

***Tove Jansson's Dreamworld*. Paul Gravett. Brussels: Belgian Comic Strip Center, March 2-Aug. 29, 2010.**

The Belgian Comic Strip Center has a tradition of temporary exhibitions, in addition to its permanent exhibitions, ever since its opening in 1989. *Tove Jansson's Dreamworld* was in many ways an exception in the long exhibition history of the institution.

For its major exhibitions, the Center usually focuses on topics that the Belgian public knows very well -- the classics of the Franco-Belgian school which are either contemporary French or Flemish bestsellers or international phenomena. The exhibition on the work of Tove Jansson (Finland, 1914-2001), especially her charming Moomin creation, stood out, because very few editions of Jansson's work have been published in French or Dutch. One would probably have to go back to the exhibition of Guido Buzzelli's self-portraits in 2003 to find a BCSC exhibition that focused on work that was as unknown in Belgium as Moomin.

If the Moomintrolls, Jansson's friendly hippie hippos that stand on two feet, have any renown in the western part of continental Europe, it is because of the illustrated and children's books she did. In some cases, their recognition would be a result of the animated Moomin series. Their fame has never reached the majority of the population though, in this country where *Tintin*, *Lucky Luke*, *The Smurfs*, *Suske and Wiske*, and others have provided more than sufficient distraction for readers or viewers looking for some drawn entertainment. Of course, in the rest of the world, the Moomin books and animation are more popular than the comics as well. Before *Drawn & Quarterly* started its edition of the comics in 2006, only one English edition of Moomin comics had ever been tried.

As could be expected from the venue and from the curator, the exhibition *Tove Jansson's Dreamworld* focused especially on Jansson's comics production, without however neglecting her work in illustration or the animation series derived from her creation. All things Jansson were hinted at, but the comics part was the biggest and the most exclusive ingredient of the exhibition.

The most well-known comics are the 1,645 daily strips Tove Jansson produced between 1954 and 1959 for the *Evening News*, a newspaper in London with a readership of up to 20 million people at the time. Of this series of 21 longer stories, no original artwork could be shown, because none survives. All originals were destroyed in London. Only one original strip from 1954 survived this massacre, because it was never included in the newspaper run. A reproduction of this original strip was shown in the exhibition, together with 12 original drawn synopses drafts of *Evening News* Moomin stories,

discovered after Tove's death in 2001. These drafts showed Jansson developed key characters and important scenes before actually drawing the comics. From these original documents, the viewer could also discover that the order the comics were drawn in was not the order of their conception. Regarding the *Evening News* run of Moomin, the visitor was also informed of the crucial part played by businessman Charles Sutton and by Tove's younger brother Lars, who assisted her during her English comics contract and took over the daily strips after 1959.

Further treasures shown in this sympathetic exhibition were drawings from the magazine *Garm*, where predecessors of the Moomins appeared years before their official conception in 1945. The comics about the Moomins Jansson made for the newspaper *Ny Tid* in the late 1940s -- and here the original drawings were shown -- were a revelation. These comic strips were more old-fashioned in the sense that the texts were written below the panels, but in spirit, they came close to the English comics from the 1950s. Although the comics from the *Evening News* may strike readers as somewhat odd in their usage of comics storytelling conventions, the strips were no marginal aspect of the production of the polyvalent artist Tove Jansson. Her books about the Moomins made her famous, but she started publishing comics in 1929 at the incredible age of 14 years old.

Exhibited works not directly related to comics included illustrations for the Moomin books, and also cover illustrations for books by other authors, as well as other illustrations in a variety of techniques, from gouaches to scraperboard. Audiovisual contents were shown as well; the exhibition opened with the well-known animated series on a large screen and closed with a wonderful 57-minute documentary made by Finnish television channel FST5. In this film, Tove Jansson's unusual life as a child in an artistic family was explained, as was her empathy with minorities -- she belonged to the Swedish minority in Finland while also leading a discrete lesbian love life with artist Tuulikki Pietilä. The documentary also showed footage from the archipelago where Jansson used to spend her holidays and which inspired the landscapes in the Moomin comics and books. The first theatrical adaptation of the Moomins in 1949 was also given attention.

All in all, this exhibition showed much work by Tove Jansson on the rather limited platform of the Moomins. Many works that are normally hidden in the archives of the Moomin Museum in Tampere, were now shown to the public in Brussels in an accessible but also thorough, exhibition.

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Korean Comics: A Society Through Small Frames. The Korea Society. San Francisco Public Library, March 13-June 13, 2010.

IJOCA, Fall 2010