

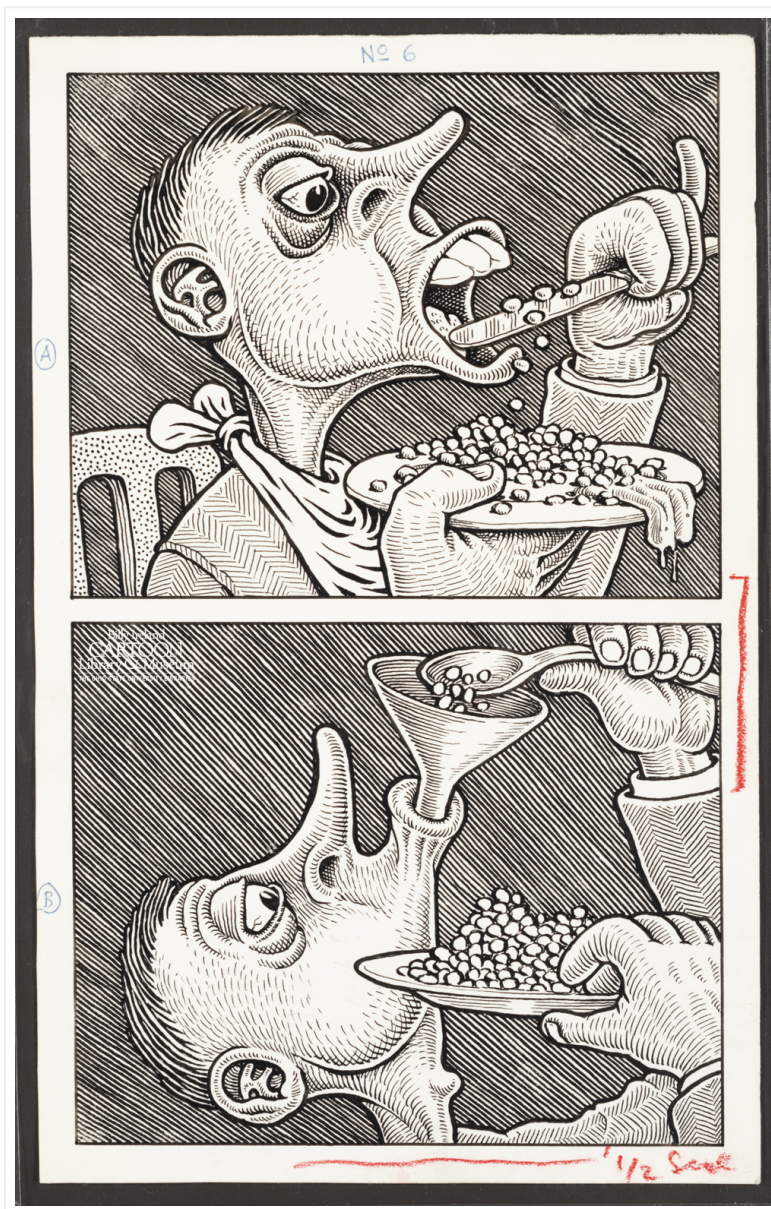
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

BILLY IRELAND CARTOON LIBRARY & MUSEUM
BLOG

Found in the Collection: Basil Wolverton (1909-1978)!

JULY 6, 2012 / CAITLIN MCGURK / 3 COMMENTS

Basil Wolverton was a true enigma of a man, best known for his work in both MAD Magazine and for his religious illustrations for the Radio Church of God (also known as the Worldwide Church of God, for whom he served as a board member) and of the Old Testament. His unforgettable grotesque and psychedelic style could be used just as easily to convey something hilarious as it could something damning, though there are certainly commonalities to be drawn in his use of exaggeration for doing both.

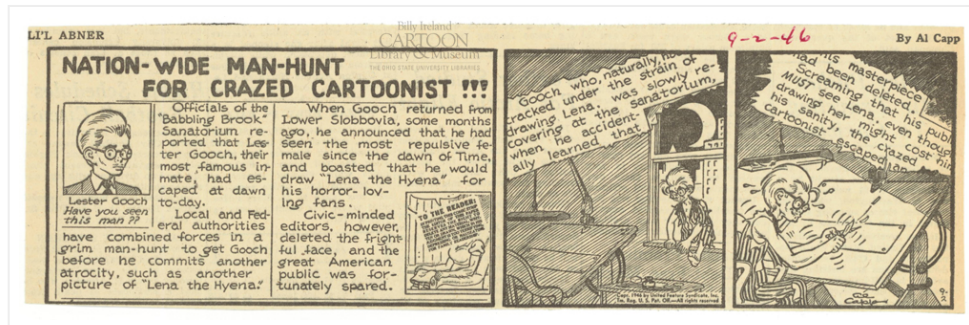


Basil Wolverton original from MAD Magazine's "Dining Etiquette Quiz". From the Mark J. Cohen and Rose Marie McDaniel Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum.

Although Wolverton's early works of note were *Powerhouse Pepper* and *Spacehawk*, it was not these accomplishments that brought his distinctly characterized style into the public eye- but instead a contest that he won *within* the storyline of Al Capp's famous *Li'l Abner* comic to draw the ugliest woman alive. As a smart humor device and a way to keep his readers hooked, in 1946 Capp introduced the now legendary character Lena the Hyena of Lower Slobbovia into the world of *Li'l Abner* on the premise that she was so hideous that anyone who looked upon her immediately went insane- and he himself never drew her face. Instead, the public was baited with teases of exposing Lena's visage, which went on for *months* before Capp finally held a competition for readers to send in their own versions of Lena- the ugliest of which would be selected by Boris Karloff, Frank Sinatra, and Salvador Dali. Yes, this was indeed a time for comics where celebrities of such a high caliber were actually participating as judges for a gag on the funny pages.

Among the couple million other strips in our beloved [San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection](#) are chronological clippings of Capp's *Lil Abner*, so we thought we'd share some of the build up to Wolverton's striking national debut. Considering that the Lena the Hyena plot was built up over such a long period of time, we'll fill in some of the gaps to explain the story as we go.

For starters, Lena the Hyena is the most despised citizen of Lower Slobbovia, the country that fictional cartoonist Lester Gooch (author of Capp's comic-within-the-comic, "Fearless Fosdick", a favorite among citizens of Dogpatch) found her living in. Gooch is determined to show Lena's face to the public by drawing her in his comic, but goes insane after doing so, only to find out that his editor has removed her image from the page because it was simply too vile to see.



After escaping the sanatorium that he was placed in, Lester Gooch struggles time and again to recreate his drawing of Lena, even going to such lengths as killing a dentist in order to steal his "Freezocaine" so that he can numb himself from the revulsion enough to redraw her. This eventually works.



Al Capp's "Li'l Abner". From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

However, just as Gooch has finished his masterpiece, the police and doctors break into his apartment to drag him back to the hospital. As he tries to flee by jumping out a window, they capture him but the drawing of Lena floats out onto the wind. From there, its travels in the breeze causes weeks of devastation in the *Li'l Abner* strips as police officers and top meteorologists trace its path. Below, two of the more ridiculous strips from this hunt:



Al Capp's "Li'l Abner". From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

Mass-hysteria continues, at some point dissuading a gang of "good will" distributing aliens from visiting earth after they catch a glimpse of Lena's picture through a telescope. Eventually, the President calls for all red-blooded American's to help:



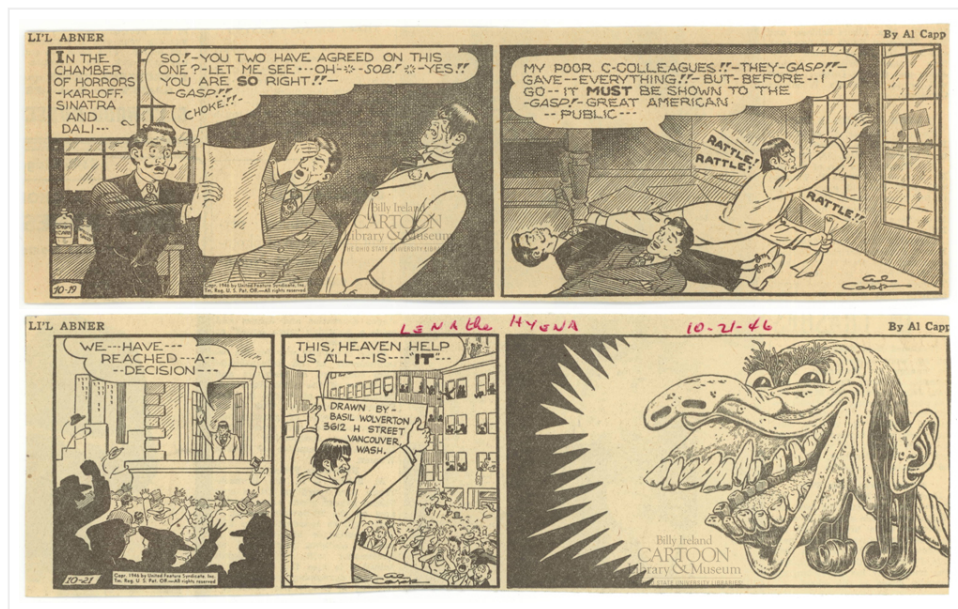
Al Capp's "L'il Abner". From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

A jury of Frank Sinatra, Boris Karloff, and Salvador Dali is formed to judge the submissions of the best (or worst) rendition of Lena the Hyena, the 500,000 of which even included an entry from Carl Barks. Below, the reasons for choosing the judges and their response to call of duty:



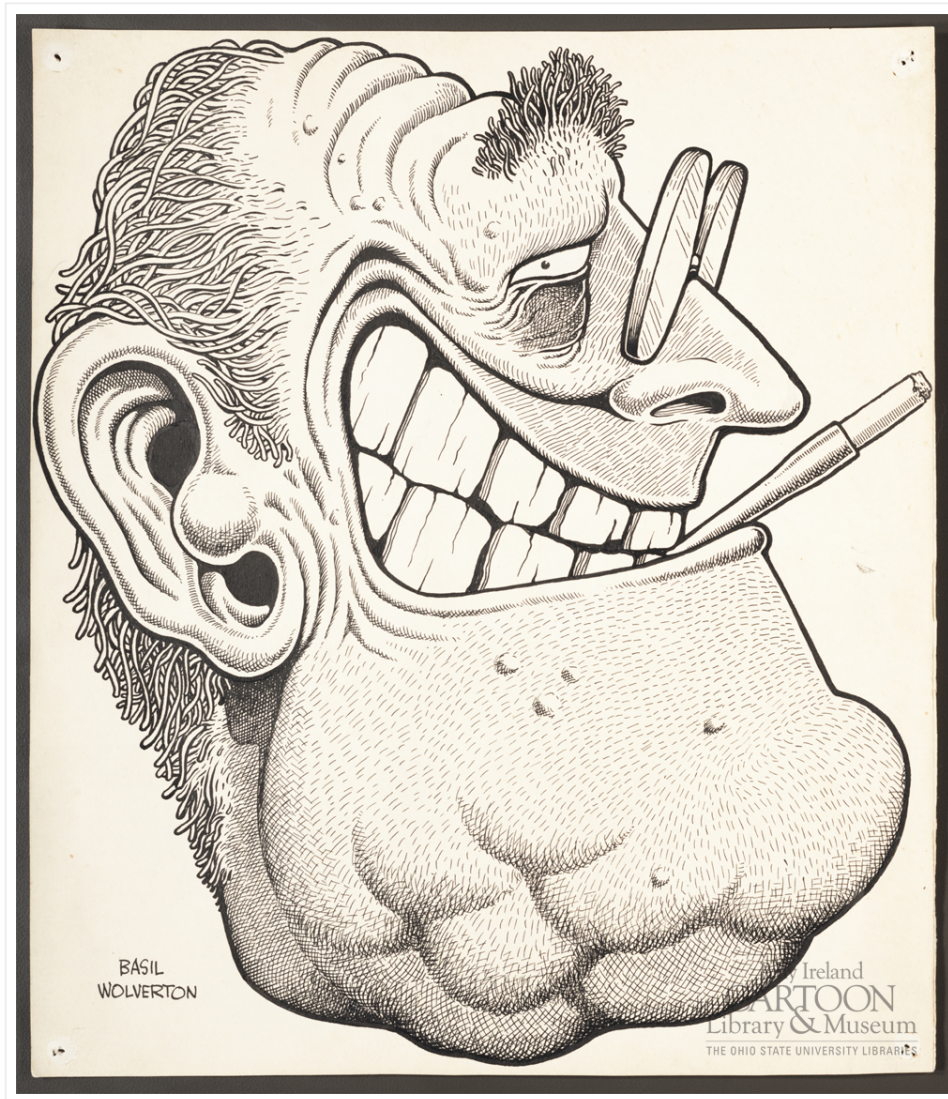
Al Capp's "Li'l Abner". From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

After more social upheaval, and as the public impatiently waits to see Lena's face once and for all- the acclaimed judges survive the process and finally deliver both the verdict and Basil Wolverton's talent to the national public eye:

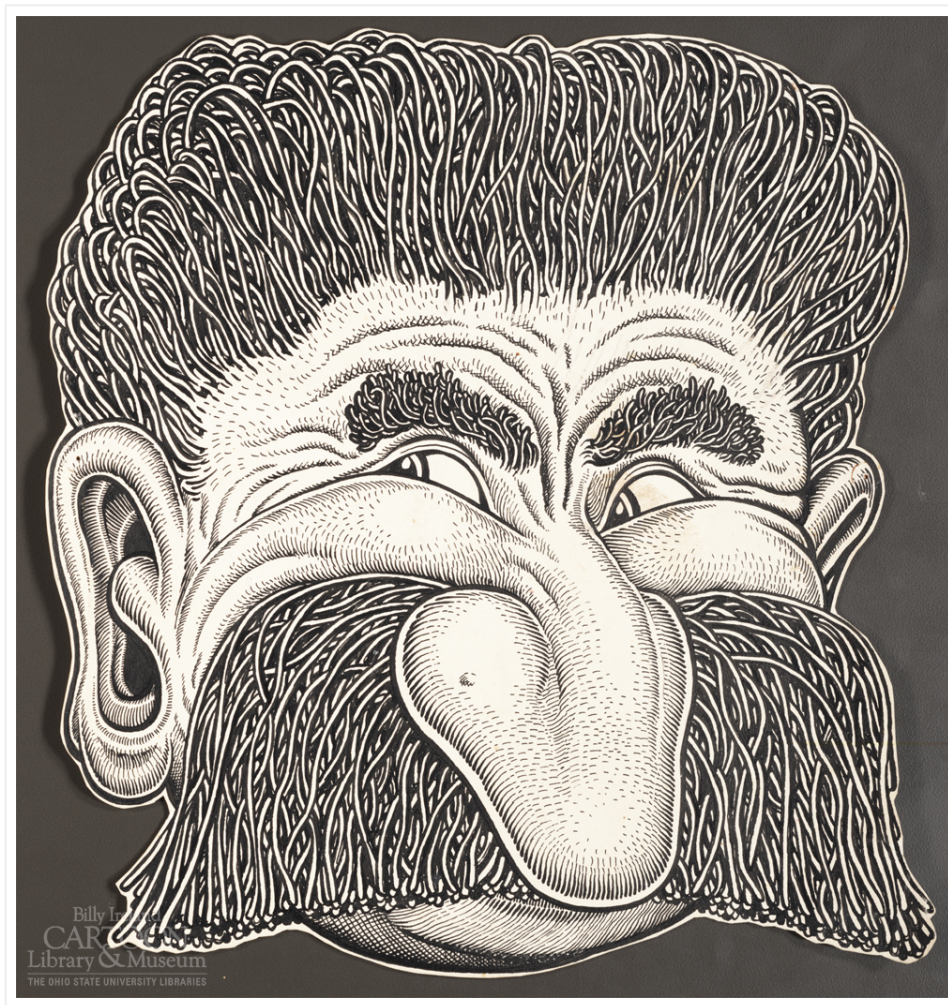


Al Capp's "Li'l Abner", featuring the winning portrait of Lena the Hyena by Basil Wolverton. From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

Wolverton's career was intensely amplified after this (Lena's face making it to the cover of MAD Magazine), with his portraits soon appearing in *Life* and *Pageant*. In tune with his now defined drawing style which *Life* would coin "spaghetti and meatballs", these portraits include the two originals below from our collection, of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Stalin:



Basil Wolverton original of Franklin D. Roosevelt. From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum



Basil Wolverton original of Joseph Stalin. From the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum

Although his name is not a household one, Wolverton’s influence on countless other well-known cartoonists like R. Crumb is undeniable, and his unique style would become a school of cartooning in itself. Basil would be 103 this year on July 9th.

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3 Comments



John Platt

JULY 6, 2012 AT 2:56 PM

Fantastic! Wolverton was amazing. There are quite a few books reprinting his best work, and what work it is!



Jim Hutter

JULY 6, 2012 AT 11:40 PM

I see similarities between Basil Wolverton and Boris Artzybasheff. Does anyone see these as well?



Samantha Wikan

JULY 7, 2012 AT 1:46 PM

I enjoyed this so much! Thank you for sharing such a great find!

Billy Ireland CARTOON Library & Museum

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

We hope that you'll enjoy taking a glimpse into our incredible collection, as well as getting updates on the latest news and events coming out of the largest cartoon art library in the world. Feel free to contact us with any comments, questions, or to schedule a visit to the library!

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