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THE DAILY GAZETTE

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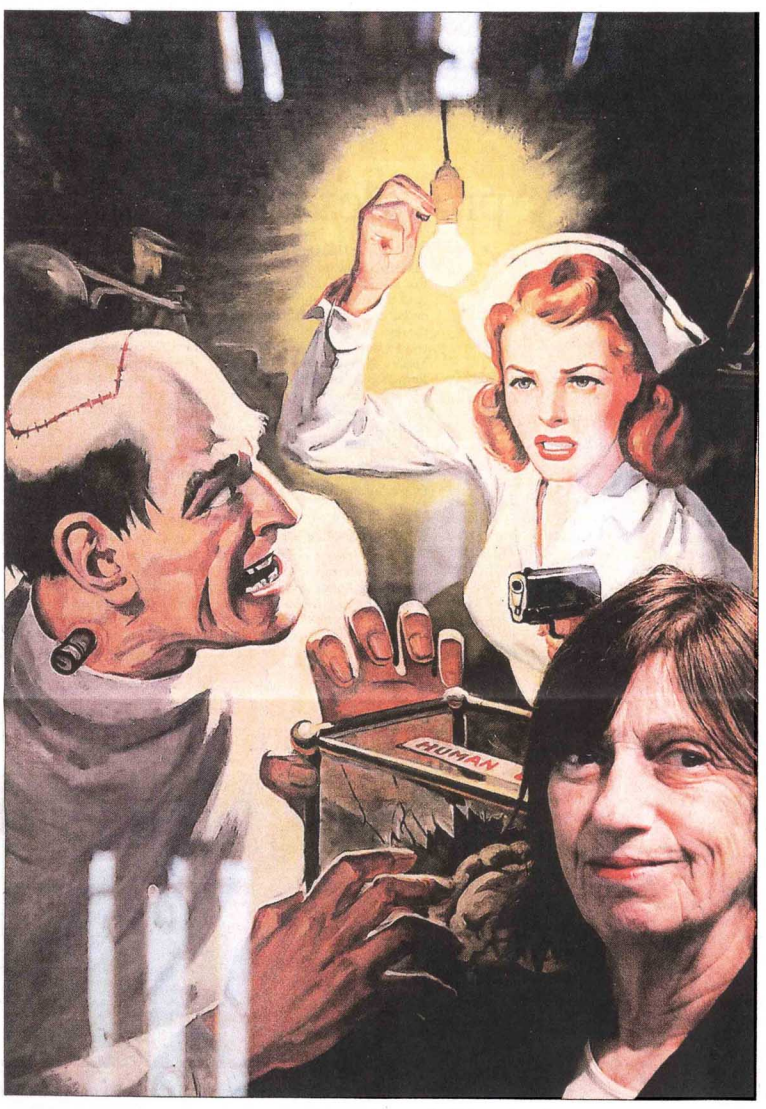
The "Spider," a costumed vigilante inspired by the more popular "Shadow," crashes a party thrown by "The Fox" in this 1942 "Spider" painting by Rafael DeSoto.



A young woman screams during a midnight kidnapping in a 1938 issue of "Spicy Detective."

THE DAILY GAZETTE

Brushes with danger



Union exhibit showcases bold paintings commissioned to draw readers into pulp fiction

BY JEFF WILKIN
Gazette Reporter

VISUAL ARTS

Crime, danger and revenge came with every issue of "The Spider" magazine.

The elegant vigilante, always dressed in a black suit, fedora, domino mask and cape, was one of the most popular guys on news racks during the 1930s and 1940s. For pocket change, readers bought stories with colorful titles like "Hell's Sales Manager," "Slaves of the Laughing Death" and "Satan's Death Blast."

But the Spider's most vivid colors were reserved for his covers. Artists put the character and his pulp fiction adversaries in frantic action scenes, complete with blazing guns, flashing knives, kicks to the head, socks to the jaw and young women in big trouble — all rendered in bright reds, yellows, greens and blues. And while pulp characters like aviator "G-8" and undercover spy "Operator #5" have faded into obscurity, some of the oil-on-canvas paintings that became magazine covers have survived.

Thirty-seven of those paintings are on display this summer at the Mandeville Gallery, in the Nott Memorial on the campus of Schenectady's Union College. World War I fliers, western gunfighters, detectives, jungle swingers and science fiction spacemen are all represented in the pieces, which were once used to promote magazines like "Western Aces," "Sky Fighters," "Amazing Stories"

See **PULP,** *page D3*

STACEY LAUREN-KENNEDY/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Left: A damsel in distress? No that's Marie Costello, curator of the Mandeville Gallery in the Nott Memorial at Union College, practically blending in with a painting used for a 1942 Dime Mystery Magazine cover.

IMAGES OF PAINTINGS COURTESY OF ROBERT LESSER COLLECTION (PROMISED GIFT TO THE NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART) AND UNION COLLEGE.



Cover stories

Union College exhibit putting pulp fiction paintings on display

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SECTION D
THURSDAY, AUGUST 18, 2011

FOR THE MEMBERS of The Tarot, playing in a band together may have been in the cards from the start. **D4**



It's the WEEKEND

Pulp: Most artists didn't want credit for paintings

Continued from page D1

and "Spicy Detective."

The artwork is from the Robert Lesser Collection of Pulp Fiction Art and is on loan from Connecticut's New Britain Museum of American Art. They will be in the Mandeville through Sunday, Sept. 25, and help out in a lecture: Professor Janet Casey of Skidmore College's English department will discuss "Pulp Fiction and the Modern Reader" on Thursday, Sept. 15, at 7:30 p.m.

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS

"These were done during the Depression and World War II," said Marie Costello, curator of the exhibition and interim director of the Mandeville. "They were mass-marketed as a means of escape, and this particular group of paintings is for a male audience. A lot of them are male fantasies. The regular guy can see himself in these stories saving this beautiful damsel from some tragedy."

The "Spider" covers were especially notorious for showing women in trouble. In January 1940, artist Rafael DeSoto showed the hero barging in a on group of Middle Eastern-looking thugs who had suspended a frightened woman in a red dress over a bed of metal spikes. Other grim covers showed heroines being chased by vampires, turned into human candlesticks and placed under a giant vise.

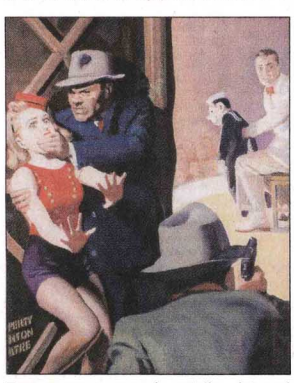
Sexy scenes may have helped young males to part with their dimes and quarters. Ki-Gor, an imitation Tarzan who was employed in the pages of "Jungle Stories," is shown rescuing a leopard bikini-clad, dark-haired woman in two paintings. And in a "Spicy Detective" from 1938, two mugs kidnap a negligee-wearing woman from her bed.

The spicy covers, and the ones that suggested violent deaths, earned publishers a little too much publicity in some places. A 1942 cover on "Spicy Mystery" showed a woman hanging on a hook, next to slabs of meat. A brute with a knife is ready for assault, but there's the shadow of a gun on his shirt — a rescue is imminent. New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia didn't care how the story ended; he was shocked by the art and vowed to ban the violent pulps from magazine stands.

"The publishers would test out covers in their offices and see who on their staff would pick up which cover and according to that, decisions were made on colors and dynamic action," Costello said. "They were competing with other publishers on the news stands and they were basically just trying to sell their magazines."

Romance novels uses the same trick today. Beautiful women are frequently shown with handsome, chiseled guys in exotic settings on the covers.

Costello said prejudices were in play during the pulp era. Arabs and Asians often were drawn as the bad guys on covers. And the "woman as victim" angle would never sell today. But some artists didn't follow the formula. In one of the most comical paintings in the collection, a Frankenstein-style monster — complete with neck bolts — has broken into a display case that reads "human brain." The monster — who actually looks like a younger version of Peter Boyle's "Young Frankenstein" — and his plans for a cerebral upgrade are foiled by a red-haired nurse who has just turned on a light bulb and points a handgun at the man-made man. It all happened in a 1942 issue of "Dime Mystery Magazine."



Two mugs, a scared ventriloquist and a terrified theater usher play roles in "Death's Dress Rehearsal," from a 1943 issue of "Hollywood Detective."

LIKE MOVIE TRAILERS

Action was the main grabber on other covers. In a 1932 cover from "Argosy Weekly," a man throws up his arms in despair as he looks down at the destruction of skyscrapers in New York City. And in what is probably the most crowded painting in the collection, flier "G-8" and his "Battle Aces" fight an aerial battle with two guys who are wearing purple gowns, metal masks and are standing outside their plane, firing flame-throwers. There are four planes in the painting; under the clouds and in a lower corner, the nation's Capitol stands.

"You can compare these to trailers of movies," Costello said. "They show you this action that's happening, you're not sure what the story's going to end up like, but there's so much going on and it's dynamic. And these are as fresh as when they were done; they're in perfect condition."

Pulp fans can thank Robert Lesser for that. He's been collecting the paintings since the 1970s.

"He was just struck by the quality of the artwork," Costello said. "Nobody was collecting them at the time; they were considered commercial art, even by their creators."

HIDDEN TALENT

In past interviews, Lesser said artists who painted the dynamic scenes were well-trained. But they were ashamed of being "pulp artists." The assignments were ways to earn quick money — between $50 and $100 — and few signed their work. They didn't want the paintings back from the publishers.

Lesser has said that based on the number of magazines published, about 50,000 pulp paintings were produced. He thinks fewer than 1,000 survive.

Costello said at an early science fiction convention, paintings from the magazines were being sold at auction. The auctioneer tried to raise dollar bids and couldn't even get people to offer change. He ended up tossing the paintings into the crowd.

There's another movie connection. For the science-fiction magazines especially, artists were able to show action that special-effects teams of the day couldn't touch. Artist Frank L. Paul gave "The Synthetic Men" a boost for a 1930 issue of "Wonder Stories" by showing a surprised, white-gowned scientist watching one of his creations, a giant green guy, climb out of a test tube. On another "Wonder" cover, from 1931, a red, spherical spaceship whizzes by Saturn.

The pulps have been gone since paperbacks, comic books and TV shows ascended in popularity during the 1950s. Costello is glad the magazines' spacey — and sometimes racy — artwork remains.

"I would say they are great examples of American culture," Costello added, "and I think their value lies in that they're all unique paintings."

Reach Gazette reporter Jeff Wilkin at 395-3124 or at wilkin@dailygazette.com.



"G-8 and his Battle Aces" have their wings full against the "Patrol of the Purple Clan" in this 1936 "G-8" adventure magazine. Pulp covers generally suggested the rip-roaring action found in the pages.

'Pulp Fiction Paintings'

WHERE: Mandeville Gallery, Union College, Schenectady
WHEN: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily through Sept. 25.
HOW MUCH: Free
MORE INFO: 388-8360, www.union.edu/Resources/Campus/mandeville/index.php