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Arts

SEXY LADIES! ACTION!

Exhibition showcases unique art of pulp novels' covers

BY AMY GRIFFIN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

The term "pulp fiction" might bring to mind Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film, but what his title references is a genre of popular novels in the 1930s an '40s with garish, eye-catching covers.

The original paintings for those covers are now the subject of "Pulp Fiction Painting: Selections from the Robert Lesser Collection" now on view now at Union College's Mandeville Gallery.

The mass-produced pulp novels got their name from the paper on which they were printed. "Before, it was rag paper, and rag paper is much more expensive. Wood pulp is cheap, and this allowed them to create these 'dime novels,' as they called them," says Marie Costello, director of the Mandeville Gallery.

Writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and H.G. Wells got their starts with dime novels. The stories were full of men of action and adventure, hard-boiled detectives and glamorous dames in distress, strange new worlds and science gone wrong.

As these tales rose in popularity, so did the competition. To catch the eye of a prospective reader, publishers needed compelling covers. The artists combined sensational imagery with garish colors. "The publishers actually tested out colors in their offices with their staffs. Red and yellow proved to be the colors men were quickest to pick up," says Costello.

Lesser first collected space toys, inspired by 1950s space movies like "Forbidden Planet," but changed his focus in the 1970s to pulp art after discovering that each cover first existed as an oil painting. The images seem uniquely American, and that's part of the reason Lesser loves these paintings, says Costello. "He loves America. He's said that, here in America, art can be anything you want. We are the masses. The popular is accepted."

Although dime novels for women existed — mostly romances — the covers Lesser collects are from novels aimed at a male audience. The images on the cover are meant to encapsulate the story without giving too much away — usually raising more questions than answers.

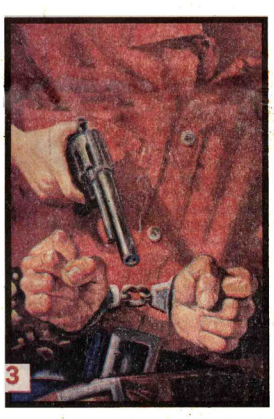
Please see ACTION! 16 ▸

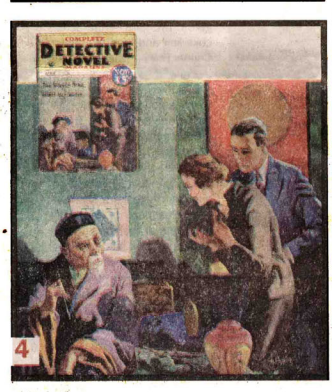

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PHOTOS COURTESY NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

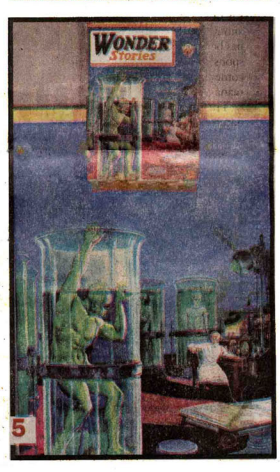
1. **"SPICY DETECTIVE: LADY FROM HELL,"** H. L. Parkhurst
2. **"HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE: DEATH'S DRESS REHEARSAL,"** Hugh J. Ward
3. **"WESTERN ACES: THE SWASHBUCKLING BUCKAROO,"** A. Drake
4. **"DETECTIVE NOVEL: THE SIGNET RING,"** H. L. Pankhurst
5. **"WONDER STORIES: THE SYNTHETIC MEN,"** Frank L. Paul


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On Exhibit

"PULP FICTION PAINTINGS: SELECTIONS FROM THE ROBERT LESSER COLLECTION"

- **When:** Through Sept. 25; hours: Monday through Sunday, 10 to 6 p.m.
- **Where:** Mandeville Gallery, Nott Memorial, Union College Campus
- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** 388-6729

MOVIE MARATHONS

In the Reamer Campus Center Auditorium

- **Film Noir:** 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday Sept. 15
- **Science Fiction:** 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday Sept. 22

LECTURE

"Pulp Fiction and the Modern Reader," reception and lecture with Skidmore professor Janet Casey. Thursday Sept. 15, 7:30 to 8 p.m. Nott Memorial

ACTION!

▾CONTINUED FROM 7

As Costello points out, "There's that touch of, 'What's going on here?' which is classic for pulp fiction covers." They exploit all kinds of stereotypes. There are sexy painted ladies in tight clothing, always facing some sort of danger though, often, it's not clear whether they're scared or excited.

"There are scheming Asians, ruthless Arabs and always a strapping white male who saves the day."

Relics of a particular era in America, the novels and their artwork left a lasting impression on pop culture, influencing art, film and literature.

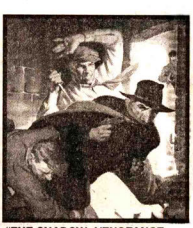
Originally, the paintings weren't valued beyond their use as cover art and were often discarded. The artists themselves didn't even like them — this was commercial work, not their "real" art. Fewer than 1,000 still exist, and Lesser has amassed one of the largest collections of them. Out of 200 paintings in his collection, 37 by 12 artists are displayed at the Mandeville. Lesser has permanently loaned the collection to the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut.

Costello, who was previously gallery director at Robert Lehman Art Center in Massachusetts, where the paintings were shown before this exhibit, thought the show would be perfect for a college gallery. Included in the exhibit is an informative documentary film, "Pulp Fiction Art: Cheap Thrills and Painted Nightmares," which gives the gives an in-depth look into the genre.

On Sept. 15, Janet Casey, Skidmore professor of English and American studies will give a talk, "Pulp Fiction and the Modern Reader." Two movie marathons are also planned for September — film noir and science fiction.

▸ *Amy Griffin is a freelance writer and art educator living in Delmar.*


"DEATH AND THE SPIDER," Rafael DeSoto


"THE SHADOW: VENGEANCE BAY," George Rozen