

Tintin. Hergé's Masterpiece. Somerset House, London. 12 November 2015 –

31 January 2016

This small exhibition provides a tempting taster for British fans who might want to visit the Belgian museum at Louvain-la-neuve. Entrance is free and, unusually for an art show, photography is permitted. As the title suggests, the tone is hagiographic. Emphasis is on visual action, and an attractive layout creates the impression that one is walking into Tintin's world. Aristocratic, elegant Somerset House becomes a Château de Moulinsart whose walls are the inside covers of Tintin albums: vertically striped blue wallpaper is hung with pictures of various characters; those pictures are interspersed with panels lifted from the albums, some of which look all the more amusing because they are taken out of context.

Readers familiar with Hergé will glean little from the potted biography, the brief summary of clear line, and the chronological resums of albums. Even so, an accompanying evening panel discussing Hergé's legacy for the digital age with Michael Farr, Paul Gravett, and others brings Tintin scholarship up to date. What is more, there are plenty of previously unpublished exhibits to satisfy hardened Tintinophiles. These include Hergé's first known drawing consisting mostly of scribbles (1911), and a picture copied from a postcard evincing his nascent interest in mimetic realism (1923). Hergé's little known poster art is on display, like the somewhat Art-Deco piece for a Maurice Chevalier concert at La Scala (1934). The covers from *Le Journal de Tintin* will also be unfamiliar to most English readers. Scale models are in evidence, notably mock ups of Tintin's bachelor flat and of the Château de Moulinsart. The Château is only seen from without, thereby begging questions about what it looks like within. The interior layout of Moulinsart has already prompted speculation; but, for the time being readers will still have to imagine.¹ Elsewhere, more information would have been appreciated. For example we are informed that Hergé disliked *Jo et Zette*, but no reason is given.

The organisers obviously decided to avoid political polemics. Thus, the anti-Semitic fascist sympathiser Abbé Wallez is just “an important figure” in Hergé’s life, colonialist racism is passed over, publications in the Nazi controlled *Le Soir* are reproduced without comment, and critiques of US Latin American policy are ignored. Near the exit Tintin holds up a banner proclaiming “vive la paix”, an anodyne message from which few could dissent.

It would be easy to carp at the lack of politics. However, to do so seems churlish given the unbridled pleasure shown by the public. The slogan that Tintin caters for people aged from seven to seventy-seven should now be updated to read from six to eighty-six. Children barely out of nursery school jostled noisily with boisterous teenagers, earnest young art buffs, middle aged enthusiasts, and greybeards hobbling on walking sticks. There was a strong female contingent on the day this reviewer visited (roughly 50%). ‘Tintin. Hergé’s Masterpiece’ can be criticised as a simplified and sanitised. Yet it is a timely reminder that, for all the copious critical and scholarly ink spilled over Hergé, to many people he is primarily a purveyor of fun.

ⁱ David Van Beylen, ‘Les plans du château’, *Les Amis de Hergé*, 29 (June 1999), 38-41. Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Dans la peau de Tintin*. (Brussels : Impressions nouvelles, 2010), 245.