyzes crucial parameters of the research, which will aid us to contextualize the topic. First of all, since there are many terms under the comic art umbrella, we will define specific terms and specify which ones will be used in the thesis. Following that, I will provide an overview of the current state of debates in order to realize where we stand in the research and what gaps need to be covered. The last section of this chapter introduces the case studies and specifies how they are inserted into the discourse.

2.1. Terminology

This section will analyze the different terms related to comic art, pinpoint at their differences, and finally, clarify which terms will be used in the thesis. *Comic Art* is an umbrella term and refers to all combinations of images accompanied by short texts as a communication format. A comic *strip* or *cartoon* (the term is used interchangeably) is a single panel design with a short text. The term *cartoon* indicates an animated comic art film. The term *cartoon* derives from the French *carton* or the Italian *cartone*, with roots in the Latin *charta*, which means paper.¹ On the other hand, a *graphic novel* refers to a complete story told in comic art format and presented as a book.² Arie Korbee, the director of the Comic Art Museum in Noordwijk refers to a graphic novel as a “one-shot-story”, meaning that it begins and ends in one volume.³ A third explanation is that the term is a marketing device, in order for comic books to appeal to a wider audience.⁴ It is debated that a *comic book* is a periodical story, usually published in volumes and comes out in a standard chronological period (ex: weekly or monthly) and often has a young target audience.⁵ In French-speaking countries, the term *bande dessinée* (directly translated to “drawn strip”) refers to high-quality albums, suitable for a more mature audience. The term *manga* is used in the context of Japanese comic art that has a distinct artistic style. Moreover, *manga*, even in the translated iterations, are read from right to left.⁶ Essentially, all those terms and

¹ M.C Gaines, “Narrative Illustration: The Story of the Comics” in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 89.

² “Graphic Novel”, Britannica, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

³ Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

⁴ “Graphic Novel”, Britannica, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

⁵ “Graphic Novel”, Britannica, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

⁶ “Manga”, Urban Dictionary, accessed June 10, 2022 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=manga>

differentiations are a direct product of the cultural context within which they were birthed.⁷ In this paper, I will mostly utilize the term “comic art” for reasons of convenience as an umbrella term, unless the context specifies otherwise.

2.2. State of Debates

In the 1980s, the creation of the Society of Illustrators is created with the purpose to critique the art world status quo of the time, however, their impact and recognition is low.⁸ In 1990, the MOMA in New York exhibition ‘*High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*’ attempts to decolonize the art museum from dated artistic norms by centering the relationship between pop culture and the art world, expressed in four art forms considered lowly; advertising, comic art, caricature and graffiti and attempting to pinpoint at a concrete historical narrative in order to defend their position in a more equal art world.⁹ American art critic Clement Greenberg argues that there is a vast difference in aesthetic appreciation in the elite and the mass, with the first leaning towards the avant-garde and the second one toward the kitsch.¹⁰ This viewpoint is a representation of the traditional art history canon on modernism. Nonetheless, one could argue over the subjectivity of those terms. The discourse surrounding comic art as presented in *museums* (i.e. not comic art as a cultural form and medium itself) does not have one epicenter, but moves around several axes, for many of which a general consensus has not been reached. One of them is the fact that comic art, as an idiosyncratic form of art, is an indisputable part of pop culture. Journalist John Carlin (b. 1956), argues that pop culture, in a museum cannot be comprehended and displayed at its full potential as it becomes recontextualized.¹¹ He recognizes, however, that when comic art is displayed in a museum, despite the potential issues, this contributes to the legitimization of the medium as “being in a museum is like having a notary seal on the pact he made with the devil”.¹² Moreover, according to Carlin himself “art is made to look good on the wall, pop culture is environmental.”

⁷ “Graphic Novel”, Britannica, Accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel>

⁸ Karen Green and Kim Munson, “Comic Art as Criticism: The Cartoons of Jonah Kiningstein”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 225-227

⁹ Karen Green and Kim Munson, “Comic Art as Criticism: The Cartoons of Jonah Kiningstein”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 223

¹⁰ Karen Green, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 224

¹¹ John Carlin, “How Low Can You Go?” in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 257-258

¹² Leslie Jones, “Cracking the Comics Canon”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 265

¹³Therefore, we see comic art thrown in the midst of the debate on high and low art. This debate is multi-layered on its own. According to Carlin, since high art has become highly controlled by an elite, there will come a time, when pop culture will be recognized as a valid and respected expression of art. He continues by stating that fine art has become detached from the society it was once a part of.¹⁴ Carlin's overall take on the debate can be summarized in the following statement:

"Pop culture is both personal and public. It is ugly, rude, sexist, racist, and politically naïve. Fine art is obscure, elitist, misogynist, and has no politics. Obviously, they were made for each other."¹⁵

In this context, we see that in order to qualify as 'art', the artwork must have a sociopolitical message. Comic art is often used as a pedestal of critique against the gate-keeping and often hypocritical high art world. The fact that it's more welcoming (although, as we will later discuss not always towards women and POC creators) renders the elitism of the art world as an institution more apparent and urges for the radicalization of the museum world.

Renowned comic artist Art Spiegelman (b. 1948) chimes in on the debate, via his contribution to the same exhibition, in which his characters claim that fine art exists due to a pre-existing low art, meaning the two art forms are complementary to each other rather than opposing.¹⁶ Spiegelman, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his comic *Maus* in 1992, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art attempted to collect his work, Spiegelman refused, hinting that it would never be shown in the appropriate context and instead would be "stuck in the basement".¹⁷ This indicates that prestigious art museums at the time, even inadvertently, were exclusionary towards comic art.

Furthermore, curator Chiyo Ishikawa is adamant about the fact that "Comic art will outlast most contemporary art being produced right now."¹⁸In this thesis, I will

¹³ John Carlin, "How Low Can You Go?" in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 257-258

¹⁴ John Carlin, "How Low Can You Go?" in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 258

¹⁵ John Carlin, "How Low Can You Go?" in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 258

¹⁶ Art Spiegelman, "High Art Lowdown: This Review is not Sponsored by AT&T", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 256

¹⁷ Leslie Jones, "Cracking the Comics Canon", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 262

¹⁸ Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums, and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 307

explore to what extent Spiegelman's and Carlin's arguments render true in two different museological environments. I will research how each museum organizes its exhibits and conveys a message to the audience. As a result, I will attempt to answer how each institution responds to the aforementioned debate.

On the topic of cultural legitimization of comics, it is vital to point out that cultural historian Charles Schultz (1922-2000) seems to be the only one in academic discourse that supports the claim that comic art does not need a museum in order to be validated as an art form.¹⁹ Schultz's claim makes sense if we take into consideration that comic art, like street art, is a public and accessible form of art, which renders its own sense of agency.

Arguably, the radicalization of the art museum, which renders it a more inclusive environment and where all art forms are represented, regardless of their status as "high" or "low" art, but instead, as parts of cultural history, initially comes from the inside and consequently, this is expressed to the audience. In that context, a withstanding preconceived notion about art mediums that are tied with popular culture is disdain and envy for their mass appeal. In other words, these "low" art forms, such as graffiti, comic art, and other forms of commercialized art are often excluded from the predominant cultural history narratives we see in traditional art museums due to their appeal to a massive audience. The curators' stance varies, from apathy to contempt.²⁰ Therefore, shifting these perceptions will be a first step in the legitimization of comic art. Comic art is not the first perpetrator in revolutionizing the art world. On the contrary, each era argues for the demolition of boundaries between fine art and applied art. What is actually happening is a natural progression of the art world, with previously established norms being constantly challenged and redefined.²¹

Interestingly enough, it goes against the fundamental nature of comics to be displayed in a museological environment. As museum director Ann Philbin points out comic art is not designed with the intention to be put in a gallery; this goes against the very nature of the form, being an interactive medium (to be held in hands, the reader

¹⁹ Scott Timberg, "An Uneasy Accord: LA Museums Open Their Walls to Comics as True Works of Art", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 268

²⁰ Michael Dooley "High Way Robbery", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 245

²¹ Michael Dooley, "High Way Robbery", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 251

is in control of the order of reading/looking, etc.).²² Therefore, the first issue of comic art exhibitions is how to bring the interactivity back.

The first issue curators encounter when designing a comic art exhibition is according to comic creator and scholar Damien Duffy:

“To avoid confronting the conceptual challenge of bringing the medium to the museum by attempting to fit comics into traditional fine art frameworks”.²³

In other words, comic art museums are designed in a way that, instead of merely displaying the finished product, often disclose the creative process; how an idea becomes a sketch, when the dialogue goes into the speech bubble, thus offering an ‘insider’ viewpoint into comic art.²⁴ This is a tactic borrowed directly from modern art museums, where the value of the creative process is presented on an equal level, if not, as more important than the finished product. Additionally, they have evolved from mere displays of comic art in a frame from behind a glass screen, to added elements, like props, artifacts and other tchotchkes.²⁵ In any case, we should always bear in mind that a comic art exhibition organized by a particular comic art museum always aligns with said institution’s mission statement, reflects the opinions of the board of directors and contributes to the vision of the positioning of the museum in the now and in the immediate future.²⁶ The thesis will explore what are those added elements in comic art exhibitions are, when they are present, what is their cultural value in relation to the respective exhibition and how they contribute to visitors’ attention and interaction with those exhibitions.

The methodological frame of this thesis is explained by Joe Wos, who explains the intersectionality of the so-called “geek/nerd culture” and comic art in museums. (Please note that in the particular cultural context, the term ‘intersectionality’ is used here not in a conventional sense of the intersection of, class, gender and sexuality, but in a broad sense of intersections of representatives of different social groups.)

²² Scott Timberg, “An Uneasy Accord: LA Museums Open Their Walls to Comics as True Works of Art”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 267

²³ Damien Duffy, “Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 275.

²⁴ Kim Munson, “Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Wos”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 163

²⁵ Kim Munson, “Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Wos”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 163

²⁶ Scott Timberg, “An Uneasy Accord: LA Museums Open Their Walls to Comics as True Works of Art”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 267.

According to Vos, adaptations of comic art for film and television introduce the source material.²⁷ Vos states that geek culture should be inclusive and willing to accept a growing audience, who is perhaps not as familiar with the lore around their adored piece of media. Likewise, engagement with the medium will attract new visitors, who, inside the museum will be educated and critically interact with the exhibits.²⁸ Subsequently, for Vos, the most vital element for a comic art museum to survive is the building of a community around it.²⁹ The audience and community is not only put on the center-front but, more than that, it is one of the reasons for the existence of a comic art museum. This thesis will examine who visits the two museums, how they generate interest for the public, how they build a community, as well as what the perspectives for growth are. For Vos, in the digital age, art museums as a whole are becoming obsolete. This is changing when taking into account the immersive programs, events and overall connection of the art museum with the local community.³⁰ I am in complete opposition with Vos in his argument that in the digital age, museums are becoming obsolete. This was evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, several prestigious museums organized virtual tours, yet this wasn't enough and audiences demanded for the re-opening of the cultural sector.³¹ I find museums an intimate experience between the audience and the artwork, where the individual does not have to be productive, but instead enjoy a moment of peace and enjoy themselves or think about what they are observing. Moreover, the digitalization of museums can enhance the experience, it cannot replace the real-life thing.

Rob Salkowitz, on the topic of physical limitations of displaying comics in a museum, comments on the artistic downgrade, as well as a narrative compromise of the artworks due to the changing of circumstances, which is a small price to pay.³² My thesis will examine whether Salkowitz's statement applies to the two case studies, to

²⁷ Kim Munson, "Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 160

²⁸ Kim Munson, "Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 161

²⁹ Kim Munson, "Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 162

³⁰ Kim Munson, "Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 164

³¹ "Top online museum and art tours to enjoy from home", *The Art Newspaper*, Accessed July 7, 2022 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/03/13/top-online-museum-and-art-tours-to-enjoy-from-home>

³² Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 303

what extent, and how we can overcome those obstacles. On the same topic, art historian Kim Munson's focus on cartoonists as curators, by using Art Spiegelman's Private Museum and the Museum of Bande dessinée in Angoulême, France as case studies, explains how cartoonist-curated exhibitions may tend to resolve a lot of the issues comic art related exhibitions face.³³ One of those issues is the logic behind collecting and curating comic art. Curator John Gardner argues that the collecting of comic art solely relies on a "database logic", meaning that the selection process is based on two criteria: works done by masters of the comic art scene and works that showcase a historic continuity.³⁴ This will be a stepping stone towards the achievement of the much-desired cultural legitimacy of the art form. My thesis questions whether those two criteria stand true for the case studies, as well as other reasons behind selecting an artwork and curatorial choices to be made at presenting it.

2.3. The Case Studies

In this section, I will introduce the case studies and explain why they can be treated as representative examples to address the issues outlined above. Belgium, since the 1940s has established a reputation of being Comic Art Mecca in Europe, being the birthplace of renowned comic titles like *Spirou* (*Robbedoes* in Flemish) and *Tintin* (*Kuifje* in Flemish). Munson's book, *Comic Art in Museums* (published in 2020), which serves as this thesis's primary bibliography, is mainly US-centric, using, most of the times, as case studies, institutions located in North America. There are only brief mentions of art galleries and institutes in France and Brazil that played a vital role in the history of comic art in museums. The Comic Strip Center- Museum, in Brussels (abbreviated as BCSC), has been operating for over thirty years, opening its doors to the public in 1989, an epicenter for comic art is only mentioned titularly in the end in a catalogue of all the institutions that carry permanent comic art collections. It goes without saying, therefore that since the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk has been operating for only about a year at the time of writing, it has not been mentioned in academic discourse yet at all.

Yet the importance of the BCSC, which has been operating for over thirty years, in the context of Europe is hard to overestimate. In the past decade, it has been

³³ Benoit Crucifix, "Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman's Private Museums", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 324

³⁴ Benoit Crucifix, "Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman's Private Museums", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 325

welcoming more than twenty thousand annual visitors, with that number taking a toll in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The museum owns a large collection of comic art that it can utilize for exhibitions, as well as a physical book library. It also has a network of Belgian, French, and international partners, from which they can borrow original comic art and co-organize diverse exhibitions, mostly focusing on Belgian comics. Most notably, since its inception, the museum has been making a conscious effort to declare its ubiquitous presence in the cultural scene of Brussels, working on various projects supported by the local government, as well as an educational program, which encourages students to engage with comic art. My research interest in the BCSC relies on how a comic art epicenter operates outside the US and what the discourse in Europe is, where comics are a cultural phenomenon since the 1940s. Overall, there is a difference thematically and aesthetically between European and US comics, with European comics dissecting human relationships and being focusing on the characters' psyche, while in the US, superhero and action-based comics have established themselves as the mainstream in the genre. I am focusing on the museum's agency, meaning its social and cultural significance in Belgium, as well as internationally. In other words, is the BCSC contributing to the international academic discourse in comic art, and if so, how?

The Museum of Comics Art in Noordwijk (abbreviated MoCA) officially opened to the public in June 2021 and it is the only museum currently in the Netherlands, solely focused on comic art. The director, Arie Korbee, calls the museum a *Stichting* and all employees, even the board of directors, are volunteers. Currently, monthly visitors are around 500 per month, with an immediate goal to double the amount. Furthermore, the museum does not have a permanent collection and relies on a network of institutions and private individuals in order to organize collections biannually, with the winter one focusing on Dutch and European artists (and therefore, audiences) and the summer one, where the tourists come to Noordwijk, in garnering the attention of an international audience. I am focusing my research on how a small comic art museum can survive and grow in a small, according to Arie Korbee at least, comic land, taking into consideration that previous attempts did not manage to survive. Furthermore, I am interested in researching how MoCA responds to the same debates on the topic of comic art and how it can contribute to the expansion of the medium as an art form, as well as a cultural phenomenon. While, there will be no direct

comparison of the two case studies, it is interesting to see how the two vastly different museums in size, audience, marketability, and literal and metaphorical positioning respond to the same discussions and contribute in our research regarding the perception of comic art museums in Northwestern Europe.

3. Cultural Legitimization of Comics/High- Low Art

This chapter inspects the debate of high and low art and the positioning of comic art in this. In order to form an opinion supported by logical arguments, we will first examine the process of the cultural legitimization of comics and hence, their integration into the art world and specifically museums. It should be clarified that in

academic discourse the term legitimization” refers to not only the institutionalization of comic art but also the perception of the medium that despite its connection to pop culture, as a “valid” art form and part of cultural history. In the thesis, the “legitimization” refers to both of those aspects. Moving forward, we will explore how the two case studies, namely the Comics Art Centre in Brussels and the Comic Art Museum in Noordwijk respond, both intentionally and unintentionally to these art history debates by questioning how they position themselves in the art world, as well as what is their agency. Finally, by analyzing the *Comics at the Louvre* exhibition, we will pinpoint the current status of the debate.

3.1. Comic Art in Museums- A Brief Overview

As, it has been stated the term concept of cultural legitimization of comic art primarily refers to allowing the medium in traditional museum environments. Therefore, by examining the history of so far, there will be an overall understanding of where we are in the process so far and where there is room for growth. When it comes to comics and museums, it is reported that the first comic art exhibitions take place during the 1930s-1940s, however, little attention was paid by the curators. Those exhibitions were of low quality; short term and with a restrictive budget. Furthermore, the exhibits were often unframed and circulated around the world by museum networks and newspaper syndicates. The reason for this is that, after the Second World War, cartoons gained mass popularity as a form of communication. Hence, it was mainly political and newspaper cartoons that were primarily shown in these exhibitions.³⁵ As a matter of fact, comic art shows from the 1930s to the 50s fell into four different categories: i) editorial or political cartoons, ii) one-panel magazine cartoons, iii) comic strip art, and iv) shows exploring the history of comic art.³⁶ A pivotal moment for the legitimization of comic art occurs in 1946 with the foundation of the National Cartoonists Society (abbreviated NCS), with Milton Canniff (1907-1988) as treasurer and eventually serving as chairman.³⁷ The NCS organized comic art

³⁵Kim Munson, “Pioneers: Comic Art Exhibitions, 1930-1967”, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 63

³⁶ Kim Munson, “The Evolution of Comic Art Exhibitions 1934-1951”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 66

³⁷, Kim Munson, “The Evolution of Comic Art Exhibitions 1934-1951”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 77

exhibitions in galleries and various art institutes across the US and eventually, in Paris. France.³⁸

Comic art saw stellar recognition in France, where people, during WWII started collecting banned American comics, only to be banned there by law after the war as well. In the 1960s, the rules regarding comic art in France were relaxed and a society dedicated to the celebration of the ninth art, consisting of academics and creatives, took initiative and started exhibiting in prestigious Parisian establishments, the most well-known of them being at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.³⁹ This indicates a gradual acceptance of comics as a valid art form during those critical first three decades. Moving forward to the next decade, in 1964, in Paris, the Society for Study and Research into Drawn Literature (SOCERLID) was founded, with many of the members being comic art lovers. The mission of SOCERLID was to raise awareness of comic art and give mass recognition to the medium, an example of this being an exhibition dedicated exclusively to US comics.⁴⁰ More specifically, the project *Figurative Narrative Art* in 1967 firstly attempted to make a chronological outline of the history of comics from Ancient Egypt to the 1960s and secondly, instigated the beginning of a conversation about antiquated perceptions in order to achieve the cultural validity of comic art.⁴¹ The success of the project was based on many reasons, with the reaction against pop art being one of them.⁴² Moreover, the narrative structure of the exhibition, as well as the catalogue, exclusively in French, offered a wide range of perspectives into the world of comics.⁴³

During the 1970s comic artists and collectors alike actively pursued the establishment of comic art-specific institutions, with permanent collections to curate and take care of. Thus, in 1974 the Museum of Comic Art in California becomes the first of its

³⁸Kim Munson, "Pioneers: Comic Art Exhibitions, 1930-1967", ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 63

³⁹ Kim Munson, "Pioneers: Comic Art Exhibitions, 1930-1967", ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 64-65

⁴⁰ Antoine Sausverd, "Comics and Figurative Narration: What Pierre Couperie Contributed", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 104

⁴¹ Antoine Sausverd, "Comics and Figurative Narration: What Pierre Couperie Contributed", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 106-107

⁴² Antoine Sausverd, "Comics and Figurative Narration: What Pierre Couperie Contributed", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 108

⁴³ Antoine Sausverd, "Comics and Figurative Narration: What Pierre Couperie Contributed", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 109-110

genre, dedicated exclusively to comics and animation art.⁴⁴ During its inception, the former director of the Museum and famed cartoonist Brian Walker (-2020) came up with the idea of displaying original cartoon art on a matte board behind Plexiglass. He also took the executive decision of leaving the originals intact, without tampering with any possible errors or demarcations.⁴⁵ Walker claims that prior to him curating exhibitions, there were no “guidelines to follow” on how to display comic art in a museum environment.⁴⁶ This indicates the lack of experience in exhibitions up until that point, thus rendering Walker a pioneer. Logically, since Walker is the first to make a concentrated effort to respectfully display comic art in a museum environment and showcase various elements of the medium, this is a radical step towards the legitimization of comic art.

Moreover, in 1976, the Museum offered its first course, in collaboration with Emerson College in Boston, thus reaching a proto-recognition from the academic circles.⁴⁷ In 1977, when the museum was relocated, the different spaces in which the museum was organized paved the way for how Comic Art Museums would display their collection; some of the rooms were a Contemporary Collection, a Historical Collection, a Hall of Fame and later on a Celebrity Cartoonist section and even a Sales Gallery, for selling original artworks and prints.⁴⁸ They also developed a motif for the periodical exhibitions, with the winter months focusing on artistic and historical importance and the summer months, during high visitation season shifting focus to what was commercially successful.⁴⁹ Every autumn, the museum would organize an exhibition that was tied with a benefit event.⁵⁰ According to Walker, the biggest issue with comic art exhibitions at the time was to convey to the public, that besides their entertainment value, comics could also be considered as part of

⁴⁴ Kim Munson, “The Renewed Focus on Comics As Art After 1970”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 115

⁴⁵ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 136-137

⁴⁶ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 136

⁴⁷ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 138

⁴⁸ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 141

⁴⁹ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 142-143

⁵⁰ Brian Walker, “Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 143

academic discourse.⁵¹ This indicates that Walker has a clear understanding of the audience that comes to the museum and curates exhibitions with visitation numbers in mind.

In 1984 we see the pioneering exhibition *Women and the Comics*; the first exhibition dedicated solely to women comic artists.⁵² It is essential to mention this exhibition, as it showcases women cartoonists solely and in a narrative, where women even nowadays are often excluded, this is a pioneering exhibition that criticizes institutionalised perception about the medium. This exhibition rendered to the public their agency as creatives through their contribution to the medium, despite being in the profession since the 1930s and 1940s.⁵³ Up until that point, comic art exhibitions were criticized for being predominantly white and male, often excluding the work of POC and women creators.⁵⁴ The comic world, remained however, until the 21st century inherently sexist, the narrative that their work was not as important as that of their male counterparts was perpetuated.⁵⁵ Author Ursula LeGuin (1929-2018) argued that it wasn't merely those in power in the art world that rejected women as creators, but also the public, limiting their creativity into four categories that they considered trivial: romance, cute, pretty and fashion.⁵⁶

In 1990, Art Spiegelman opens the *High Art Lowdown* as a reaction to the mistreatment of comic art in the art world in general, as well as previous comic art exhibitions. This exhibition includes direct references to pop art. Spiegelman's overall stance is that by relying on art history canon to gain the validity of comic art as a fine art medium, the very essence of comic art is lost, which is its immediate connection to what is current.⁵⁷ In Europe, the oldest comic art museum, with the largest collection, the Belgian Comics Strip Centre in Brussels opened in 1989 to the public, after

⁵¹Brian Walker, "Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 143

⁵² Brian Walker, "Exhibitions at the Museum of Cartoon Art: A Personal Recollection", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 144

⁵³Trina Robbins, "Here Are the Great Women Comic Artists in the United States, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 272

⁵⁴ Trina Robbins, "Here Are the Great Women Comic Artists in the United States, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 272-274

⁵⁵Trina Robbins, "Here Are the Great Women Comic Artists in the United States, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 273

⁵⁶Trina Robbins, "Here Are the Great Women Comic Artists in the United States, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 273-274

⁵⁷ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 279-280

previously operating as a non-profit organization. Since then, it has an established reputation as a comics art epicenter in Central Europe, attracting a local and international crowd alike.

However, it is the new millennium when comic art canonicity in terms of museum environment begins obtaining its shape. Even under those circumstances, when comic art is becoming canonized besides its entertainment value but more so in its art aspect, cartoonist Joe Vos, founder of ToonSeum, a comic art museum in Pennsylvania, the US (2007-18) claims that as an artist and principal director of an arts institution, he struggled maintaining agency and building a community, due to the fact that the museum to abstain from political commentary and maintain a “family-friendly” image.⁵⁸ Vos also consciously made the decision for ToonSeum to be an inclusive environment, highlighting the diversity of the comic world, rather than hiding it, making sure that women artists were featured in exhibitions on an equal level as their male counterparts.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, like the case studies, ToonSeum’s biggest issue was funding, which was the reason for its eventual closing down.

In 2005, the joint exhibition *Masters of American Comics*, by UCLA’s Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, curated by Brian Walker features five hundred pieces of comic art by fifteen artists.⁶⁰ This was a pivotal moment for comic art exhibitions in the US.⁶¹ Walker pinpoints some of the crucial issues he faced while designing the exhibition, which boils down to the fact that comic art is not meant to fit the narrative of a traditional art museum.⁶² This is because traditional art museums prevent the visitor from touching and actively interacting with the exhibits, while comic art preaches for the opposite and wants this interactivity. The limitations of comic art museums will be further discussed in the following chapter; however, it is important to point out that those issues are not a new phenomenon that comic art curators have to face. Furthermore, the title “master” instigates a crucial debate, with the term being often associated with white (dead)

⁵⁸Kim Munson, “Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 159

⁵⁹ , Kim Munson, “Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Vos”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 162

⁶⁰ Leslie Jones, “Cracking the Comics Canon”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 259

⁶¹ Rob Salkowitz, “Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 300

⁶² Rob Salkowitz, “Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 304

male artists, this leaves no space for female and POC artists. *Masters of American Comics* repeat this exclusionary behaviour, with all the Masters highlighted in the exhibition being male and, with the exception of one, who is African American, white.⁶³ Despite its issues, *Masters of American Comics* was praised for its innovative nature and operated as a stepping stone for future comic art exhibitions.⁶⁴ Eleven years later, in 2016, in a comic art convention in Angoulême, France, for the Grand Prix, none of the thirty nominees was a woman. The particular award has been given circa 1974, with only one woman been given it since its inception.⁶⁵ More than that, the lack of proper documentation on the topic of comic art, creates a false image that during its inception as well as formative years, in the late 19th and early 20th century, only white men were involved with it.⁶⁶ Comic artist Jessica Abel (b. 1969) claims that the perception of women comic artists is that they are not as important as their male counterparts.⁶⁷ Regardless, co-curators John Carlin and Brian Walker refuted the claims that *Masters of American Comics* was exclusionary towards women and POC creators, claiming that there are other masters that belong in the comic art canonicity besides those shown in the exhibition.⁶⁸

The second largest comics art Museum in Europe, the Musée de la Bande dessinée in Angoulême, France opens twenty years later than its predecessor, the Belgian Centre for Comic Art, in 2009. In 2012, Art Spiegelman organizes in this museum the exhibition *Le musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* is an innovative type of exhibition where comic artists are called to be the very own curators of comic art exhibitions and thus provide their own unique perspective on the matter.⁶⁹ The premise of the exhibition, to allow creators to tell their own story is interesting as it allows for those who have been objects of comic art exhibitions to reshape the narrative and challenge comic history canonicity. For Art Spiegelman, this is also a way for been continuously

⁶³Leslie Jones, "Cracking the Comics Canon", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 259

⁶⁴Leslie Jones, "Cracking the Comics Canon", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 263.

⁶⁵ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 273

⁶⁶ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 279

⁶⁷ Trina Robbins, "Here Are the Great Women Comic Artists in the United States, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 273

⁶⁸Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 279.

⁶⁹Benoit Crucifix, "Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman's Private Museums", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 324.

excluded from traditional art galleries to re-enter the collective cultural history canon on their own terms.⁷⁰ This exhibition was also a direct response to, the 2005 *Masters of American Comics* exhibition, which as it has been previously discussed, failed to include women and POC comic creators.⁷¹

Overall, the outline of the history of comic art in museums is essential for understanding the cultural legitimization of comics. It depicts a gradual acceptance of comic art in cultural environments and showcases the road so far for the acceptance of the medium not just for its entertainment value, but more so as an art form. Lastly, we understand the roots of the overarching debates on the matter in terms that have been discussed thus far and therefore, we come to a better understanding of where this research fits in academic discourse.

3.2. Comic Art Legitimization of Comics in in cases of Brussels and Noordwijk's museums

The debate on comic art as a lower art form relies on the idiosyncratic nature of the medium, which combines a “system of visual language” and the cartoon genre into contemporary art.⁷² Isabelle Debekker, the current director of the BCSC argues that the disregard of comics as a lower form of art is due to their commerciality and accessibility to a wide audience.⁷³ According to Debekker, when the final artistic product is a book that can be reproduced many times and not the original, that it is designed with that intention, unlike great artistic masterpieces, which were later reproduced, this translates to the art world falsely perceiving comic art only as a commercial product and not as Art.⁷⁴ Isabelle Debekker does not deny the fact comic art is a specific type of art, that combines two art forms, writing and drawing, but this does not diminish its artistic value.⁷⁵

It is vital to point out, that the notion that comic art is a culturally legitimate art form is not uniformed across the art world. According to Damien Duffy, it is a more

⁷⁰ Benoit Crucifix, “Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman’s Private Museums”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 324-325

⁷¹ Benoit Crucifix, “Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman’s Private Museums”, in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 326

⁷² Damien Duffy, “Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 277

⁷³ Debekker, Isabelle, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

⁷⁴ Debekker, Isabelle, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

⁷⁵ Debekker, Isabelle, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

widespread idea in the US, while in France and Japan comic art is perceived as a medium that contains multitudes, with still a long way to go until it is equal to other institutionalized art forms such as painting, sculpture and photography.⁷⁶ It is also the very concept of displaying comic art from a comic book in a museum that highlights the conflicting nature of the two and argues against its positioning in them.⁷⁷ However, Duffy has a valid criticism to this notion when he says that this contradiction should not prevent comic art from being in an art museum, but rather operate as a driving force that encourages art museums to be more inclusive towards the art forms displayed, as well as artists.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the process of cultural legitimization of comics, it is vital to get rid of formerly institutionalized biases.⁷⁹ Author Rob Salkowitz (b. 1967) argues that museums, galleries and public art exhibitions arbitrarily perpetuate the act of gatekeeping in the art world by being insular elitist and with the majority of its personnel being white and male. In a Machiavellian sense of the end justifying the means, the inclusion of comic art in these institutions, the desired cultural legitimacy is accomplished. The question that arises is what urges these elites to allow comic art in a museum? Comic artists also face the dilemma of compromising their artistic integrity by abiding to these antiquated museum norms or rejecting them and risk their work not being displayed in an art space. Notably, this is a US-centric stance on the subject.⁸⁰ Moreover, Salkowitz credits the rise of the acceptance of comic art in its emerging marketability; in other words, comic art achieves cultural legitimacy the moment there is an audience and a market that buys original artwork.⁸¹ However, this thesis examines comic art in the context of (comic art) museums, therefore Shultz's statement will not be expanded further. The chapter questions the validity of Salkowitz's arguments

⁷⁶ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 276.

⁷⁷ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 276.

⁷⁸ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 276-277

⁷⁹ Benoit Crucifix, "Curating Comic Canons: Daniel Clowes and Art Spiegelman's Private Museums", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 326

⁸⁰ Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 298-299

⁸¹ Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 301-303

when it comes to the two case studies, which will give us answers in regards to the perception of the cultural legitimacy of comics in Belgium and the Netherlands.

3.3. Cultural Legitimization of Comics and the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk

In this section of the thesis, I will research how each of the case studies responds to the debate of high and low art and how the process of the cultural legitimization of comics is expressed. First of all, when it comes to the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, it has been established that it is a relatively new institution with limited agency. In order to start building a community, as Wos mentioned it is vital for the survival of an art institution, it relies primarily on free publicity. The director, Arie Korbee, mentions that for a while, ads for MoCA appeared in the screens of the Dutch public transportation system, as well as the Dutch national television, as part of a magic show.⁸² Also, it helps that the museum is in Noordwijk and not Amsterdam, where it could have been easily overshadowed by the plethora of other institutions. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, comic art is not as popular as a form of entertainment in comparison to Brussels and France, occupying a small part of mass culture. This becomes apparent if we take into consideration that MoCA is the sole surviving Museum, exclusively dedicated to comic art. Arie Korbee is aware of this issue and therefore the museum organizes exhibitions bearing in mind the majority of the audience each one of them will attract; choosing niche and Dutch-centered artists in the winter months and European or American comics in the summer months, when tourism is at its peak.⁸³ Moreover, the Dutch government does not collect comic art, which shows the disregard for the medium, a topic on which Arie Korbee expresses his disdain.⁸⁴ In this context, it is implied that MoCA rejects the notion of comic art being considered a lower or not as “important” form of art and pinpoints at the current circumstances which are to blame for the institution’s slower growth and limited influence on the community. A crucial element that indirectly depicts MoCA’s stance on the debate, as well as on the cultural legitimization of comics is the building of the educational program, where the museum, in collaboration with after-school establishments welcomes students and gives them a tour of the exhibition and drawing comics lessons with the perspective of garnering the attention of the government.⁸⁵

⁸² Korbee Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022

⁸³ Korbee Arie, “Interview” to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022

⁸⁴ Korbee Arie, “Interview” to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022

⁸⁵ Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

Therefore, it is not farfetched to presume that, if MoCA is provided with funding from the government, this will be a stepping stone in the museum's own struggle with legitimization in the Dutch cultural sector and recognition and consequently, comic art in the Netherlands. Moreover, the museum's mission statement, according to its director is "to strengthen the comic world".⁸⁶

Overall, despite its limited cultural and social influence, the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk makes a concentrated effort to insert itself in both the cultural sector in the Netherlands and the international comic world, while trying to spread the popularity of the medium. MoCA also takes the advice of Brian Walker and organizes thematic exhibitions according to audience reach. Their rejection of comic art as a lower art form stems from the fact that they are building an educational programme. Thus, for MoCA, the cultural legitimization of comics means receiving recognition and funding from the public and the government for their work.

3.4. Cultural Legitimization and the Belgian Comic Strip Center in Brussels

Secondly, when it comes to BCSC, I will mostly focus on the temporary exhibition, *Comics at the Louvre*, curated by Mélanie Andrieu and Fabrice Douar, which depicts the museum's stance on this chapter's debate. To be more precise, the exhibition, co-organized by the Louvre Museum and the publishing house Futuropolis, which runs from the 25th of February 2022 until the 11th of September 2022, is located on the second floor of the museum.⁸⁷ In the exhibition, twenty comic artists incorporate the Louvre, either as a museum or, parts of its collection in their narrative and create unique works of art. The viewer is welcome to inspect each of these artworks re-imagine this prestige establishment and how the two, comic art and one of the world's most renowned museums' blend together in order to create a new reality. Isabelle Debekker, explains how this exhibition came to be. To be more precise, according to Debekker, the intention of this exhibition is "to show to the public that comics are also Art". This is achieved by showcasing that there is an equal relationship between one of the biggest museums in the world, the Louvre and comic art. In other words, we can see the BCSC is using the Louvre to 'legitimize' themselves. I cannot help but applaud at this idea, as it can be a response to the argument "It's a nice museum, but

⁸⁶ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

⁸⁷ "The Great Exhibitions: Comics at the Louvre", Belgian Comics Strip Centre, Accessed July 5 2022, <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/exhibitions/the-great-temporary-exhibitions/comics-at-the-louvre>

it's not the Louvre, so what's the point?". However, I am wondering how would an exhibition that actively attempts the cultural legitimization of comics would look like without a point of comparison to a more well-known and established institute. This is just speculative, but the BCSC does not have a "Mona Lisa" or another magnum opus, representative of the medium to display. Therefore, the visitor's experience essence is focused on the reaction (or response) to all the artworks, which in comparison to the Mona Lisa, are less culturally significant.

Firstly, the BCSC approached the publishing house, Futuropolis, who agreed.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the biggest issue in organizing the particular exhibition was collaborating with the Louvre, due to its mere size. There were many representatives from Louvre, which was difficult to keep track of who was who and what was their responsibilities. Comparatively, the BCSC is a little museum and the project is an ambitious attempt.⁸⁹

Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor is welcomed with a long text which explains the collaboration between the two institutions, the history of comics at the Louvre, as well as the purpose of the exhibition. The sub-heading reads "The 9th art has arrived at the Louvre". To be more precise, comic art in the Louvre has been displayed circa 2005. This marks the first time a traditional, well-established art museum showcases comic art. The purpose of this exhibition is to intersect the "classical academic, official art of the Louvre with the vibrant world of comics". Moreover, through this collaboration, the Louvre is positioned, not only as a historic art museum but more than that, as a ubiquitous presence in touch with contemporary society, rather than detached from it.⁹⁰ Additionally, the twenty comic artists who are part of this project, are diverse in their backgrounds, choice of themes and storytelling and artistic expression. Namely, the featured artists, in alphabetic order, are: Hirohiko Araki, Charles Berbérian, Enki Bilal, Florent Chavouet, Nicolas De Crécy, Philippe Dupuy, Christian Durieux, Etienne Davodeau, Christian Lax, Stéphane Levallois, Eric Liberge, Li Chi Tak, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, Taiyo Matsumoto, Minetarō Mochizuki, David Prudhomme, Jiro Taniguchi, Naoki Urasawa, Bernard Yslaire and Judith Vanistendael.⁹¹ The centring of the Louvre as a limitless source of inspiration mimics

⁸⁸ Debekker, Isabelle, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

⁸⁹ Debekker, Isabelle, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

⁹⁰ Panel in Comics at the Louvre Exhibition, BCSC, June 18, 2022

⁹¹ "The Great Temporary Exhibitions: Comics at the Louvre", Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 5, 2022 <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/exhibitions/the-great-temporary-exhibitions/comics->

how the thousands of daily visitors are affected and linger upon different parts of the museum.

The design of the exhibition is well planned out and intentional. The first artworks someone sees are portrayals of the *Nike of Samothrace* (Image 1). This reflects the real experience at the Louvre, where the Hellenistic masterpiece is the visitor's first encounter with the museum's collection, standing on the top of a grand staircase. Here, the *Nike* is also depicted with the staircase. The message is clear: this is an entry point. Furthermore, the Nike is accompanied by a quote in French and in English from the author Charles Baudelaire which reads;

“Man passes there through forests of symbols, which look at him with understanding eyes”.

This further enhances the viewpoint that the depictions of the different parts of the Louvre, more than a mere aesthetic representation, are created with a specific purpose in mind, which is to construct their own story and fit with the exhibition's overall story at the same time. Moving forward, we meet another one of the Louvre's points of attention. In a dark grey background, interpretations of the Mona Lisa are displayed. A rope separates the viewer from the particular artworks. The original *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre is not only in a glass case, but also distanced from the crowd, behind a rope. Therefore, the curators make a conscious effort of reflecting the sense of one being at the Louvre and viewing these masterpieces. From that point on, the comic art is separated by artist, with each section dedicated to them. Additionally, the rest of the exhibition chooses a dark burgundy as a background for displaying the artworks.

A surprising visual element that makes for an interesting experience is that the comic art displayed is in different sizes. Therefore, the visitor is not exhausted or bored by the repetitiveness, despite the consistency in themes. There are also designated seating spaces: black, geometric and not at all comfortable cubes are placed upon the larger-scaled comic art. They serve as resting spots and allow for the visitor to take a break from standing and by being positioned specifically there, they allow for a closer inspection of those large works. This permits them from mentally disconnecting from the experience, something which only happens upon exiting from it. Regardless, it is

questionable whether the particular selection of seating was due to a purely aesthetic purpose, budgeting reasons, or, a combination of both. Also, the exhibits come in various formats, some of them being single panels and others multiple panels, some with dialogue, others without. This is attributed to each of the artist's expression and interpretation of the theme; however, the diverse choice of artists and narratives makes for a unique experience; through comic art, the viewer themselves can see through the artist's eyes. The issue of comic art exhibition design will be further discussed in the next chapter of the thesis; however, we see the intentional prioritizing of the various details of the comic art united under an overarching narrative. Lastly, one of the indicatives of the BCSC's stance on comic art (and consequently the Louvre's) is the choice of burgundy as a background for displaying the exhibits. Burgundy is a colour most often associated with aristocracy, for example, the Byzantine emperors or places of worship. In traditional art museums, burgundy is often used as a background for Renaissance and Baroque paintings, associating it with traditionalism in art and time periods, during which, in Europe, the most universally acknowledged works of art were created. Hence, the usage of burgundy as a canvas for displaying comic art, a medium with humble beginnings in advertisements and newspapers, often associated with children's literature, sends the message that comic art is transforming from a secular medium, designed for the populus, to a hallowed one, that has earned its rightful place in a prestigious art museum, such as the Louvre. The playful characteristics of the exhibitions like the accompanying panels that ask the visitor *How many Mona Lisas they can see* or *What a gentleman is looking at?* (Image 2) indicate, that even in that context, comic art does not lose the core characteristics that render it an accessible art form.

Overall, the *Comics at the Louvre* exhibition in the Museum of Comic Art in Brussels is an innovative attempt to affirm the positioning of comic art in the art world, not just in comic art museums specifically but also in established art museums in general. Moreover, by introducing the Louvre to audiences through the eyes of twenty diverse comic artists, the exhibition conveys the message that comic art is a valid form of art, deserving enough of a spot in prestigious establishments that historically collect the crème de la crème of art and that comic art is deemed "worthy" to be entailed as a medium of artistic expression. Moreover, it is not merely the comic world and the BCSC that profit from this collaboration, but an exhibition of mutual gain. The

Louvre has built its initial collection through the looting of art from places the French colonized. The fact that this practice is not criticized enough in public and academic criticism, or that those discussions are considered an overplayed subject matter is another indication of the inherent classism and elitism of the contemporary art world.

Moreover, the artists displayed in the Louvre, when it comes to not stolen art, are in the overwhelming majority white and male. This perpetuates the perception that in order for an artwork to be collected by the Louvre, it needs to come from a position of privilege. The *Comics at the Louvre* exhibition subconsciously invalidates this claim and presents the Louvre as an inclusive art museum, accepting of diverse artists and new art forms, leaving elitisms of the past behind. Therefore, this is the first step of the art world to consider comic art outside of the high/low debate, but as an equal to other art forms historically belonging and exhibited at museums such as painting, sculpture and photography. To further clarify, the Louvre exploits the blurry lines between “high” and “low” art, and diversifies its collection to incorporate comic art by listening to audience’s sensibilities in order to defend its positioning as a leading museum in Western art history canon and escape the criticism of elitism.

The Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, despite it being a small art museum, located in a provincial town in the Netherlands, where visitation numbers are the highest during the summer season, it still makes a conscious effort, despite the apparent lack of resources to establish its presence in the art world. On top of that, the Netherlands does not have a rich tradition of comics the same way France or Belgium has, which makes the museum’s attempts for gaining agency twice as difficult. More specifically, they strive for free publicity, by appearing on public television and on screens in public transportation, they organize two exhibitions bi-annually, with the winter exhibition, when visitation numbers are lower, being centred around Dutch and European artists and the summer exhibition when Noordwijk is filled with tourists and families on vacation having a more international theme, such as the ongoing Donald Duck exhibition. However, MoCA’s loudest stance against the dichotomy of art in high and low and the cultural validity of comic art is the building of the education program, where in collaboration with after-school institutions they provide lessons to children about comic art, with the purpose to show to the government the potentials of comic art as a medium of creative expression. MoCA is still a small comic museum in a small comic land, though we cannot help but be hopeful for its future and eventual

growth as an establishment, despite the fact that similar attempts, such as the *Stripsmuseum* in Rotterdam has closed down.

Suffice it to say, it is the visitor who plays the most vital role over the agency of a museum in general and what type of exhibits belong in an art museum. That is because museums pride themselves in being open to the public and engaging with the audience in active discussions about cultural history. Therefore, visitation numbers and active engagement with an exhibition deem the success of an exhibition. This influence of the audience is vital in understanding how the art world currently operates. Audiences have specific demands from art museums and when their expectations are met, this becomes apparent in the *crème*, who adapts accordingly. Hence, despite the prevailing classism of the arts, it is important to remember that change comes from the bottom.

On the other hand, when Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in the peak of the pop art movement incorporated comic art elements into their work, this did not prevent them from being exhibited in prestigious art galleries rather they were praised for their innovative nature. The question that comes to mind is what makes the public's attitude to pop art and comic art so vastly different, despite their apparent similarities and mutual influences and operating in the same cut-throat world? An initial response to that is that "the clash of economic models, caused by comics' commerciality has left the medium unrecognized by the fine art world."⁹² However, this double standard is indicative of much bigger issues in the art world and relies on the perpetuation of previously institutionalized biases against mediums of creative expression and artists alike. Additionally, the pieces in an exhibition are chosen to reflect a certain visual aesthetic. Comic art exhibitions are often disregarded due to their tight link to mass culture, which they (inadvertently) comment on.⁹³

In conclusion, it is vital to point out that the legitimization of comic art is currently rendered possible, not thanks to the rigorous attempts of artists and niche comic art galleries, but when it is beneficial for the upper-class of the arts, who are still predominantly dictating who and what is being exhibited and deserves a spot in the cultural collective memory. This is explicitly indicated at the co-organization of the

⁹² Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 278

⁹³ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 278

Comics at the Louvre exhibition by the BCSC and the Louvre, where the latter needs to maintain the public image of an inclusive and accepting vault of cultural history. Needless to say, the battle of acceptance is far from over, but at least, small progress in the right direction has been made. Regardless, the purpose of this thesis is not to showcase all the reasons why comic art should be considered a fine art and escape the high/low debate as this would perpetuate the elitism that still dictates the art world and the debate would still exist for other mediums, such as graffiti. More than that, the overarching stance of the thesis is that if museums are exclusionary toward comic art due to its connection to pop culture, then we should radicalize museums in order to be more inclusive and diverse on the matter of who earns the right to be in a museum. Since museums display the cultural history of humans and pop culture is an essential part of it, comic art, even if it is not considered a fine form of art and does not escape the high/low debate, deserves to be displayed in an art museum. In other words, it is true that is essential to its nature that pop culture and comic art connect, but pop culture is part of human history, narrating the now and for that reason, it belongs in a museum, where the cultural history is preserved for the generations to come.

4. Social and Cultural Value of Comic Art Museums through Exhibitions

This chapter discusses the social and cultural value of comic art museums through exhibitions. Moreover, by dissecting selected elements of the two case studies, and later on, using specific exhibitions as examples, we are pinpointing at those particular elements that add cultural value to Comic Art museums and plead their case as museum institutions that add to the discourse in the field. Therefore, in this section, we are to analyze the case studies in terms of features of experience, exhibition design and architecture, the utilization of mixed media, and particularly, how they incorporate new technologies into the exhibitions as a result of new media curation. This will answer the critical question ‘What are some of the physical limitations and specificities of exhibiting comic art in a museum environment and how can we overcome them?’”

First of all, according to Kim Munson, since the beginning of the 21st century, we witness an ever-growing diversity in terms of artistic innovation in comics in all its formats. In combination with comic art establishing its ubiquitous positioning in pop culture, mostly as an entertainment form, with widely-distributed films based on comics being adapted for the big screen, more and more museum professionals are attracted to the medium and showcase an interest in displaying it in a museological

environment.⁹⁴ Munson claims that more artists in the comic art scene are getting big-budget projects and respectively, more and more art institutions are capitalizing on the popularity of the medium, organizing exhibitions all over the world.⁹⁵ The canonization of pop culture exhibitions and in particular exhibitions on unconventional art forms, such as street art and comic art is rendered possible due to the doubting of dated art world rules. Instead, these types of exhibitions are establishing their presence in public discourse and a diverse range of voices from academics, to art critics, to the average museum-goers take a stance to eradicate obsolete norms and re-establish a new agenda. Munson states that active engagement in discussions between academics, the public, and the media radicalizes the art world and reshapes the quota on what belongs to a museum.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the emergence of comic art museums as a cultural phenomenon is attributed to the aforementioned process of cultural legitimization of comic art. Comic art curator Dennis Kitchen argues that since the beginning of the 21st century, he is curating more and more comic art-related exhibitions.⁹⁷ According to Kitchen, a large part of the curating comics opportunities are based on the fact that museologists with more scholarly backgrounds do not have the credentials to organize exhibitions as such. Kitchen expects this to change.⁹⁸ This is directly linked to the gradual legitimization of comic art and is mentioned in this section since it discusses specifically who are the people behind comic art exhibition design and what are their credentials. Academic Rob Salkowitz credits the rise of the acceptance of comic art to its emerging marketability; in other words, comic art achieves cultural legitimacy, and hence, is deemed “worthy enough” to be in a museological environment, the moment there is an audience and a market that buys original artwork.⁹⁹ Bearing that in mind, most the comic art auctions

⁹⁴ Kim Munson, “Introduction”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. by Kim Munson, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 3.

⁹⁵ Kim Munson, “Introduction”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. by Kim Munson, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 3.

⁹⁶ Kim Munson, “Introduction”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. by Kim Munson, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 6-7

⁹⁷ Dennis Kitchen, “Comic Art in Museums: An Overview”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. by Kim Munson, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 14

⁹⁸ Dennis Kitchen, “Comic Art in Museums: An Overview”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. by Kim Munson, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 17

⁹⁹ Rob Salkowitz, “Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces”, in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 301-303

take place in digital forums, instead of high-class spaces and posh galleries. This is slowly changing.¹⁰⁰

When it comes to Comic Art exhibition design, according to academic Jean-Mathieu Méon, comic art exhibitions can be distinguished into three separate categories. The differences in how they portray the works, connect to different types of interest in the comic form, whether it's an aesthetical point of view, a narrative-oriented interest, or an attempt to pinpoint the distinctive elements of comics. These models are presented as ideal types, meaning that certain actual exhibitions may combine characteristics from various models. Each form, however, may be demonstrated with precise and direct examples.¹⁰¹ In this chapter, I will explore if Méon's statement applies to each of the case studies and in what ways. Comic art curator Joe Wos utilizes storytelling in exhibition designs, presenting a complete narrative arc.¹⁰²

First of all, the Comics Art Museum in Brussels, Belgium, as it has been previously stated, (also known as Belgian Comics Strip Centre, abbreviated as BCSC), opened its doors to the public on October 6th, 1989. Six years prior, in 1983 it was founded as a non-profit organization with the chairman being Herge's assistant, Bob de Moor. In April 1986, it found its headquarters in an impressive 1906 Art Nouveau building in the center of the Belgian capital.¹⁰³ The Comics Art Museum opened for the public and currently, they are welcoming more than 200.000 visitors annually.¹⁰⁴ More specifically, visitation statistics provided by the directors of the museum indicate that in 2014 and 2015 the total number of visitors exceeded 20.000, only for that number to drop to 15 thousand in 2016, only to rise again in 2017 to twenty thousand, reaching a peak of twenty-six thousand annual visitors in 2019. In 2020 and 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic we see a significant drop to eight thousand and eleven thousand annual visitors respectively, while in the first two months of 2022, two

¹⁰⁰ Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 302

¹⁰¹ Méon, Jean-Mathieu. "Comics Exhibitions in Contemporary France: Diversity and Symbolic Ambivalence." *International Journal of Comic Art* (2015).

¹⁰² Kim Munson, "Comics, Community and the ToonSeum: An Interview with Joe Wos", in *Comic Art In Museums*, ed by Kim Munson, (Univ Press of Mississippi, 2020), 164

¹⁰³ "A Masterpiece of Art Nouveau", Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 4, 2022 <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/a-masterpiece-of-art-nouveau>

¹⁰⁴ "In Short", Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/in-short>

thousand people have visited the museum (Image 3).¹⁰⁵ The museum's mission statement is:

“ to promote the comic strip as a valuable cultural medium and to maintain the architectural masterpiece in which it is housed in”.¹⁰⁶

The same building also hosts a library, which hosts the institution's physical book collection, with books primarily in French and Dutch and secondarily, in English, and a restaurant (*Horta Brasserie*), both of which are in direct collaboration with the Comics Centre, as well as a comic book shop (Slumberland Bookshop). They are situated on the ground floor, on each side of a grand staircase, which leads to the main museum spaces.

First of all, the Museum mostly focuses on the display of Belgian and French comics. Isabelle Debekker, the current director states that the Museum's interest is not solely on the local comic art scene; on the contrary, they also have an affinity for manga, webtoons and American comics, evidenced by the upcoming exhibition on the popular manga, and later anime, *Naruto*. However, according to Debekker, if they want to organize an exhibition with international materials, they need to display original comic art, which they are not in possession of and therefore, they need external partners.¹⁰⁷

The Museum is on three floors. (Image 4) I will provide a general overview of the space, and afterward, there will be a more in-analysis of each section. First of all, it is important to point out that the Museum also offers an augmented reality experience, with QR codes accompanying many of the exhibits that the visitor can scan. This is included in the ticket. However, there is a gap in the research; my phone is not compatible with the AR app that gives permission to access the QR codes, and therefore, I do not know about the material and the extra information provided. Nonetheless, it is important to point out the museum's initiative to incorporate new technologies in order to enhance the visitor's experience. This is done on purpose, according to new media curation, which dictates the incorporation of new technologies in art exhibitions, in order to enhance the visitor's experience.

¹⁰⁵ Visitation statistics of the BCSC, Accessed July 15, 2022

¹⁰⁶ “In Short”, Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/in-short>

¹⁰⁷ Debekker, Isabelle, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

Throughout the museum we can see various statues and figurines of beloved cartoon heroes such as: Porco Rosso From Hayo Miyazaki's 1992 animated film of the same name, a young Goku from the popular anime Dragonball Z (Image 5), a miniature maquette of the Smurf village, inhabitants included, Tintin and Millou as astronauts and a bust of famed Belgian cartoonist and a bust of Tintin, with a portrait of his creator, Herge, guarding the grand staircase that leads to the first floor (Image 6). Another playful detail incorporated to the museum, is that all the signage for the toilets, cloakroom and auxiliary rooms are indicated by beloved superheroes using said room. For example, the signs that point to where the bathroom are, are indicated by the Justice League in a position indicating that they are holding their pee. This small element adds to the whimsy of the museum and makes for a playful tone. The first floor can be characterized as an introduction to comic art, with sections dedicated to the history of the medium, and the creative process of artists and publishers from the inception of an idea until its circulation to the market. For each of the steps, there is a text explaining the process and underneath it, a table with a glass protective with comic art representing each step. Therefore, the visitor, can lean over the table and observe at the exhibits, without them being in direct sunlight. Following that, there is a screening room, showcasing particular Belgian pioneers of the comic art scene. At the time of visitation (June 2022), the space was dedicated to *Dickie (Boerke)* by comic artist Pieter De Poortere (b. 1976), which has been in circulation in magazines and newspapers circa 2001. Later on, the strips were collected and published in volumes). Dickie is a Belgian comic known for its dark humor and references to pop culture and current affairs.¹⁰⁸

The next section of the museum takes a visitor through the different sub-genres of comic art (ex: heroic, sci-fi, realistic, humorous, for children), with a brief explanation in text format about the characteristics of each genre, as well as panels of Flemish comic art that fit the genre. The comic art is framed, however, there is no further context about the artist or if it is a printing of already existing comic art or a commission. According to the director of the museum, the comic panels in those change every few months. This happens because, even behind protective glass, comics are susceptible to sun and temperature damage. Therefore, they are switched due to conservation reasons.

¹⁰⁸ "Dickie", Dickie Comics, Accessed on July 7, 2022 <https://dickiecomics.com/?lang=en>

The last section of the first floor of the Museum is “the Gallery”, a space that is dedicated to showcasing new publications in French that enrich the comic world. From May 2022 to August 2022, the space hosts ‘*Le clan de la rivière sauvage*’ by Renaud Dillies and Régis Hautière (Editions La Gouttière), with panels hosting experts from the graphic novels and games that test the viewer’s attention (ex: spot the differences between the two panels), that add a playful tone to the presentation of the strip (Image 7).¹⁰⁹ This can also be seen in the *Comics at the Louvre* exhibition; separate panels with questions like “How many Mona Lisas can you spot in this room?” or “What is the gentleman looking at?”. The purpose of them is to break the routine of the audience merely looking at the comic art displayed and make them observe the collection thoroughly in an interactive and challenging way.

The second floor of the BCSC hosts the permanent exhibition on Peyo and his work, as well as a temporary one on Marc Sleen. To be more precise, Pierre Culliford (1928-1992), who worked under the pseudonym Peyo, is a Belgian comic artist, well known for creating the comic series *Les Schtroumpfs* (The Smurfs), which was later adapted as a cartoon series and a movie in 2011. The exhibition is in chronological order, outlining the history of the beloved characters from their inception to catapulting into mainstream pop culture and later adapted by Hollywood into a movie with human characters and elements of animation. Furthermore, it includes a life-size (or at least Smurf-size) replica of the Smurf Village, as well as some of their clothes, an overview of their enemies, and panels from the comics (Image 8). However, the Peyo exhibition, though, mostly focused on *The Smurfs*, is not solely limited to one oeuvre. The viewer is taken on a journey of the artist’s career, while more of his work is featured (albeit to a much less extent) like *Johan and Pewitt*, *Jacky and Celestin* and *Benny Breakiron*. Additionally, the temporary exhibition that was featured was titled ‘*Marc Sleen: A century of Change*’, in collaboration with the Marc Sleen Foundation on the topic of the renewed Belgian cartoonist (1922-2016), who created more than 217 comics.¹¹⁰ Before entering the exhibition, a warning sign prepares the viewer that the exhibition contains offensive imagery due to stereotypes and negative representation of particular culture. This renders true, with Sleen’s portrayal of

¹⁰⁹ “The Gallery”, Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 5, 2022.

<https://www.comicscenter.net/en/exhibitions/the-gallery>

¹¹⁰ “The Great Temporary Exhibitions: Marc Sleen 100. Nero 75”, Belgian Comic Strip Center, Accessed July 8, 2022. <https://www.comicscenter.net/en/exhibitions/the-great-temporary-exhibitions/marc-sleen-100-nero-75>

minorities being outwardly racist. Women in Sleen's art are portrayed in the Madonna-whore complex, either as seductresses and objects of male desire, reduced to only that quality, or demure housewives, usually plus-size; regardless, most of the female characters are stripped of their agency (Image 9). Moreover, the exhibition on Marc Sleen is not in chronological order but rather dissected into depictions of different themes (women, people of colour, smoking the telephone, etc.), with different coloured- panels representing each theme, thus rendering it a visually stimulating experience. The only section that is placed behind a curtain with a separate warning sign before you enter about depictions of graphic imagery, is the section on nudity; the graphic imagery being the portrayal of female genitalia. This only affirms the hypothesis that Marc Sleen objectifies women in his cartoons. Undoubtedly, Marc Sleen is a comic artist with agency in the comic world, nonetheless, as a visitor and an aspiring museologist, I feel like his problematic depictions should have been addressed further than a simple warning sign. The last section of the museum is a space for temporary exhibitions, which can be accessed via a staircase. At the time of visiting the Comics Centre, the exhibition was *Comics at the Louvre*, which was discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Overall, we see that the Belgian Comic Arts Centre focuses on a narrative-oriented style exhibition design and secondarily, pinpointing distinctive elements of the comics exhibits rather than an aesthetic representation, meaning displaying comic art as purely visually pleasing objects. All of the collections are created with a purpose (How did comics come to be, what are the different types of comics, what makes Marc Sleen stand out as a pioneer in the Belgian comic art scene etc.) A possible explanation for this is that, according to the director of the museum, Isabelle Debekker, the Museum is for everyone; from kids to adults, and from people who come in contact with the comic world for the first time to those who have acquired a vast pool of knowledge on the subject.¹¹¹ Therefore, the exhibitions are not created with a specific audience in mind, but rather how they can appeal to all visitors. Thus, the choice of a clear narrative while highlighting important moments allows for accessibility of the subject matter to a wider audience. Moreover, the aesthetic aspect is not completely removed from the equation; comic art, as a visual medium, itself, relies on the combination of imagery and storytelling in order to get a message across.

¹¹¹ Debekker, Isabelle, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

Likewise, this also occurs in the exhibition design, with deep burgundy walls being the background for the artworks for the exhibition *Comics at the Louvre*, and the comic art displayed being in different sizes so that the visitor would not get tired of due to the repetitiveness of observing the same thing (size-wise) many times (Image 10). In the *Marc Sleen* exhibition, the aesthetics are achieved with the multi-colored background associated with each of the themes (Image 11). In the permanent exhibitions, the visual stimulation is much more toned down, mostly relying on mixed media for the visual stimulation of the visitor.

Since its opening, the BCSC has established itself as a “MUST” for comic art in Europe, through its exhibitions and all the projects where it participates in the celebration of the 9th art, from conferences to workshops to international comic-related events.¹¹² In 1991, a project to decorate the streets in Brussels with comics was conceptualized with the aim to render comic art visible to an even wider audience.¹¹³ Currently, there are 45 comic art murals scattered around Brussels, with the last one being painted in 2011.¹¹⁴ Thus, when someone visits Brussels, they are still surrounded by comic art, even if they choose not to visit the museum. Additionally, the Gallery section of the museum ensures that the BCSC is in the know in regards to what is currently being published, rather than being an institution that is only interested in comic art from the previous decades. Lastly, the museum’s education program solidifies its positioning as a cultural phenomenon. The BCSC collaborates with schools and after-school programs and conducts workshops to children. In these workshops, the students are given comics lessons with the aim to make their own little books (approximately five pages) in the end. These workshops are guided by a comics author, who takes the role of a professor.¹¹⁵ This, as an endeavor, is crucial, as it depicts the notion that parents and the education system alike want the younger generation to gain knowledge in comic art. All these endeavors pinpoint at the BCSC’S attempt to solidify their social and cultural significance and influence, based on community-building.

¹¹² “In Short”, Belgian Comic Strip Center, Accessed July 4, 2022.

<https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/in-short>

¹¹³ “External Activities”, Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 7, 2022,

<https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/external-activities>

¹¹⁴ “External Activities”, Belgian Comics Strip Center, Accessed July 7, 2022,

<https://www.comicscenter.net/en/about-us/external-activities>

¹¹⁵ Debekker, Isabelle, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

Secondly, the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk (abbreviated MoCA), the Netherlands firstly opened its doors to the public in November 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Dutch laws for public health and isolation, it was quickly forced to shut down. A permanent reopening occurred in June 2021, with an exhibition titled “European Masters of Comic Art”. Arie Korbee, the director of the Museum describes it as a *stichting*.¹¹⁶ A *stichting* is the Dutch word that describes a legal entity with a specific purpose, with no members sharing capital.¹¹⁷ In other words, the term refers to a non-profit foundation. At the time of writing this thesis, the museum is still relatively new, and therefore, its agency is limited. This is apparent in many organizational aspects. Currently, they are welcoming 500 visitors per month and their immediate goal is to reach a thousand visitors per month.¹¹⁸

The museum is a two-story space that is situated at the beginning of a central shopping street in Noordwijk, a coastal town in the Netherlands that primarily relies on tourism. It has a comic shop attached to it in the same space. Due to MoCA being a relatively new institution, one issue they face is that they have a limited permanent collection. Hence, for exhibitions, they rely on a network of institutions (for example the Letterkundig Museum in the Hague) and private collectors from who they can borrow material for each temporary exhibition. The design of the museum space is centered around this issue. According to Arie Korbee, the average visitor stays approximately an hour and thirty minutes, due to it being a small space, and therefore, they do not get bored or tired.¹¹⁹ This adds to the entertainment value of the museum, as museums, in general often criticized for being a large and repetitive experience, that could be exhausting. Upon entering the museum, the visitor is greeted at the reception, which occupies the same space as the aforementioned comic shop. Moving forward to the main area, the visitor observes an open floor plan (Image 12). They are welcomed with a wall of information about the ongoing temporary exhibition, with the artworks being mounted on the walls, with explanatory text that accompanies them. In the center of this area, there is a row of tables and chairs, designed with the perspective of various activities, such as workshops, in mind. In the same room, there are also two glass displays with comic art-related paraphernalia, like comics and figurines. This area is ever-changing. Since its opening the exhibitions organized

¹¹⁶ Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹¹⁷ “Stichting”, Definitions, Accessed June 7, 2022. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/stichting>

¹¹⁸ Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹¹⁹ Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

were: from June 2021 until October 2021 “*European Masters of Comic Art*”, which was the very first one, from 16 until the 31st October 2021 “Noordwijk, Behind the Wall.”, a comics art festival whose theme was “*After 75 years of Freedom*” and from November 2021 to May 2022 “21 Innovative Dutch Comic Artists.”¹²⁰ Lastly, the current exhibition (at the time of writing) is “Donald Duck, a Merry Weekly for 70 years”.¹²¹ According to Arie Korbee, the next exhibition will be a solo one dedicated to the Dutch comic artist, Marten Toonder (1912-2015). Moving forward, by taking the stairs, the visitor finds themselves at the second floor, where the temporary exhibition continues. The back wall is dedicated to the history of comics, with a glass showcase in front of it with comic-art-related memorabilia from originals to figurines of beloved characters. This section does not change. On the opposite side, there is a small library with comics and couches, where the visitor can sit and read, as well as a viewing room dedicated to the respective exhibition, as well as a private working space for the personnel of MoCA.

Meon’s arguments of comic art exhibition design manifest in different ways in the various MoCA exhibitions, with a narrative direction and the pinpointing of details merged and the aesthetics being mostly on the background, with the walls of the museum being a bright teal, thus rendering the space a visually stimulating experience. When applying Méon’s theory to the exhibition “*Grensverleggers: 21 Dutch Comic Artists*”, we observe a clear story; comics have existed in the Netherlands from the beginning of the 21st century until today. The artists are not placed in chronological order, which is intentional. According to Arie Korbee, by putting an artist from the old generation like Jean Deullieu, next to a new creative, like Coco Ouwekerk, who creates comics that can be read on the site Webtoons, a platform for reading comics online, this puts them on an equal level, where they are both of value.¹²² Additionally, the lack of chronological order in the particular exhibition pinpoints at the diversity of the comic art scene in the Netherlands, from the people involved to their different artistic styles, themes and overall artistic expressions. This aims at the attraction of a wider audience, instead of being limited to appreciators of the classics or an audience accustomed to newer formats.

¹²⁰ “Exhibition Archive”, MoCA, Accessed June 14, 2022

<https://www.museumofcomicart.nl/tentoonstellingen/>

¹²¹ “70 years Merry Weekly Donald Duck”, MoCA, Accessed June 12, 2022

<https://www.museumofcomicart.nl/tentoonstellingen/donald-duck-70-jaar-weekblad/>

¹²² Korbee, Arie, “Interview”, to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

Henceforth, by directing the attention of the viewer to the details of each comic artist, this results in a larger narrative that unites everything together. However, the architecture of the exhibition is rather simple: A poster created custom-made for the exhibition, with the name of each artist, their picture (usually working) and information about their life and most-well known projects in Dutch and in English. The poster is accompanied by originals of their work, borrowed specifically for the exhibition in simple white frames (Image 13). Moreover, the Museum has limited access to new technologies in terms of them being incorporated in the exhibitions; one is in the screening room, one is on the ground floor and is projecting a step-by-step design of a comic and the last one was near the section dedicated to Coco Ouwekerk; a white tablet in a tripod next to a cardboard cut-out of one of her characters, where the visitor can read her work in digital format, the same way that she gained popularity (Image 14). This added feature is a way to overcome the physical limitations of displaying comic art in a museological environment by bringing the interactive aspect of the comic back. On the other hand, the audience who first comes in contact with Ouwekerk's work, understands how the artist works and how her comics are meant to be read, thus giving agency to the experience.

The Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk is a relatively new institution, with, so far, limited visitation numbers. Therefore, they are not an established presence yet. The directors remain hopeful that there is still room to grow, bearing in mind that a *Stripmuseum* that used to exist in Rotterdam, closed down. The only institution that is similar in the Netherlands is Storyworld in Groningen, which is part of the *Cultureel Forum* and combines video games, animation and comics, while MoCA is strictly a comics art museum.¹²³ Therefore, as it has been previously established, the museum relies on free publicity for marketing and gathering the public's attention. Arie Korbee is adamant that their consistency in regards to social media engagement, as well as the newsletter to the *Friends* of the Museum, for the moment is the key to maintaining a steady audience.¹²⁴ Despite the limited agency of the institution, this does not prevent them from conceptualizing projects that will ensure growth, like collaborating with *Het Stripschap*, a club of comic art appreciators established in 1967, with the perspective of working in the future with as many like-minded institutions in the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium as possible,

¹²³ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹²⁴ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

thus gaining traction towards the museum. The most ambitious project of MoCA is the collaboration with schools and after-school programs, where children will visit the museum and they will attend workshops.¹²⁵ This contradicts the previous notion that reading comics cultivated lazy students and was responsible for juvenile delinquency. Instead, through the educational program of MoCA, Arie Korbee hopes that they will be considered as a serious cultural institution by the government and hopefully, they will receive funding¹²⁶. Overall, the descriptive analysis of the museum helps us understand not only how the museum operates and what is the logic behind its steps, but also how they currently position itself in the art world in general and how do they aspire to be elevated as an art institute.

On the topic of physical limitations of exhibiting comic art in a museological environment, both institutions are in agreement. The primary reason is funding and lack of money. In both cases, the funding is very limited. In the Museum of Comic Art Noordwijk, it comes mainly from selling tickets to enter the museum, but also, from a comic shop that is attached to the museum, which is paying rent to the museum. Secondly, the Friends of the Museum program, which costs 27,50€ annually, comes with several perks, such as a discount on the exhibitions' catalogue and unlimited access to all the Museum's exhibitions.¹²⁷ According to Arie Korbee, there are currently 460 Friends of MoCA.¹²⁸ It is also vital for the Museum to, at this stage at least, save money. One way they achieved this is by developing an unusual business model, where it operates on a voluntary basis. This means, that the entirety of the personnel, even the foundation board are all volunteers. According to Korbee, this changes the dynamic within the institution because they cannot force anyone to complete a task with a strict deadline, they have to ask.¹²⁹ However, they are in the process of designing an educational program for after-school activities for children. According to Korbee, this will garner the government's attention with the perspective of receiving funding for the particular initiative.¹³⁰ Additionally, on the same topic for the Comics Centre in Brussels, according to the director, Isabelle Debekker, the majority of the income, at around 45% comes from ticket sales and secondarily from

¹²⁵ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹²⁶ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹²⁷ "Friend of MoCA", MoCA, Accessed June 7, 2022

<https://www.museumofcomicart.nl/steun-moca/vriend-van-moca/>

¹²⁸ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹²⁹ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

¹³⁰ Korbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

the library, the restaurant, and the organization of events in the space.¹³¹ Isabelle Debekker also mentioned being sponsored by the Brussels Capital and *La Communauté française de Belgique*, which comes to about 15% percent of the total income.¹³² Nonetheless, a common ground in both institutions, is that the lack of funds prevents them occasionally, from carrying out larger-scale projects, or they carry them out in a longer timeline. As a matter of fact, one of these projects for the BCSC is the design of a new permanent exhibition on the topic of the history of Belgian Comics, which is set to open in 2024.¹³³

Additionally, another issue that museums face when it comes to comic art exhibitions, is, as it has been previously stated, that paper and is susceptible to sun damage and needs maintenance, which is a problem mostly when displaying originals. Isabelle Debekker also mentions that in the winter, it gets really cold inside the BCSC and thus this constant temperature instability makes it extremely difficult for the museum to accept original comic art.¹³⁴ This can be resolved, partially, through the utilization of new technologies, such as using tablets to allow visitors to read excerpts of comics, or switching out the material due to conservation reasons.

Another issue spotted, is apparent and by displaying comic art behind the glass case, the interactivity of the medium, which is quintessential to its nature, is removed from the equation. Once more, the problem can be partially resolved by the incorporation of new technologies and inventive ways, such as quizzes, treasure hunts and other games to render the experience more interactive and make the audience feel more active in a museum space. Damien Duffy argues for the treatment of comic art as *new media* art, which refers to the incorporation of media and new technologies in the creative process.¹³⁵ At first glance, it would be unhistorical to refer to comic art as such, given the fact that arguably comic art has been present to some degree since the Stone Age, but the argument does not stop there. What Damien Duffy refers to, is that comic art, as an inherently idiosyncratic medium, cannot be highlighted in the same manner in a traditional museological environment. Hence, the incorporation of new

¹³¹ Debekker Isabelle, "Interview " to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

¹³² Debekker Isabelle, "Interview" to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

¹³³ Debekker, Isabelle, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

¹³⁴ Debekker, Isabelle, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, July 4, 2022

¹³⁵ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 282.

technologies and the organization of comic art exhibitions according to new media curation give comic art the opportunity to reclaim its very nature that was lost during the attempt to compromise the medium in order to fit the expectations of a traditional art museum.¹³⁶ That is not to say that one is more effective than the other, but rather that a combination of both techniques, new media curation and traditional gallery comics alike, is preferred.

Besides, Comics Art museums have established themselves as a safe haven for the medium, but also, they position themselves, not as austere establishments as a more traditional cultural institution, where there is the apparent distance between the audience and the exhibits, allowing curators more creative freedom in the designing of the space. Nonetheless, the issues that comic art exhibitions face are unavoidable and have been present since the first ones in the 1930s. On the other hand, comic art curator Brian Walker argues that most of these issues can be resolved if the design of the exhibition is based with a specific target audience in mind.¹³⁷ Walker's statement is applicable to neither of the museums, as both Arie Korbbee and Isabelle Debekker are insisting on the fact that they do not want to limit themselves by designing exhibitions with one target group in mind; instead, they want to appeal to as large of an audience as possible. However, MoCA chooses to organize exhibitions that appeal to a Dutch audience in the winter and a more international one in the summer months.¹³⁸

Overall, comic art museums have gained significant traction over the past twenty years, due to the emerging marketability of comics and their emergence as a valid form of entertainment. The ever-present public discourse on the medium challenges antiquated art norms and makes academics and audiences alike rethink the social and cultural positioning of museums. This is apparent in the type of exhibitions being organized by comic art museums, which aim to appeal to as wide of an audience as possible, instead of a niche market of comic art aficionados solely. However, museums face some inevitable challenges when it comes to displaying comic art. One of them is the sensitivity of paper to sun damage, which needs constant maintenance.

¹³⁶ Damien Duffy, "Remasters of American Comics: Sequential Art as New Media in the Transformative Museum Context", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 283

¹³⁷ Rob Salkowitz, "Splashing Ink on Museum Walls: How Comic Art Is Conquering Galleries, Museums and Public Spaces", in *Comic Art in Museums*, ed. Kim Munson (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2020), 304

¹³⁸ Korbbee, Arie, "Interview", to Maria Mavromati, April 21, 2022.

The second is that by displaying comic art in a frame, the interactivity of the medium, which is essential to each nature, is removed and the experience becomes sterilized. This can be partially solved by the combination of new media curation, meaning the incorporation of new technologies and traditional gallery comics when designing comic art exhibitions. Lastly, the biggest issue, which encompasses the previous ones, is despite the growing diversity of audiences and creatives in the comic world alike, the funding of comic art museums remains still very limited, something which acts as a barrier to manifesting bigger-scale projects. This depicts the vicious circle comic art museums fall into; the lack for money to create projects that will garner audiences, which will allow them to stand autonomously as cultural institutions prevent them from resolving issues that require a budget, such as the incorporation of new technologies into the exhibitions that render the experience more interactive and fun and will allow curators to have more of creative freedom in terms of exhibition design. Undoubtedly, comic art museums have come a long way since they were first established. However, there is still a long way to go until they are considered up to par with traditional art museums. This is especially apparent in newer museums that struggle to make a name for themselves and often do not last.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, comic art, as we currently know it, has existed since the early 20th century, though art historians would argue that it is a much more ancient art form, with cave paintings and book illustrations in medieval books being a proto-form of the medium. Since its inception, comic art has been directly linked to mass culture, often utilized in advertising and children's literature. The first comic art exhibitions take place in the 1930s and 1940s. They are notorious due to the lack of attention and effort put into them, short-lived, with the exhibits being unframed and the absence of a wider cultural context. The first museum dedicated exclusively to comic art opened in the United States, in California, in 1974. Fifteen years later, in 1989 in Brussels, the Belgian Comic Strip Centre (also known as the BCSC) officially opens its doors to the public, though it operates as a private cultural institute since 1983. The second case study, the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, the Netherlands firstly opens in November 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, which only forces it temporarily close down, only to open permanently in June 2021. In this thesis, I focused my interest in comic art museums specifically in Northwestern Europe, taking into consideration that Belgium and the Netherlands are two completely different comic lands, where the medium has developed at different paces and thus the circumstances in which the two museums operate do not align. Hence, there would be no gain in research from drawing a comparison between the two cases, which is why I did not proceed to conduct one. Rather, the attention of the research is to individually examine each case study in regards to the particular cultural context and draw conclusions on the museums' agency, exhibitions, audience and respond to the academic debates surrounding comic art and finally, their prospects in the future.

To begin with, it is important to point out that the academic discourse surrounding comic art in general and comic art are not new ideas and instead has been present since the inception of the medium and the demand for it to be in a museum environment. The first one is the debate of high/low art, which renders comic art as a

lower art form and therefore, does not belong in museums or comic art museums are considered of less cultural value than traditional art institutions. Academics and Isabelle Debekker, the current director of the BCSC, claim that this is due to the medium's commercial success and link to pop culture, accessibility by the masses, and inherent nature as a visual communicative medium that combines two art forms: literature and design. This debate operates as a segue on the cultural legitimization of comics. Moreover, since comic art is utilized as a critique of the elitism of the art world and instead perceived as an inclusive medium, that is current and political due to its mass appeal and pop culture ties, its exclusion from traditional art museum narratives indicates the issue with the contemporary art world more promptly. Nonetheless, both institutions reject this notion that comic art is a lower art form and actively do so, by organizing exhibitions that showcase the diversity of creative expression and artists and more importantly by building a strong education program, with the intention to show to the respective government that comics could be a part of the arts education, as it can foster valuable skills. Most importantly, the BCSC currently runs the exhibition *Comics At The Louvre*, in collaboration with the publishing house Futuropolis and the Louvre Museum in Paris. In this exhibition, twenty diverse comic artists draw the artworks or moments from the Louvre with the intention to show that comics belong in a traditional museum space, which preserves and narrates the cultural history, as a part of it and respectively, that the Louvre, is not an elitist institution, but rather an accepting and embracing museum. Overall, this chapter, which commences with a brief history of comic art in museums in order to show the progress that has been made so far on the topic, can be summarized is the urgency for the cultural legitimization of comic art. Additionally, it calls for the radicalization of the museum in general, by shedding previously institutionalized biases and creating a more inclusive museum environment. This change comes from the bottom, with audiences, who chose to attend particular exhibitions and then critically discuss them. Additionally, the art world is not a uniformed entity and thus, the level of the cultural legitimization of comics differs from the US to Asia to Europe and even from the Netherlands and Belgium, where the two case studies, MoCA and the BCSC are on two vastly different level playing fields. This is overwhelmingly apparent when we consider the audience of each museum, their agency, meaning their cultural and social significance and value, and lastly, the funding they receive. The latter and how it affects the museum's agency and future prospects was analyzed in

the next chapter. Regardless, we must not forget that the art world is still, in its majority, an elitist space, run by a *crème*. Therefore, the public's active engagement with exhibitions, shows the elite, where the attention should be in order for museums to narrate a well-round version of cultural history.

Following that, the next chapter makes analysis the aforementioned cultural and social significance and value through specific exhibition design. Moreover, by utilizing the two case studies, the BCSC and MoCA in terms of the overall structure, as well as particular features of experience, such as exhibition design, the usage of mixed media and the combination of new media curation and traditional gallery comics in order to pinpoint at the museums' cultural value and agency. Furthermore, an axis for this chapter is answering the question "what are some of the (physical) limitations and specificities of designing comic art exhibitions and how can we overcome them?".

With the literature on the topic mostly being centered around the US narratives and exhibitions, we see a lot of aversions in the European counterparts. First of all, it is vital to point out that the two cases studies, the Museum of Comic Art, Noordwijk (MoCA), as well as Belgian Comics Strip Centre (BCSC) in the majority of their exhibitions choose not to display superhero comics, which, for the past twenty years possess a predominant role in comic art, both in the context of pop culture and as an art form, rendering them almost synonymous with the medium. Instead, they rely mostly upon exhibiting local talent from Northwestern Europe, namely France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This indicates the museums' attempt at constructing their own narrative in the comic world. This does not mean that there is lack of interest in the international comic art scene; on the contrary, the summer exhibition on Donald Duck in MoCA and the upcoming Naruto exhibition in the BCSC will garner the attention of a more international audience and thus, it will expand their agency and recognition. Prioritizing Dutch and Belgian artists is also due to the resources of the two museums. In particular, MoCA does not have a permanent collection and instead they rely on a network of galleries and private collectors from whom they can borrow original artworks and create compelling thematic exhibitions. These individuals and galleries are predominantly Dutch and therefore own and can lend Dutch original comic art. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the government does not collect comic art, something which Arie Korbee, the director of MoCA opposes to. To

circle back, part of the cultural legitimization of comics in the Netherlands is to urge the government, besides the fact that comic art museums will receive funding that will enable them to materialize larger-scale projects, to collect comic art and render comic art as an integral part of cultural history.

On the other hand, the reason the BCSC organizes primarily French and Belgian comic art exhibitions is due to collaborations. The museum has a clear vision and mission statement, which comes to life through collaborative exhibitions. Therefore, by combining the already pre-existing material they own with institutions, this will help them elevate their status quo and agency.

Hence, this chapter analyzes the structure and organization of each of the case studies, using particular exhibitions as examples. First of all, the MoCA is a small two-storey museum situated in Noordwijk, which is known as a summer tourist destination. Currently, they receive 500 visitors per month, with that number going up during the on season. It has already been mentioned that they organize two exhibitions per year, using material from an established network. Since they do not receive any funding from the government, MoCA's income comes from the selling of tickets and the exhibition catalogs and the subscription of the Friends of MoCA. Their agency and audience is extremely limited, however they have future plans for expansion of their connections and audience. Secondly, the BCSC in Brussels, Belgium opened its doors to the public in 1989, though it has been operating as a private institution circa 1983. Its headquarters are in a historical three-story art deco building and has a comic book museum, a library and a restaurant attached to it. The BCSC hosts a diverse array of comic art exhibitions, permanent and temporary, ranging from the history of comics to a walkthrough of the creative process of comics and the subgenres, to more thematic exhibitions dedicated to particular local and international artists and comic series. Furthermore, there is also a commercial gallery section, where they present the newest publications in the world of comics. Unlike MoCA, they do receive some money from the Belgian government and the cultural sector in Brussels and we see them getting much bigger recognition in the local community, through various projects such as painting the street of Brussels with comic-inspired graffiti, as well as the international audience, welcoming more than 20 thousand visitors pre-pandemic and the number going up after the Covid-19 pandemic. Mainly their income comes from the selling of tickets and merchandise. Once again, their strong point is to

indicate the cultural legitimacy of comics, is the educational program, which also operates in the summer as a camp.

On the topic of the physical limitations of comic art exhibitions, the primary one, which is encompassing all the others is lack of money. This is the biggest restriction in both case studies, that prevents them from accomplishing larger-scale projects that require a bigger (in comparison to the resources that are already available to them) budget, or from executing the same projects they already have planned out in a shorter period of time. This is why both institutions need to appease the elite, because it is those people who dictate where the funding goes and what cultural institute is worth invest in. The second issue is with displaying original comic art, since, as Isabelle Debekker says, they are susceptible to sun damage and the irregular temperatures inside the museum environment. For the partial prevention of this, the BCSC has found a trick, where they switch out the original comic art in the permanent exhibition every three months with other artwork from their own collection for maintenance.

However, the most crucial issue of comic art exhibitions boils down to the very nature of comics. Comics, as an idiosyncratic form of art that entails two others, drawing and literature, rendering a highly communicative medium. Comics are usually found in books, newspapers and more recently, the internet, with websites such as Webtoons, meaning that readers of comics actively interact with them. Hence, by framing them and putting them in gallery walls, the very essence of the art form is removed. The medium itself demands the reader to touch it and dictate the narrative and storytelling potentials themselves. One cannot do that when the comic in question is behind a glass case. Comics are not mere paintings to be gazed upon from afar. They are meant to be interacted with in various ways. As it has been previously discussed, it is that accessible nature that makes comic art clash with a traditional museum environment that either requires a completely new art museum specifically for comics to be showcased and thrive at their full potential, reworking traditional curation or challenging the art museum and advocates for. In other words, there are short and long-term solutions to the issues of displaying comic art in museums, with the radicalization of the art museum at its core, questioning its inaccessibility by art mediums and artists alike being a long-term and rather ambitious goal.

Another solution to the issue is a new curating method that can be applied for comic art exhibitions, called new media curation. New media curation dictates the incorporation of new technologies in order to enhance the visitors' experience. We see that happening in MoCA where screens play videos related to the respective exhibition on a loop and a tablet, where the visitor can scroll through the comics that a Dutch artist created and gained fame through an online platform and therefore, the audience engages with the work the way the artist intended it to. Once again, the lack of money prevents MoCA from investing in more technological equipment. On the other hand, the incorporation of new technologies as a means of bringing interactivity back to comic art exhibitions is much more prominent in the BCSC. First of all, any visitor that has a smartphone can access it for free (included in the ticket price) and an augmented reality app. Occasionally QR codes appear near the exhibits and the visitor can gain some extra information. Furthermore, there is a screening room, detailing the history of particular comics that set the foreground for Belgium as a comic art land. Other special features of comic art exhibitions, such as posing riddles to the audience, having differently sized artworks displayed are just as effective and are incorporated in the design of these exhibitions, with the aim that someone who visits the museum wouldn't just have to read the text and carefully observe the comics, but shift their attention back and forth with various hidden details, easter eggs, and challenges. Regardless, it is agreed upon that a combination of new media curation and traditional gallery comics have the biggest payoff when it comes to comic art exhibitions.

In all this, we must not forget the essential role the visitor plays in the radicalization of the art world starting from accepting comics as an art form of equal value that belongs in a traditional museological environment. They are the ones who choose which exhibitions to attend and then they voice their opinions in regards to them. That's why both museums attempt at building strong educational programs and raising their visitation numbers. This way they will expand their agency and impact on their local community. By entering a museum, this means that comics would have earned the right to become a part of art history canon and cultural history. Hence, it is essential for comic art museums to show that comic art is a ubiquitous part of human everyday activity, not only due to pop culture as a form of entertainment but also as an art form that people ponder upon. Currently, art institutions are exclusionary towards "unconventional" art forms such as comics and graffiti, forcing them to be

isolated in their own specific-genre museums, which have limited agency and are not taken as seriously by public and art world elites respectively. From all the above information, we can conclude that the radicalization of the art world is strategic and currently comes from a privileged elite who still dictates what is pop culture and what is fine art, what is conceptual, and what is kitsch. But who are these elites? Isabelle Debekker clearly states in the interview, that despite being the director of a large museum in the capital of Belgium, she does not have a say on whether she receives the money she desires and is not enabled to materialize all the projects she has routed for the BCSC and is dependent on government and the larger institutions, which take executive decisions in the cultural sector. This showcases that the BCSC's cultural capital is not entire owned by the BCSC itself.

Regardless, the battle for the legitimization of comics and their positioning in the museological environment, despite the steps towards it being more inclusive, in terms of art forms and artists alike, is far from over. We cannot help but marvel at the progress been made so far and hope for a more radical and accepting art world, that keeps doubting pre-existing notions and is constantly shifting and adapting to the demands of society in the near future. Comic art, as well as many other “unconventional” art forms may never escape the high/low debate. It is in the very nature of comic art to be an accessible and interactive medium and therefore it has established itself as synonymous with pop culture. That should not be an argument against the display of comic art in art museums or the treatment of comic art museums as less important. Museums exist because they document, preserve and showcase the cultural history of humankind. Pop culture narrates the history of the now and therefore, as comic art is an essential part of it has earned a rightful spot inside museums. If the art world is exclusionary towards comic art as a medium, then this is the first sign that the status quo needs to be changed in order to accurately document the present for the generations to come, not the other way around by forcing comic art to strip of its very nature in order to fit with anachronistic societal perceptions of what art should look like. Hence, the radicalization of museums is the only way the institution can survive. The nostalgia for the past and the yearning for the glorious, idealized version of a before time, does not suffice anymore and museum-goers, as well as professionals, need to constantly change in order to be ever-growing. This radicalization firstly comes from the audience who holds power over which

exhibitions they attend and by actively engaging in discourse and critiquing said exhibitions. Audiences' active engagement is then transported into academic circles, who influence the elites over what belongs in a museum and is therefore deemed "worthy enough" of cultural preservation. While it would be unreasonable to currently demand a complete reform over the classist way the art world operates, it is essential to understand that change starts from the bottom and that comic art is a great starting point to see that change.

6. Image Appendix and Credit Illustrations



Image 1: Interpretations of the *Nike of Samothrace*, BCSC, Comics at the Louvre exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 2: Panel. “How many representations of the Mona Lisa do you see in this room?”, BCSC, Comics at the Louvre exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati

Evolution fréquentation CBBB													
	janvier	février	mars	avril	mai	juin	juillet	août	septembre	octobre	novembre	décembre	total
2014	11472	14891	16721	22434	21374	13055	18169	25333	11755	23233	16155	21625	216217
2015	14027	17859	17277	24614	25254	14132	20723	24967	12808	23253	8397	13278	216589
2016	8928	14917	12032	10646	11156	8200	12469	14284	7907	17924	13584	18817	150864
2017	11603	17523	14469	24315	17076	12909	17230	21520	11195	19781	15670	20938	204229
2018	13904	18261	20766	24788	19951	12750	18248	24795	12332	22815	19014	24543	232167
2019	15701	19467	19916	29057	20403	18433	22595	29464	13454	27609	22525	25357	263981
2020	16113	28184	6263	0	0	2611	9742	8287	3083	2954	0	6525	83762
2021	5190	8681	3525	7853	4092	3176	8550	15245	6790	19048	19022	15262	116434
2022	7929	14469											22398

Image 3: Number of annual visitors, 2014-2022, BCSC



Image 4: Overview of BCSC. Photo

taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 5: Statue of Goku from 'Dragonball Z', BCSC, History of Comics. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 6: Portrait of Hergé and Bust of Tintin, BCSC, Entrance. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 7: The Gallery, Put the panels

in the right order game. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 8: The Smurf Village and Smurfs.

Peyo Exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 9: Women in Marc Sleen's oeuvre, Marc Sleen Exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 10: Portraits of Mona Lisa, Comics at the Louvre exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 11: The telephone, Marc Sleen

Exhibition. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 12: The two floor of MoCA, photographed from above. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 13: Exhibition Design for “21 Dutch Innovative Artists”, MoCA, Noordwijk.

Photo taken by Maria Mavromati



Image 14: Acception by Coco Ouwekerk on a white tablet. The incorporation of new technologies at MoCA. Photo taken by Maria Mavromati

7. Transcripts of Interviews

7.1. Interview with Arie Korbee, Museum of Comic Art (MoCA) in Noordwijk, 21.04.2022

MM: My name is Maria Mavromati, it is April 21st 2022 and we are currently at the Museum of Comic Art in Noordwijk, the Netherlands. The interview will be conducted with Arie Korbee. Please state your name and identity.

AK: Arie Kerbee. I am the director of *stichting* and I am the president of the stichting. I am also the curator of the museum

MM: Please state if I have consent to record this conversation and use it for my Master's Thesis.

AK: Oh yeah, that's okay, that's alright.

MM: Okay. Now that we are over with the formalities, we can start with the questions. Could you please tell me a bit about the history of the museum, where did the idea come from, and how it came to be? Is it public or private?

AK: It is a public museum. (*Note: I was talking about the ownership of the museum if it is owned by the state or government, A.K must have been confused and talked about who has access to the museum.*) We are all volunteers, even the curators. No one is paid. The people who make the book (*referring to the exhibition catalog*) because we have no structural subsidy. Subsidy (financial aid from the government) is not the right word; you know what I mean? The money from the government is not structural, so we have to take care of ourselves. For us, it is very important to have a lower cost. There was a *Stripmuseum* in Rotterdam, that had been there no more than one year because they had financial problems. They had a director, who they had to pay, so there must be a lot of money. We don't have money, we are all, always, volunteers. It was my initiative because I have a (*large personal collection*). In the Netherlands, there's a group of (*comic art*) collectors. Some people collect something whether.... There are three big collectors of original comic art. I am one of them. I know the other two. So, there's a great basis. I can borrow their drawings also; I can use their drawings. We have three big collections together and we can make exhibitions. The Netherlands is not a real comic art land. The real comic art lands are Belgium, France, and America, United States. France, Angouleme, there's a beautiful Comic Art

Museum. In Belgium, Brussels, a really beautiful one, that's a lot bigger than ours, but the Netherlands is a small comic land, so a small comic museum. I think that fits together. We are the only one in the Netherlands, the only comic art museum. I told you about the museum in Rotterdam that doesn't exist anymore and you have in Groningen the *Stripmuseum* that is now part of the *Cultureel Forum* in Groningen, that's now called "Storyworld". Storyworld is now game, animation, and comics. So comics are a small part of the total, the total Cultureel Forum in Groningen. We are now the only real comic art museum. In Dutch, it's called *strip*, in Groningen, the museum was called *Stripmuseum*. We have a lot of tourists here, so *Stripmuseum* is a very strange title. Someone might not understand what a *Stripmuseum* is, so we call ourselves a Museum of Comic Art. For us, comics are art, we want to show the real originals. With the originals, you can come closer to the author and the artist and to show them. Internationally, there's a big group of people that collect original comic art, and in the Netherlands, the government doesn't. The government should, I think, because it's an art form, but the government doesn't do it, so I do it, but in other countries like Belgium and France, also collect the originals. In the Netherlands, the government doesn't do anything particular, so people, collectors are the ones who collect comic art. So, I have a big collection and I want to show the originals and I think because, my work, is an architect, and I have a business partner for a few years and I want to work less. I have some time and I think I want to use my time for something useful. I think it's good for the comic world in the Netherlands. Also, from my childhood, I liked the comic world. I also want to make something that is part of it. Also, it is good for Noordwijk, here it's a tourist place because we see that half of the people that visit us, come because they stay a few days in Noordwijk, they want to see something and say "Hey, there's a comic art museum in Noordwijk!" and half of the people especially come to Noordwijk to visit us and they also sometimes stay in Noordwijk, so I think, So, I think it is also a great product for Noordwijk, as a tourist place and I like to meet as many people as possible from the comic world and this is a great place to meet people from the Comic World. And now we have a place, there are a lot of groups that work with comics, but no one had a real, physical place, where we can meet each other.

MM.: We can go on. I'm guessing the permanent collection, from what I saw at least, is very limited. Does the museum mostly operate with temporary exhibitions? The

permanent collection of the museum comes mostly from your personal collection, am I correct?

AK.: Yes. We want to show two exhibitions a year.

MM: We have another question about exhibitions...

AK: So...the purpose of the museum is not to collect originals. We know a lot of collectors, that we can borrow the originals. We also borrow straight from the artists, if it's necessary. We borrow from the artists and also...in this exhibition, we have very beautiful originals from Marten Toonder and we borrow them from the *Letterkundig* Museum in the Hague. So when we want to make an exhibition, we think about what we want to show and then first we think about what we want to show in the exhibition and then we think about which drawings we want to show then. That's then part of my collection, but also from others. From this exhibition, we borrowed from nine different people he can borrow stuff from or *instanties* (institutions).

MM: Could you please tell me the museum's target demographic? Who visits the museum? Actually, who the museum aims to be the visitor and who actually visits the museum?

AK: We aim to be interesting for all people. Of course, have an interest in comics, but all people who are interested in visual arts. So also, people who don't really read comics but are visually interested. It's a very visual art, so that is our aim, and also like, this exhibition is called *Grensverleggers*, and *Grensverleggers* is the team, to show different authors and for instance, we show Jean Deulie is from the very old generation and we show them next to Coco Ouwekerk, she's a young woman, she is the newest generation. For her it isn't less important to make books, she makes comics you can read on your phone, so you read them this way (*pretends to scroll down on a screen*). And she writes on Webtoons, it's called, it's a South Korean website, possibly more recent in the comic world and we want to show them also and we want to show to people how great and how different from each other their comic world is. And we also, in practice, also people who have a *Museumkaart* that are the people who visit each month an exhibition and they also come to us. That's a group of people who are really interested I think and really interested in art in general, so also, the 9th art, the comic art.

MM: So I guess the reason for founding the MoCA is equally education and entertainment. Are there any other reasons, perhaps you could think of?

AK: Yes. To strengthen the comic world. The comic world isn't big in the Netherlands and there are a lot of clubs, and people who do something with comics but is very fragmented. So we want to stimulate, the iteration of all the small parts and we think the comic world in France is ten times bigger than in Holland, so from a book in France. So France is bigger, it's four times the Netherlands in inhabitants, and comics are sold thirty times more than the Netherlands, so we have room to grow. There's a lot to win, we can try to interest a bigger group, then raise interest.

MM: So how many visitors are there per month? Approximately, you don't have to stress about it and could you please explain to me what impacts this number? Approximately.

AK: We want to grow to a thousand people per month and maybe now we have five hundred a month.

MM: And is it the location that it's impacting this number? Because Noordwijk is a very summer city and a vacation city I guess...so, is it tied? Are there any other factors?

AK: Noordwijk is a tourist place, so that helps, the location where we are is the main shopping street here. We are 200 meters from the sea, so for Noordwijk, this is a very good location, a showing location, you see the comic shop, so I think the location is very viewable. Noordwijk is a small city, you could expect a museum of Comic Art that must be in Amsterdam. Amsterdam, I don't know, but I think it might have 150 museums. Noordwijk has now six, so it's easier to show up in Noordwijk and for us, it is very important as I told, there isn't a lot of money, for us it is very important to use the free publicity. For instance, the two best newspapers in the Netherlands, there's the *Volkskrant* and a full page on the NRC. We were in the trains, that have small TVs on the trains, we were on them. We were on Dutch National TV as part of a magic show. So I think we are trying to have a lot of free publicity that's very important for a new museum. Most people who come say "Ah, it's beautiful, it's a small, high-quality museum!" Most people like that it's not too big. Most people stay here for three-quarters of an hour. That's nice. It's not the Louvre, where you have to stay five days. It's a small museum. So, in an hour, a small hour, you can relax and

see the exhibition and people like that and people who come are almost all very enthusiastic and say they will come back, because we are new and not an institution, we need a lot of publicity.

MM: We're going back to temporary exhibitions. I am wondering, where does the material come from? Are there donations from the artists or collectors or from your personal collection?

AK: From other collectors, my collection, and from artists. And from institutions.

MM: What do you mean institutions?

AK: For instance, the *Letterkundig* Museum in Den Haag. That's a national museum.

MM: Thank you. Some questions are repeating the kind of what you've said, but just to be clear and have it in a certain (*interview section*). Now we're talking about the funding. Does it come from the friends of the Museum, ticket sales, and merchandise? You've said there's no funding from the state. Any additional funding perhaps?

AK: We have some form of income, the shop is paying rent, so there's that part. The most part is the tickets, the selling of tickets. But also now we have 460 Friends, you read it on the site probably, who pay 27.50 euros annually. \. The shop sells everything, we don't compete with that. He has a shop. He has to do it himself (*There's a shop attached to the museum*). We sell tickets and the catalogue and when we sell enough, we have a profit of it.

M.M: Thank you. We've talked about this before but can you please expand on how operating on a voluntary basis works? How does it impact the museum in comparison to a more traditional employee situation? You can choose whatever lens you want, either financially, as a structure, everything.

AK: As a structure, for me with volunteers, it was new, as I told my business is architecture. I have an architecture office of 20 people, where I am the boss. So I can tell you have to do this, this that way. Now we have volunteers. We are the *stichting*. The main activities with the *stichting* are three people, for an exhibition, we form a group, especially for that. Now the next exhibition we do with four people that are also volunteers, a writer, a curator (PR?) and we have I think, one volunteer who helps us with fundraising and to be here, in the museum, when it's open, we have I

think eight or nine volunteers, that's a group of volunteers, but of course, there's a big difference with working together with people you pay and volunteers. People you pay, you can say you must do that, with volunteers, you have to ask "Will you do this or that?".

MM: So, it's more of a collective.

AK: No, it's not more of a collective, you can't say "tomorrow it must be done!" when you pay people you can say this. When there are volunteers, you can only ask "Can you do it as quick as possible?". I think that's the main difference.

MM: Okay now we're moving towards the Dutch comic art scene. Can you briefly explain to me the history? I've already seen the exhibition; I was wondering about... an overview. A really brief overview of like the Dutch Comic Art scene. I've heard it was banned for a time, what made comics legal again? Is it true? Just a brief history.

AK: It was not really banned, there was a time, it was in the 50s in the Netherlands, when people said that reading comics made you lazy. Do you know what I mean? So they weren't enthusiastic about comics, they weren't really abandoned, but it was difficult to read them in schools for instance. In the Netherlands, they had a practical solution for it, etchings, they were pocket-sized and you could read them in school underneath the table. They made especially very small comics, so they could read them without the teacher seeing them and they could give them to each other. That was the 1950s in the Netherlands. But I think the comics... on the first floor we talk about the history of comics and some people say "Do you know *Centsprent*?" They make prints. Some people say that's one of the first comics. And that the tapestry of Ballieu, that's the first comic. In the comic world, the start of the real modern comic is in the about the 1900s in America, in the newspapers.

MM: So after the 1950s, in the Netherlands, what happened?

AK: The history of comics, of modern comics, started in America in the 1900s.

MM: I meant in the Netherlands....

AK: Yeah, but in the Netherlands, we read American comics and the invention was there. During the Second World War, they couldn't import American Comics, so they had to make them themselves. And then, people in Belgium started for instance

Spirou (*Robbedoes* in Flemish) and *Tintin* (*Kuifje* in Flemish), which were the most important magazines and Belgium became big in comics after WWII. American comics weren't imported anymore and in Europe, we do it ourselves. Afterward, France, the 70s-80s was the main comic country, so a lot of comics we read in the Netherlands, come from Belgium or France. Or from the Netherlands. And there is a small group of collectors who collect original art, but there is a big group who collect books. Some only want the first print, some don't care and only want to read the story, there are a lot of events, where people meet each other.

MM: Now I want to go to the contemporary Dutch Comic Art scene. Is there a consistency in topics, or art styles? Perhaps recurring themes? For example, I come from Greece and the contemporary art scene is heavily influenced by the tense political climate, so right now we're seeing mostly comics commenting on capitalism on queer and femme liberation and state violence. Have you noticed any recurring themes or patterns or art styles or topics or anything? Just talk about the contemporary Dutch comic art scene.

AK: In terms of themes, they are becoming more different from each other and comic series become less important and the graphic novels, graphic novels is the name of one story, like a novel, one-shots are becoming more important. And you have a lot of themes and a lot of different styles and most selling. So there are more titles with fewer printings of them.

MM: I also wanted to ask, right now are they mostly self-published, under a publishing house?

AK: Self-publishing is very small in the Netherlands. Mostly there are young artists who are self-publishing, but it's very marginal. So most want to be under a publishing house. Sometimes like I said, Webtoons, it's a site. It's a digital publishing and I think every theme you can imagine, there is a graphic novel.

MM: Can we talk about if the influences have changed? We've talked about like how in the Netherlands, the main influences were the American comics and then the Belgian and French comics. Have they changed at all? Like what are the current influences? Have they changed? Have they remained the same, what has been added? What has been removed?

AK: The French and the Belgian comic world are still important in the Netherlands. We have artists of our own, but in the Netherlands, it's very difficult to earn your money with it. Some are very well known, but most are not very well known and have to work in the illustration world or do commercial work to earn their money, because they are not big enough, so, artists in the Netherlands want to be published. For instance, in France, because the comic world is a lot bigger. But I think in the Netherlands we have a lot of talent, but it's very difficult to sell it abroad. Some people are great, but our publishing houses are not very international. People from Belgium and France are a lot better commercially and have it better with selling their comics abroad.

MM: Has this superhero and manga trend of the past fifteen-twenty years has influenced the Netherlands? Or not?

AK: I don't know superheroes and I don't know a lot of manga. It's not my interest, but of course superheroes are very important and also big because all films are made from superheroes. In the Netherlands, I think half of the films that are made now are influenced by superheroes and manga has also created a new public, for instance, young women; they weren't interested in comics, I don't know why, they found interest in some parts of manga, but a few, maybe ten years ago, they expected was becoming very big in the Netherlands and it end up not becoming very big. In France it is very big, but not in the Netherlands. I don't know why. Maybe the French are more open-minded to new things or they took their part but it's not becoming very big I think in the Netherlands.

MM: We're coming close to the end, there are a few more questions. You mentioned earlier the comic museum in Rotterdam, in Groningen, could you please comment briefly on other comic museums? Some of them are closed down, what makes MoCA stand out? What will make it survive in your opinion?

AK: The main reason is that we are very low with the cost, we work with volunteers, we have reached a big audience with our free publicity, far more than the old *Stripmuseum*. We are very active with it, we are also very active with social media; Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. We are sending newsletters, and comic-related emails, we are approaching our Friends, with the *Friends* letter, we are very digital in comparison to other small museums, and we have active social media. I think it's

good to be in a tourist place, there are only a few museums and we are not one of the 150, so that helps. And I think the basis is that we know a lot of collectors, so we have a lot of beautiful drawings we can borrow, in the sense that I can make easily 20 years' worth of exhibitions or something like that

MM: I would like to discuss temporary exhibitions again. The first one was on European Masters, now it's on Dutch Masters, the next one is on Disney (Donald Duck), and the next one on Marten Toonder. So how do you choose the exhibitions, do you purposely mix the Dutch comic art scene with more international exhibitions?

AK: Yes, we want to reach a broad public, as broad as possible and so this was European, this exhibition is 21 Dutch masters. As I told the old generation, new generation, an old master, a new master, that's very beautiful in black and white, we think and we show them together. So he's (one of the artists) far more well known, so people, they come to see Hans Kresse, but when they're done, they also see Erik Kriek. That's our purpose, that we show as much as possible and surprise people. "Oh! I didn't know there was that much talent in Holland!". People, they come for names they know, but we show them a lot more, but we surprise them, I hope. For us the selling of tickets is very important because we don't get money, so of course, we have to think exhibitions, where we expect a lot of people are coming, so Donald Duck is a very well known institution in the Netherlands. Everybody in the Netherlands knows Donald Duck, so we think, in the summer, it will be our next exhibition, Noordwijk is a touristy place, so for us, it's important that people are coming and that's why we think in the summer we do a real public exhibition and then in the winter we do an exhibition that's more for the people who really like the comic art. We mix them.

MM: What are your future plans concerning the Museum of Comic Art? Any goals, any ambitions? I've heard about the education program that you're building. Could you please elaborate on that? Any possible future plans?

AK: We want to work together with as many people and institutions in the Netherlands as possible, so know we're going together with *Het Stripschap* (a club of comic art appreciators est.1967). *Stripschap* is an institute for comic art, people who like comics. Its existence is from 1967 and they are very enthusiastic because we are very new and they want to work with us, so we want to work with as much as

different from the comic world in the Netherlands as possible and maybe also from Belgium, the Dutch-speaking part. We want to make beautiful exhibitions and we want to grow our number of visitors, so it's important to be active on social media and active with knowing people that are interested in something beautiful to see and we want to be important in the comic world in the Netherlands. Our importance is yet already growing. We're getting noticed. People are coming to ask us about some things because they see we know a lot of it, we know a lot of the subjects, so for us, it's important that 'we are a stayer' (meaning that we'll stick around). Rotterdam was only for one year, so it's important to be there for a longer time, because a lot of the processes are taking time.

MM: So could you please talk to me about the education program? Is it in collaboration with schools?

AK: We have now. Because of coronavirus, it was impossible, but we have another table, we can make it very long, we have chairs, we can invite a group of 20 people, there are coming a few, children and either we tell them about the exhibition or we tell them how to draw comics. So we are making a program for school-children. And it's new for us because it wasn't possible until now. Now we have three concrete (meaning substantial) appointments with schools and BSO (Buitenschoolse opvang – After school activities), they are also interested in an appointment with us. And we think that we want to interest people and also children for comics and maybe for us it's important to show to the local government we're doing this, so maybe they will be paying money for it.

MM: Do you have any final comments perhaps? Any information you would like me to know? Anything.

AK: We are very enthusiastic, maybe we are only working for only one year, but we see us growing and we get a lot of enthusiastic reactions from people, also on TripAdvisor and on Google comments, that's also important for us, so the main difficulty is that we are volunteers and that we also have another job, so we can't do it full time, it takes a lot of money and it takes a lot of time to manage a museum, we didn't know that, but we know it now, so we're becoming better with that.

MM: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this and for your collaboration. If I have any further questions, can I reach to you via email?

AK: You can reach me via email and I am very anxious to know what you'll make of it. *-End of Recording*

7.2. Interview with Isabelle Debekker, Belgian Comic Strip Center (BCSC) in Brussels, 04.07.2022

MM: My name is Maria Mavromati, it's July fourth, 2022 and I'm interviewing the director of the Belgian Comics Strip Centre. Please state your name, profession, and pronouns.

ID: My name is Isabelle Debekker, I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Comics Museum in Brussels and my pronoun is "she".

MM: Thank you. And do I have your permission to record this conversation and use it for my Master's Thesis?

ID: Yes

MM: Thank you. So, we can start. I've read some stuff on the website, but I would really like to have your own opinion and your own viewpoint on the questions. So, can you please tell me about the history of the museum and for how long have you been working here, how long have you been the director?

ID: Okay so the museum exists for over thirty years, so it's been born in 1989 and I am working here since 2019.

MM: And have you started as a curator and then you became the director or immediately?

ID: No, I was in charge of the financial administration of the museum.

MM: How has the museum changed since its inception and what has impacted those changes? Because it is a thirty-year-old museum?

ID: A lot of things. I think the thing that changed the most is that it was created by *amateur* people and they tried their best but they did not know the right way to do things. Comics was still not something like Art with a big "A", it was more like "comics is a popular thing and we are sure it is really hard to do comics". So, the way we speak about comics and present them in the museum, all that changed in 30 years.

So, it started as a group of friends that does their best and then we try to professionalize the way we work.

MM: We will circle back to some things, but now we can move on with the questions. I really want to talk about funding. Are you supported by the Ministry of Culture or do you rely mostly on other resources for financing the museum? Where does the money come from, basically?

ID: Most of the money comes from the selling of tickets. I think it's a total of 45 percent. We have a little bit from the library and the restaurant, when they hire the place (*for events*) and there is a little bit of money coming from the Brussels Capital and *La Communauté française de Belgique*, which is like 15%.

MM: And now we're going to talk about the permanent collection. How many pieces are approximately and where do they come from? Are they from donations, from artists and collectors? Are they purchased by the museum, perhaps in an auction?

ID: We have two different collections. We have a book collection, so it's all in the library. We have more than 100000 books. So of them were given by collectors, some of them were bought by us, some of them were given to us by publishing houses. So that's the collection of books and we have also a collection of original comic art drawings and they in a specific state, because some of them are not our property...you know when you give somebody something and you have to give it back after that. So some of them we have given back when the people die. We have like six thousand original drawings, which we use for permanent exhibitions and for temporary exhibitions we receive drawings for six months and then we give it back.

MM: Who visits the museum? Who the museum is for?

ID: Everybody comes to the museum. We have a lot of internationals and a lot of schools. The idea is that "We are in Belgium and Belgium is a country of comics, so we are going to the comics museum." And then we have families, groups of friends, old people.

MM: So the museum is for everyone in mind. Not specifically comic art lovers.

ID: This is very difficult, to have something that everyone appreciates. Some people don't know anything about comics and we have to keep explaining to these people

and we have some readers and collectors and we have to add another section for them. So it's really wide.

MM: And in terms of numbers... the website says two hundred thousand people visit the museum yearly. Has the number changed because of the pandemic and other reasons?

ID: I will send you the statistic if you want...I don't remember, but in 2020 and 2021 it was really not enough.

MM: Now we're going back to the permanent exhibitions. I love that the first floor is a step-by-step guide to publishing comic art and what the comic art sub-genres are. So what is the thought process? What are the changes in the permanent exhibitions? Because when I talked to your colleague (*when I visited the museum*), they said that you change the artworks every few months. Is this true? Are there any other changes in the permanent exhibition? How do you adapt them each time?

ID: In the museum we exhibit original drawings and you can't put paper for a long time at light because of the UV rays. So we have to change the original drawings a lot of times, so we try to change all the original works. We have a permanent exhibition for the history of comics and there we do not have any original drawings, but all the rest of the museum we have to change the drawings. But in 2024 we have a project to have a big exhibition on the second floor about the history of Belgian comics. So we will try to explain to people from where it comes the idea that comics is something from Belgium

MM: I want to ask you the same question with the temporary exhibitions. Are they created with a specific audience in mind. Do you firstly approach your collaborators before deciding on a theme or is it the opposite? How do you make a decision on the temporary exhibitions?

ID: It depends. Sometimes there is a collaborator that comes and says "What do you think if we do this exhibition?" and sometimes it's the a mixed proposition, for example when new books come out, like *Blake and Mortimer* and that was 75 years celebrating *Blake and Mortimer* and they asked us "Can we do something together?". So we try to be open-minded and we select what we think is okay with the people coming here at the museum. So next year, we have a season all for kids with

(inaudible) as a temporary exhibition and we try to have something for adults in the other exhibitions.

MM: I also like very much that it's mostly centered around European comics and French and Belgian comics. And there is an upcoming Naruto exhibition. How do you change and adapt each time?

ID: We organize exhibitions based on what we have, which is mostly French and Belgian comics. But we also have an interest in manga, webtoons, American comics. If we want to do American comics, we need original drawings. We don't have it, so we have to find partners that have the drawings, so it's easier for us to do local. But we try to be open to other styles as well.

MM: When organizing an exhibition, what are the physical limitations? What are the problems, the restrictions and the issues?

ID: The biggest problem is money! But the problem of the light, the temperature. And it's only one big space...The sun is coming from the glass in the roof. And in the winter, it is very cold in the Museum. So it is very difficult to accept masterpieces. Now we make more exhibitions in the parts of the museum that there is no daylight coming inside. We are working on that, but it's a huge thing to do. That's the most difficult part of making exhibitions. And the money. Like everywhere.

MM: In my thesis, I am also discussing the debate of high and low art and how comics and that comics are considered a "lower" art form. I would like your opinion on that.

ID: The objective of comics is to sell. The originals exist, but it's not important. The final product is more important. When someone makes comics, the artistic project is the book, so it's an original art. So it's coming from that. That the final objective of comics is not considered Art. But if you look at comic books, you cannot say it's not Art. It's not art in the literary style, but it's different art, it's real art, like the rest, since there are two things, the writing and the drawing.

MM: I really love the exhibition about *Comics at the Louvre*, because it has the message if comics belong in a museum and vice versa. How this exhibition was created?

ID: The idea of the exhibition was to show at the public that comics is also Art and its place can be in one of the biggest museums of the world, the Louvre. So we want to show the relationship between the two. So we spoke to “Futuropolis” and they agreed. But it wasn’t very easy to work with the Louvre, because it is a big institution there are ten people you don’t know who is who and what they are doing. We are a little museum. It was an experience.

MM: What is being published right now in comic art in Belgium?

ID: Not series. Most of the time big books, like graphic novels, and journalistic comics, western comics. The best-sellers are the new *Asterix* and the new *Blake and Mortimer*. It’s not new, but people know that, so they buy something they know.

MM: I would really like to talk about the education program. You offer holiday courses and workshops on Saturdays. How does it work?

ID: Right now, we give comics lessons to children and they try to make a little book of 4-5 pages per child with a comics author as the professor.

MM: So last question. What are the future plans for the museum? Anything you want to accomplish? Any collaborations that are coming?

ID: The first project that is coming is the permanent exhibition about the history of Belgian Comics in 2024. We have a lot of projects. To make more dynamic the presence of Belgian Comics outside of Belgium. We are trying to collaborate with Angoulême because they have the same objective as us and they are in France. We are also organizing a lecture on Comics identity. And we are going to make a podcast.

MM: Thank you so much. – *End of Recording*.

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