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The Art of the Con

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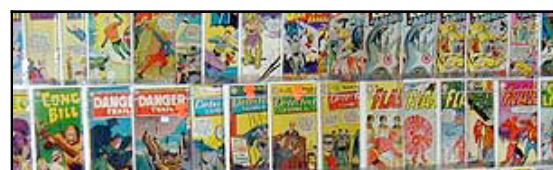
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Friday, Jul. 25, 2003

The Comic-Con International at San Diego, the largest comic convention in the world, took place last weekend to the biggest attendance in its history: more than 70,000 people, according to organizers. Lasting four days, the San Diego Con, as it's known, spans nearly five football fields on two floors, hosting retailers, publishers, creators and fans. While it sounds like a comix Brigadoon, a magical island that appears just once a year, many in the comixcenti scowl at its mention, fuming at the mix of toys, models, movies, videogames, animation, trading cards, t-shirts and ancillary merchandise that they see as irrelevant junk. On assignment, your TIME.comix reporter was there for the first time, and has returned somewhat dazed but with a complex and not unpleasant experience.



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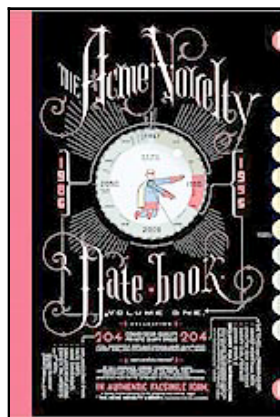
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ANDREW D. ARNOLD

Raison D'etre: Rows of comics at the Comic-Con International

We'll start with just the comix, which remain the heart of the show, even if they must share equal time and space with booths like the one selling swords and weaponry. San Diego Con is the only place where nearly all the American comic publishers gather under one roof. Consequently it becomes like a dense star that pulls creators of every genre into its orbit. Fans can go crazy trying to find them all, from the venerable Will Eisner (who was previewing his latest book "Fagin the Jew") to Harvey Pekar (stumping for the "American Splendor" movie) to Alex Ross (previewing the new hardcover of his painted superhero art) to Michael Chabon (previewing his comic "The Escapist," based on the character in "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay.") The number of creators easily reached several thousand. Marvel Comics, perhaps demonstrating just how much their comics have become a loss leader for the movie franchises, and how little they care for comicbook fans, was the only glaring absence.

**Chris Ware's "Acme Novelty Datebook"**

Although smaller presses sometimes complain about being overshadowed, the convergence of genres and fans allows for generous spillage. Of the publishers I spoke with, all were having successful sales. Several were debuting new books at the con. Drawn and Quarterly premiered the new "Acme Novelty Datebook," a hardcover collection of pages from Chris Ware's sketchbook (\$39.95). Ware is one of the medium's outright geniuses and the chance to peer into his unpolished doodles should not be missed. Another great find was a little hardcover called "War

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Time and Play Time" (\$15) by Luc Leplae. Born in Belgium in 1930, Leplae only started doing comix in his mid-sixties as a form of memoir. The family originally put them on the [web](#), and now has published some as well. They have a charming, outsider-art kind of simplicity on a subject — growing up in Nazi-occupied Europe — rarely found in comics.



ANDREW D. ARNOLD

Where's Shiga? The Eisner winners pose with an imposter in the lower right

On Friday night the 15th annual Eisner Awards were handed out. Having been a judge who helped choose the nominees (see TIME.comix [coverage](#)) I got a front-seat, complete with complimentary chips and guac. Eisner himself handed out the awards, bounding up and down the stage in spite of being 86 years old. Neil Gaiman (best known for his "Sandman" series) opened the ceremony with a keynote speech. His "State of the Comics Nation," as he called it, was generally sunny. "I don't think we're doing that badly at all," he said. He felt that comix had graduated from a public image of forgettable trash to being "just another medium," like film and literature. Eisner echoed this when he got on stage, declaring, "We're almost at the top of the mountain."

The awards, voted on by industry pros, were handed out with the skew towards the mainstream that the Eisner's are known for. A complete list of winners can be found [here](#). However, there were two highlights of the presentations. The "Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition" award went, most appropriately, to Jason Shiga. Like one his playful comix come to life (see TIME.comix [review](#)), Shiga sent an imposter (actually F.C. Brandt) to receive the award. Wearing a black wig and dark glasses the clearly false Shiga then regaled the audience with an absurd shaggy dog story about being born on a desert island as the product of a Japanese WWII pilot and two American army nurses. The second remarkable moment took place courtesy of Frank Miller, author of "[The Dark Knight Strikes Again](#)," who has in recent years become far more interesting as a comics gadfly than a creator. Prior to handing out the "Best Graphic Album — New" award (which rightfully went to Lynda Barry's "[One! Hundred! Demons!](#)") Miller lamented the rising cost of a

single comicbook. Noting they have reached upwards of \$3 a piece, "It's just not working," Miller said, "Our future is not in pamphlets." All but pronouncing the death of the comic chapbook, Miller predicted that, "This award [for best graphic novel] will be the centerpiece of these awards in the future." His gutsy pronouncement, in front of an audience largely made up of pamphlet comic-makers, received mild, reluctant applause.



Luc Leplae's "War Time and Play Time"

My second day of the Con was spent weaving through the booths and unsuccessfully trying to see Angelina Jolie present scenes from the up-coming "Tomb Raider" sequel. Frankly, I didn't mind the non-comics aspect of the show. Anyone with an interest in pop-culture sub-genres, like myself, will find a blissful smile uplift their face in the presence of so much "junk." G.I. Joe dolls in action poses, Simpsons dioramas and full-scale sculptures of creatures from the Lord of Rings movies get museum-like attention. And why shouldn't they? Andy Warhol, who you can easily imagine walking around the Con, redefined the meaning of this material over fifty years ago. It's a small leap to New York's Whitney Museum, which currently features Gilles Barbier's life-size installation of geriatric superheroes in a nursing home. It's all art.

And you've got to love the freak show. Friday was a particularly good day for costumes, a number of which seemed more appropriate to an S&M convention. At one point a black angel was seen in discussion with two white angels on the proper construction of a truss to support the wings. The Con has a weirdly sublimated sexual atmosphere. Tight and/or revealing outfits were not uncommon for both women and men. Actually the ratio of women seemed higher than one would expect. I would guess the number at around one third. It's easy to be contemptuous of the dorky characters that show up, but you must always remember: you're there too.

Though the Comic-Con International may be inaccurately named, being only 50% comics-related and not very international, it shouldn't be missed by comix enthusiasts. Its giant tent has enough going on under it for anybody to find something of interest. The

very thing that aesthetes complain about, the wild mash-up of comic books with other products, becomes one of the strengths of the show. Comix become instantly re-contextualized as the pop-culture medium they always were. It's nice to climb down from the upper atmosphere once in a while and wallow around.

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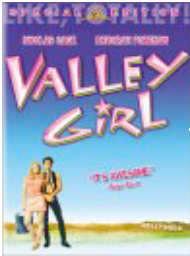
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