I Like It!... But Is It Comics?

By Karen Green

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Were any of you at MoCCA Fest last month? I thought it was a terrific show (hey, any time I have the chance to meet Charles Burns, I don't ask for much more), and the panels were amazing: informative, challenging and hilarious, by turns. One of the best panels of the weekend, in my opinion, was Gary Panter's discussion of modern artists who stand as the spiritual forefathers—or perhaps kissing cousins—to comics artists. If you missed it, you can still listen to it and see examples of many of the paintings he discussed, as well.

Panter spoke of the relevance these artists had to the comics tradition, and it's difficult to fault his choices when you look at the images. But his reflections on these fine artists led me to think about certain types of graphic narrative that are seldom included in even the most expansive comics canon. Sometimes it seems that, no matter how many times people come up with a definition for comics, there's always something that's going to challenge that definition's boundaries.

![Image of Scottsboro, Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts](image-url)
One such example is a remarkable graphic narrative, *Scottsboro Alabama: a story in linoleum cuts*. It was formally published in 2002, after NYU's Tamiment Librarian Andrew Lee discovered the self-published manuscript in the archives of Joseph North, a major Communist journalist of the early 20th century. I saw the book on the desk of a librarian friend of mine over at NYU, and was immediately captivated by its raw power and skill.
Do you know the story of the Scottsboro Boys? In 1931, in Scottsboro, Alabama, nine young black men riding the rails were pulled from their train car after two white women, likewise "hoboing," accused them of rape. Although few of those nine young men had even been aware that the women were also on the train, they were sentenced to death by an Alabama court—the sort of sentence that often was short-circuited by the brutal tradition of lynching. But in this case the cause of the Scottsboro Boys was taken up by the International Labor Defense (ILD), a group founded by the Communist Party USA six years earlier to defend "class war prisoners." The ILD had [unsuccesfully] championed the cause of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, and now they focused all their energies on the Scottsboro case. They succeeded in getting the nine a new trial and their hopes rose when one of the two women confessed before the trial even started that no rape had occurred. Notwithstanding their accuser's admission, the jury of their "peers"—entirely white, as had been the first—returned a second guilty verdict. A third trial was called after a circuit judge overturned that second verdict (also ending his judicial career), but the new trial judge guided the third jury to yet another verdict of guilty.

The ILD dropped out after it was revealed that the group had tried to bribe the second "victim," but the Communist Party continued to champion the cause of the Scottsboro Boys, joining with the NAACP, the ACLU, and other groups to form the "Scottsboro Defense Committee" (SDC). In 1937, the SDC negotiated a lopsided plea bargain: four of the young men were convicted (with one sentenced to death, though that was commuted to a life sentence in 1938), one was sentenced to 20 years for assaulting a sheriff, and the final four were released.

It was in 1935, however, that two otherwise unknown artists, Tony Perez and Lin Shi Khan, created a graphic story of the trial—but more than the trial. Perez and Khan begin their tale with slavery itself, breaking the narrative into three parts: "Negroes Come to America," which sets the Scottsboro struggle in the context of American racial history; "The Nine Boys of Scottsboro;" and "White and Black Unite," an attempt to demonstrate solidarity between the plight of African-Americans in the United States, and exploited and abused workers of all races. The images, chiseled out of linoleum squares, and featuring bold, crude figures, embody the dramatic power of the story itself. Michael Gold, founder of the Marxist journal New Masses and author of the original introduction to the book, wrote that intellectuals and artists had recognized in the Scottsboro story "one of the major battles against the monstrous Fascism by which a corrupt and expiring civilization attempts to clutch to its last straws of existence."

Uh, okay.
But, ideological jargon aside, *Scottsboro Alabama* is a work of propaganda and a call to activism…but also a work of art…and also a reflection on racist hatred and violence, and of man's inhumanity to man.
So—is it "comics"? Perhaps I should ask more formally: is it a narrative in the form of sequential art, generally but not exclusively with accompanying text? Well, yes. Which means it's just as fair to ask if the woodcuts of Lynd Ward's *God's Man* are comics, or those of Franz Masereel's *Passionate Journey*. Is this when we're supposed to use the term "graphic novel," because it has more...gravitas? Does the actual physical medium complicate the issue? Okay, what about Eric Drooker's scratchboard novel *Flood*—does that count as comics? Is it the content? *Scottsboro Alabama* is ideological and propagandistic; can it still be considered comics? If not, what about Chick tracts, or Steve Ditko's more oppressively Objectivist oeuvre? Is it easier to call it a comic if it was made in the last 50 years? I'm not asking this to be combative or disingenuous—I really want to know. I consider *Scottsboro Alabama* to fall into the medium we call comics or graphic novels—do you?

Here's another example: Edward Gorey. When people ask me what comics I grew up reading, I always include him. But how many people shelve Gorey with their comics collections? How many people who own Gorey even have comics collections (or vice versa)? But how does Gorey not fit into the definition in the paragraph above?
Who could fail to be moved by the sight of poor Nellie's shoes, which add such pathos to his slightly surreal text? Gorey's Gothic Edwardiana seemed *sui generis* to me in high school, but mostly because there really wasn't anything else that looked like it. (In the late '70s, I used to see Gorey in the lobby at performances of American Ballet Theatre, in fur coat and Keds like a character out of his books.) Gorey was like neither the Archies I'd recently graduated from reading, nor the Crumb I was simultaneously devouring. As a fan of 19th-century melodrama as found in the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, I was drawn into Gorey's intricately-created worlds, whose inhabitants lived in absurd hamlets that could have been named by a young S. J. Perelman. These days, when the comics that are published fall into a hundred stylistic categories or more, Gorey seems less of an outlier. Most recently, for example, at MoCCA Fest, I thought I saw hints of his unique world in Joshua Ray Stephens' *The Moth or the Flame*, especially in Tempest McGillicutty, the nattily dressed, teacup-headed protagonist. My more widely-read audience can probably come up with a dozen or more other examples. But who talks about Edward Gorey at comics conventions? Is he considered a comics artist?

Perhaps this debate is a straw man I've concocted as a consequence of my own defensiveness over not having grown up reading mainstream comics, for having to educate myself at this late date on things like the Kirby crackle and the chains of relationship between Golden Age, Silver Age, and modern artists. Perhaps artists like Perez and Khan and Gorey missed their time; perhaps today they would be speaking to packed rooms at comic-cons and lecture halls. Perhaps I'm silly even to imagine that there is a "they" who determines what is or isn't comics—some kind of star chamber with white and black balls, like in Renaissance-era Venice.
Perhaps it's up to me, and to you. If I consider *Scottsboro Alabama* or Edward Gorey's tales to be comics, then so be it. Is it really that simple?

Credits:


"Sadistic lynchings are encouraged to fan the flame of race hatred," *Scottsboro Alabama: a story in linoleum* (NYU Press, 2002), p. 51

From *The Willowdale Handcar* in *Amphigorey* (Berkley Windhover, 1975)

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