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Transatlantic Picture Stories:
Experiments in the Antebellum
American Comic Strip

In 1895, the cartoonist Frank Beard spoke in an interview about his sense of the history and possibility of comics in the United States. The interviewer wrote that Beard was “to some extent, the father of the American cartoon,” citing the artist’s stint of thirty years of drawing comics. At the time, Beard was promoting his illustrated magazine *Ram’s Horn* and his new project of picture Bibles. When asked about the origins of comics in the United States, Beard cited humor magazines of the 1850s, especially T. W. Strong’s publication *Yankee Notions*, as the site of their inception. Beard noted, “the first paper that published cartoons was the *Yankee Notions* . . . Then *Nicknacks* [sic] appeared, which was followed by the *Comic Monthly*.” The well-known turn-of-the century publications *Puck* and *Judge*, Beard said, “were later creations . . . and now the daily newspapers are publishing their cartoons” (Frank Carpenter, “Interview with Frank Beard,” *Deseret News*, September 1895, 8).

Beard went on to link these works to storytelling and especially the genre of the picture story. “Pictures,” he said, can often tell stories quicker and better than words.” With this latter observation, Beard was referring to a watershed moment in the history of graphic narrative in the United States. With the first issue of *Yankee Notions* in 1852, US comic artists began a robust period of experimentation. In particular, they appropriated the format of the multipanel picture story that they had encountered in their readings of French and Swiss comics. Unlike the English tradition of single-panel caricatures and cartoons, French and Swiss visual humor commonly divided panels, allowing for extended stories and elaborate sequences of actions and movements.

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For US artists, this shift was crucial. As Beard alludes, mid-nineteenth-century artists' experimentation with this style of storytelling set the stage for the explosion of creativity in the comics in mass dailies and glossy humor magazines of the 1890s, and thus for modern comics.

Beard's genealogy contradicts standard histories of comic strips in the United States. Most recount US comic strips as beginning with Richard F. Outcault's newspaper series *Hogan's Alley* in 1894. A few defer to Frederick Opper's *Happy Hooligan* at the turn of the century. Beard's emphasis on sequential storytelling is significant. Nineteenth-century US comics are conventionally described as a tradition of single-panel cartoons, usually with a political undertone like that of Thomas Nast's famous political caricatures. The elaborate narratives of multipanel picture stories were associated with French and German graphic narrative. If they appeared in histories of comics, earlier strips from the United States are dismissed as mere compilations of pirated illustrations, pilfered from superior publications abroad.¹ Americans, we are thus frequently told, would have to wait at least until the 1880s and 90s for the more elaborate strips that signaled a robust engagement with the rhythms and cadences of daily life.

The three publications mentioned by Beard require us to revise this long-standing version of the history of graphic narrative. Even a cursory glance through *Yankee Notions*, *Nick Nax*, and *Comic Monthly* dispels any misperceptions about their purported lack of sophistication. Cartoonists in the States were, in fact, publishing original, highly sequential strips in high volume at least as early as the 1850s. Over the course of their run, these publications boasted circulations in the tens of thousands and employed a who's who of major US illustrators, including Augustus Hoppin, J. H. Howard, John McLenan, J. H. Howard, and Frank Bellew.² Humor magazines in the United States, moreover, were distinguished from both the prestigious literary magazines and from book illustration by using art as primary form of narrative. Works included "The Adventures of Jeremiah Oldpot," "The Precocities of Master Springles," Carl A. Carleton's "Young Fitznoodle," and Hoppin's "Jonathan Abroad," all serialized through multiple issues, in some cases lasting as long as twelve months. And far from mere derivations, US humor magazines were adamant in their policies of charting a distinctively "American" style of visual storytelling. Just as Emerson hoped for the end of "our long apprenticeship" to Europe, comic artists argued that graphic narratives should, as one editor wrote, "fix

on the honest, home-writ page” (Strong 1846, 3).³ Within this nationalist project, artists most commonly focused on exploring the rhythms and cadences of everyday life in America. They teased out the subtle humor and excitement in subjects as mundane as traveling down Broadway or eating dinner at home.

In doing so, US comic artists developed a distinctive set of visual narrative conventions. Figures such as Bellew, McLenan, and Howard experimented with novel approaches to caricature, movement, and depiction of time. Much of the richness of visual archive in *Yankee Notions*, *Nick Nax*, and *Comic Monthly* resides with the diversity of styles for organizing the narrative flow of the comic strips. In contrast to later works, comics of the 1850s are more likely to organize their transitions in ways that do not follow a tight sequence of actions. It is common to see transitions based on movement from scene to scene, aspect to aspect, and subject to subject. The result is a style of graphic narrative that does not fit neatly into our existing models. Consequently, the significance of this archive extends beyond its revision to the periodization of comics in the United States; it also brings into focus how the creation and consumption of images was defined in large part by a taste for experimenting with new and different ways of depicting narrative experience.

While it may seem odd that this rich archive has been so understudied, its omission can be explained by looking to the technological and logistical obstacles faced by previous scholars. *Yankee Notions*, *Nick Nax*, *Comic Monthly*, and other works were meant to be disposable and ephemeral. As a result, the magazines themselves are extremely fragile and are dispersed across dozens of archives and unwieldy microfiche collections. Research was conducted by individual scholars visiting archives, locating partial runs, and then comparing their findings. This type of collaboration produced the important annotated guide *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals* (1987), edited by David E. E. Sloane. Sloane’s book features nearly fifty distinct authors, providing a series of bibliographic overviews of each magazine. It is rightfully considered the most comprehensive overview of the genre and thus foundational to the study of periodical humor in the United States. However, its limitations are particularly acute when it comes to examining visual material. Where the humorous stories and jokes in the magazines could be easily transcribed and reproduced, the illustrations were generally available only to the individual looking at the

magazines or in fragmentary selections. Sloane's authors thus spoke in very general encyclopedic terms, referring, for instance, to cartoons being "important to the character" of a magazine or to a publication featuring a "captioned cartoon narrative that often appeared through several pages" (Nickels 1987, 324).

Recent digital humanities initiatives are rapidly offering avenues for scholars to build on the foundation created by Sloane and others. Projects like HathiTrust, Google Books, and the American Antiquarian Society Historical Periodicals Series have made visual material available in ways that would have been unimaginable even five years ago. Collections that would have taken decades to assemble can now be prepared in a matter of hours. Additionally, the technology allows for rapid broad-based comparisons of materials stretched across the archive. From the standpoint of visual humor, this is particularly important. A researcher can rapidly scan through and survey the breadth of different types of illustrations, observing broad patterns in the artwork and composition of these materials. What emerges is a newly coherent picture of recurring forms, conventions, and themes with which comic artists were experimenting.

The significance of these strips goes beyond their status as evidence of an overlooked tradition of graphic narrative in the United States. They also provide an important window into the development of modern graphic narratives. Their artistic innovations in areas such as caricature, narration, and depiction of movement were admired and absorbed by the influential generation of comic artists who emerged in the United States at the turn of the century. As innovative as they may be, many of the inventions of the early American comic strip signal neither a record of "winners" nor "founders" of modern comics as we know it. Instead, the record is frequently one of lost visual literacies: ideas that fell by the wayside and did not become widely accepted as conventional elements of graphic storytelling. The stakes of exploring this multiplicity of visual literacies are greater than just the recovery of practical techniques; this is also an epistemological project. As Heidegger contends, drawing is itself "a mode of knowing," and so the act of rendering a character or depicting timing in a new way is to come up with distinctive conceptions of character and time (Heidegger [1971] 1977, 180). With this in mind, revisiting these sources means reconvening with historically situated ways of thinking about human experience within nineteenth-century American culture.

At a moment when literary scholars are rushing to embrace graphic narrative as a vital element of the field, it seems essential to grapple with the diversity of comics histories in the archive as well. Much of the recent scholarly attention paid to comics has stemmed from interest in what the medium can reveal about the broader project of narrative representation. As Hilary Chute and Patrick Jagoda (2014, 1) note in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, comics “enable an intense focus on how complexly woven stories unfold across time and space and, particularly, how these involve the reader . . . to generate meaning through interacting with, or themselves shaping, spatiotemporal form.” And indeed, scholars have done an admirable job as they have begun charting the complex narrative work taking place within comics and graphic novels. The last few years have seen insightful research on subjects ranging from Alison Bechdel’s important work on memory to critical reassessments of modern classics like George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*. But this discussion of the diversity of narrative styles within comics has generally extended only to twentieth- and twenty-first-century comics. Earlier works have, in the meantime, been ignored or subsumed into a one-dimensional progress narrative that divides between “comics” and “proto-comics” (Ndalianis 2011, 113–14).⁴

These limitations are in no small part due to the unorthodox origins of graphic narrative as a subfield. Indeed, one of the primary weaknesses of the initial wave of scholarship on graphic narrative is that it relies so heavily on the observation of artists from within today’s comics industry, such as Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, who tend to describe current industry practices as transcendent rules (see McCloud 1994 and Eisner 2008). As Thierry Smolderen (2014, 129) notes, the practices of a few artists from the late twentieth century have been naturalized as “a seamless craft that integrates all the tactful, rational choices one has to make to accomplish the job in a realistic and convincing fashion.” For Smolderen, “appreciat[ing] the nuances between different idioms of progressive action” necessarily involves understanding the ongoing negotiation between “existing visual languages” and “new ways of seeing.” Critiques like Smolderen’s underscore the need for a historiography that traces the diversity of context-specific styles of creating graphic narrative and the extent to which the language of comics is a highly volatile, changing entity. Such insights help avoid the pitfall of treating current industry methods as

the idealist model to which so-called “proto-comics” were progressing and in turn the realist standard from which all postmodern “experimental” comics diverge.

Highlighting the fundamental pastness of earlier graphic narratives thus promises to help denaturalize the appearance that conventions such as the modern cinematic grid and the dominance of linear action-to-action sequences (and the ways of thinking inherent in these forms) are somehow immanent to the creation of graphic narrative itself. We can thus hope to move from a historiography that looks not toward a telos of a singular form, but instead a history of experimentation and innovation—a family tree in which some branches lead to later genealogies and others stop, offering only the possibility of many counterfactual histories.

Francophone Appropriations and American Innovations

The shift in emphasis from a British tradition to a Francophone tradition was spearheaded by Thomas W. Strong’s *Yankee Notions* in 1852. The editorial pages of earlier humor publications from the 1840s warred over which magazine would be the American counterpart to the British magazine *Punch*. *Yankee Doodle*, for instance, was not atypical in regularly featuring illustrations of their magazine’s character “Yankee Doodle” shaking hands with Mr. Punch. When the rival publication *Judy* folded, *Yankee Doodle* published a sarcastic obituary, attributing the failure to her “extravagant imposture” of pretending to be the wife of Mr. Punch while giving “coarse libels on the original[1].”⁵ By contrast, the trio of *Yankee Notions*, *Nick Nax*, and *Comic Monthly* echoed the apolitical leanings of the Francophone picture stories and their dynamic multipanel sequences while avoiding “the acids” perceived to emanate from the politically charged pages of *Punch* (“Preface,” *Yankee Notions*, January 1864, 2). Strong proclaimed that his publication should enjoy popularity “with not one class of people, but with all,” including “juveniles” in need of “a pill with sugar” and also “lovers with an appropriate touch of sentiment.” In both audience and content, these three publications were therefore far different than anything that had appeared in the United States in previous generations.⁶

Comics from France and Switzerland are often seen as the basis for the twentieth-century comic strip because they featured elaborate stories with closely linked sequential frames. This Francophone strand of

multipanel sequences marked a vital development in the broader history of graphic narratives. They broke from the more widely known tradition of political and moralist cartooning. Unlike the pillars of the British tradition of caricature—George Cruikshank and William Hogarth—Francophone artists relied far less on caricature and typically steered away from overt political commentary, instead preferring to chronicle the rhythms, subjects, and sights of French life. Attention was thus diverted away from the allegorical or the didactic in favor of sequences that focused on commonplace human behavior and movement. Subtle mannerisms and human peculiarities now took center stage in visual satire.

This strand of graphic storytelling traces its origins to the genre of the “picture story,” which enjoyed popularity in France from the 1830s to the 1850s. Starting with the works of Rodolphe Töpffer and gaining further popular appeal with volumes by Cham (Amédée de Noé) and Gustave Doré, the picture story was, as Smolderen (2014, 52) notes, regarded as a “novel in prints,” in which “the relationship between the illustrator and the writer would be inverted.” Later on, high-quality French humor magazines such as *Charivari* adapted and serialized these picture stories or developed original material expressly for the magazine format. In adapting these works to fit the format, images were generally shrunk down and stacked next to each other, shifting what had originally been one or two pictures per page into a grid pattern that resembles the modern comic strip (though, as Smolderen points out, the *Charivari* grid is not a direct forerunner to the modern comic grid, but instead, a comparable solution that evolved independently).⁷

The work of Töpffer is especially influential for the development of this strand of graphic narrative. Sponsored by no less a figure than Goethe, Töpffer is noted for developing a highly sophisticated sense of timing and narrative sequence. By dividing his panels into distinct, sequential events, Töpffer could tell extended stories and portray sequences of actions. From a narrative standpoint, Töpffer’s work had as much in common with theater as it did with caricature or the sequential prints of Hogarth. Töpffer’s frames are presented in the proscenium view and borrow extensively from the classic conventions of restoration comedy and slapstick pantomime (see Willems 2008). Paired with Töpffer’s spontaneous and whimsical visual style, this allowed his work to enjoy a fast-paced sensibility that could play upon

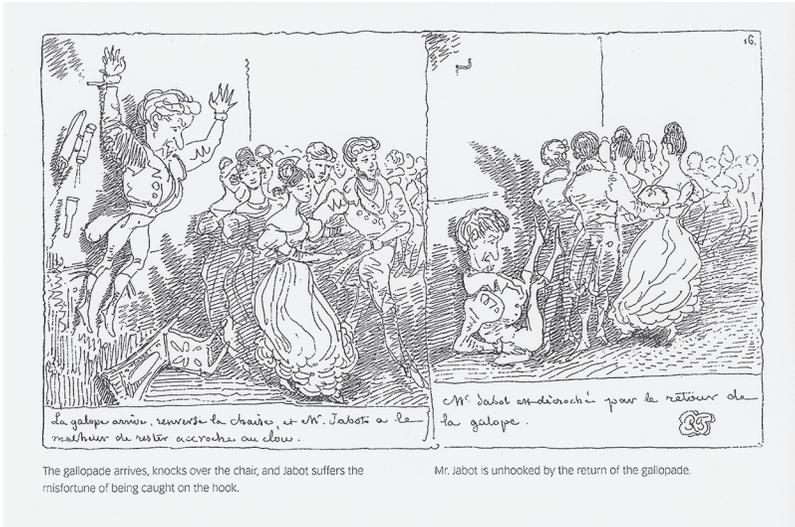


Figure 1. Selection from *Monsieur Jabot*, reproduced in David Kunzle, *Rodolphe Töpffer: The Complete Comic Strips*. 2007. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi. Captions translated to English by David Kunzle.

comic timing and repetition. His thematic sophistication is also notable. Töpffer's brand of picaresque was reminiscent of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Upstart characters such as Jabot (fig. 1) and Cryptogame disrupted the order of polite society, wreaking satirical havoc on subjects as diverse as bourgeois social climbing, the Catholic Church, and nineteenth-century science. Goethe would marvel at the flexibility of Töpffer's storytelling with characters such as Jabot, a hero who was "always producing his personality anew in the most varied forms" (quoted in Kunzle 2007a, 52).⁸

Töpffer's influence is quite apparent in the first issue of *Yankee Notions* with the serialized comic "The Adventures of Jeremiah Oldpot." The series took its name from Töpffer's *Les Amours de Monsieur Vieux Bois* (which, in its English translation, was entitled "The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck").⁹ "Oldpot" is equal parts homage to Töpffer and adaptation for an American audience. The artist of "Jeremiah Oldpot" took the absurdist pursuits of Töpffer's protagonist and adapted them to the "Yankee" mindset, infusing the structure and style of the Töpffer picture stories with a self-consciously American flavor in its themes and humor. Where Töpffer's original comic satirized the emerg-

ing bourgeois classes in Europe, the “Oldpot” artist skewers the entrepreneurial spirit of the American self-made man. Rather than the love-stricken country dandy who appears in Töpffer’s comic, the protagonist of “Oldpot” is a tin-merchant living in New York who abandons his wife and children to pan for gold in California. Where Monsieur Vieux Bois’s ambitions lead him into parlors, picturesque meadows, and other scenes of bourgeois life, the protagonist of Oldpot’s adventures take him on a continent-spanning journey in which he encounters a veritable cross-section of American landscapes and social types, among them city-dwelling b’hoys, tinkering inventors, immigrant miners, and animal-worshipping Indians.

Among the strips’ highlights is their wickedly funny send-up of American consumerism (fig. 2). In an early installment, Oldpot visits the emporium of the unscrupulous salesman “Hoax’em Mac Scratchit,” who cons him into purchasing a host of unnecessary gadgets. Mystified by Scratchit’s claims of “Electro-Galvanic-Vulcanized-India-Rubber,” Oldpot equips himself with a slew of ridiculous costumes for survival in the wilderness. Much of the satire hinges on the contradiction between Oldpot’s romantic view of himself as a rugged frontiersman and his attachment to consumer goods. The interplay between the captions and images captures the back-and-forth between these dueling tendencies. In one frame, the captions highlight Mr. Oldpot’s inflated sense of self as a “hero . . . duly sensible of the perils which, in all probably, he will have to encounter.” In the next, they reveal Scratchit’s ability to exploit Oldpot’s meek urban tendencies with a snake-oil pitch that plays to his insecurities. Scratchit offers products such as the “Never-sinking, self-inflating, and everlasting diving apparatus” and the “Life-protecting, bone-defending, heat-securing, Indian-extermimating hunting dress for all nations,” and in doing so simultaneously strokes Oldpot’s ego and reminds him of the dangers he is supposed to be facing. Oldpot’s frontiersman self-conception is further deflated for the audience by the illustrations, which render him looking like an elephant or snowman underneath his accumulated goods and costumes. The whole sequence takes a further madcap turn with the embarrassed reaction of Mr. Oldpot’s children (fig. 3). Shocked at the foolish appearance of their father, the children’s “eyes start out of their head,” flying around like small butterflies, to be caught and retrieved by a horrified Mrs. Oldpot (and in a savage twist) the dog. The trajectory from mild vanity to madcap anarchy encapsulates the sequence’s basic operation of taking the

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!"
 OR,
 THE ADVENTURES OF JEREMIAH OLDPOT.



Mr. Oldpot resolves to go prepared for the most terrible adventures.

Duly sensible of the perils which, in all probability, he will have to encounter in his voyage to the land of gold, Mr. Oldpot makes his way to the emporium of Mr. Hoax'em Mac Scratchit, patentee of nine hundred and ninety-nine articles, indispensable to emigrants, and entirely composed of Electro-Galvanic-Vulcanized India-rubber.



Mr. Oldpot tries on the Never-Sinking, Self-Insulating, and Everlasting Diving Apparatus.

He tries the aquatic costume first, which will enable him to remain, with ease, at the depth of 474 fathoms beneath the surface of the sea, for 15 days and ten minutes.



Mr. Oldpot is courteously received by Mr. Mac Scratchit.

There, being waited upon with the utmost politeness by the illustrious patentee himself, with him Mr. Oldpot takes counsel. Having reviewed the entire stock of inventions, two in particular excite our hero's attention, both of which he incontinently purchases. Then, selecting upwards of fifty minor articles, including a patent magnetic-India-rubber warming pan, and a wheel-barrow of similar material, Mr. Oldpot hastens homewards, impatient to try on his two more important purchases.



Mr. Oldpot arrays himself in the Patent Life-Protecting, Bone-Defending, Heat-Securing, Indian-Exterminating, Haunting Dress for all Nations.

Having done so, he is delighted in the prospect of achieving a world-wide reputation for courage and prowess. While exultingly striding up and down, he creates a terrible consternation in the minds of Mrs. Oldpot and the seven children, who, peeping in at the door, which had been left open, are perfectly appalled at the singular appearance of the head of the family.

Figure 2. "The Adventures of Jeremiah Oldpot," *Yankee Notions*, March 1852, 92, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002804172s.

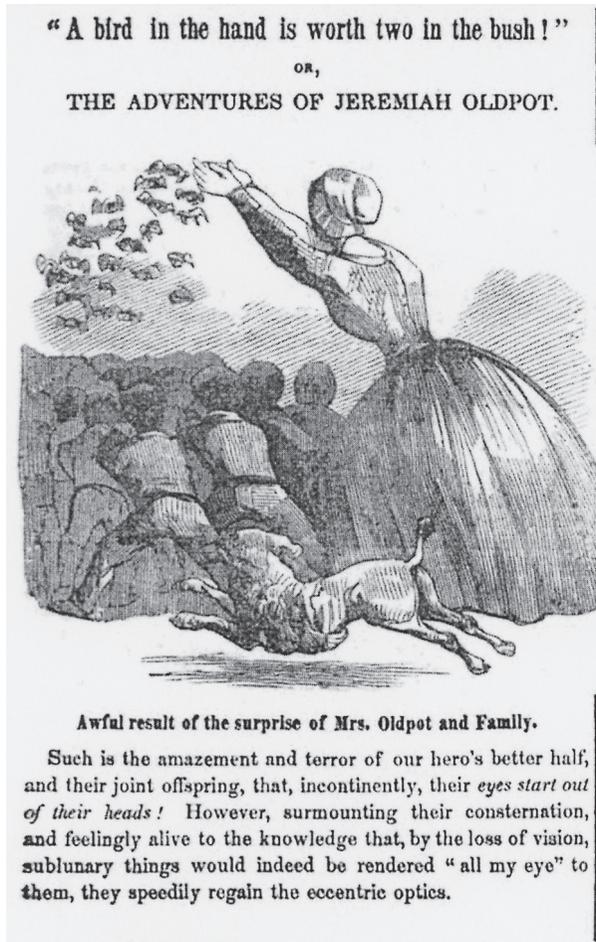


Figure 3. “The Adventures of Jeremiah Oldpot,” *Yankee Notions*, April 1852, 117, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002804172s.

manners and customs of Americans and throwing them into sharp relief through comedic timing and humorous storytelling.

Yankee Notions's adaptation of and homage to Töpffer's *Vieux Bois* serves as a useful example of the broader project that Strong and his fellow editors undertook in adapting the medium of graphic narratives to the sensibilities and tastes of American audiences. Jeremiah's farce and journey through the landscape throws American manners and

customs into sharp relief. It is thus not only a study in mannerisms and customs, but also a broader allegory for American life. Strong specifically demarcated *Yankee Notions* as an alternative to the news cycle's attention to action and drama. "Our pages," Strong wrote, "will embody all the good things that are constantly floating about society." Strong identified his artists and writers less as romantic luminaries than as "preservers of jokes" who will draw out those rarely noticed "facetiae" that "sometimes find their way into the corners of newspapers, or serve to eke out a scanty column" ("Beloved and Honored Reader," *Yankee Notions*, January 1852, 2). Strong's definition of his writers and artists as "preservers" highlights a theory of realism that ran through all three publications. Even the names of the publications signaled this preference for the day-to-day. *Nick Nax for All Creation* plays on the term "knick knacks," while *Yankee Notions* puns on the archaic sense of the word "notions" as "cheap, useful articles," especially "buttons, hooks, ribbon, thread" (*OED* online). In each case, the suggestion from the moment a reader picked up the magazine was that he or she would encounter a playful study of the details—the knick-knacks—of American life.

Strong's pronouncements for his magazine parallel the tradition of American literary fiction that ran through texts like Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1809) and local-color humor. This strand of thinking favored close attention to folkways, speech patterns, and customs, studying, as Irving ([1819] 2009, 13) wrote, not "with the eye of the philosopher," but rather with the "sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one printshop to another; caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature, and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape." The artistic eye is a mediating link between the audience and an artist's observation of manners, customs, ways of speaking, and acting. By this logic, no object of interest is too subtle or insignificant to capture the notice of his team of writers, illustrators, and engravers. The interest in the mundane was not devoid of its allegorizing tendencies. American fiction's preoccupation with observation often legitimized American nationhood by locating an underlying sense of coherence within the young nation's diverse people and regions.

In the comics themselves, the bent toward the mundane was manifested through short subject studies that highlighted the people and terrain of the United States. Carl A. Carleton's "Blow-out in the Fifth

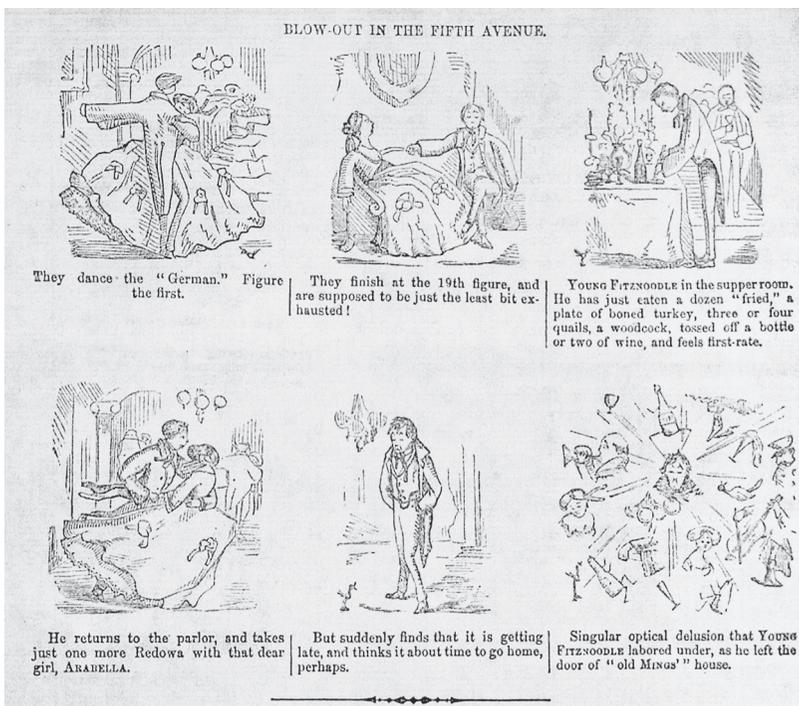


Figure 4. Carl A. Carleton, "Young Fitznoodle's Blow-Out in the Fifth Avenue," *Yankee Notions*, December 1857, 375.

Avenue" (fig. 4) followed the travails of a Young Fitznoodle, a man at a fancy party who must decide between his tastes for champagne and the host's daughter. John McLenan's "The First Segar" features the simple sequence of a man whose enthusiasm for cigars quickly wanes after his first attempt at smoking ends with overindulgence and illness. Domestic pets were also an appropriately mundane theme. In Bellew's "Tricks upon a Canine," the mischievous act of tying a helium balloon to a small terrier's tail allows for observations of the dog's confused reactions and thus an occasion to look inside even this crevice of the American household.¹⁰ These subjects are neither the vice-ridden cautionary tales of Hogarth nor are they necessarily the anarchic improvisations of later comic artists George Herriman and Leslie Feininger. Instead, they offered the occasion for close observation of people's daily goings-on. Whether it was a simple act of smoking a cigar, purchasing a dog, or

starting a farm, artists treated manners less as a means to an end than an end in itself. The result was a dynamic style of comic strip that placed the viewer in the seat of the observer and focused heavily on the process of observing manners and customs.

Manners of Movement

The archive of cartoons in *Yankee Notions*, *Nick Nax*, and *Comic Monthly* is strongly distinguished by an adventurous approach to different methods of organizing strips. Artists turned to a host of devices for guiding narrative, many of which would have seemed quite foreign to the audiences even thirty years later: comic artists organized strips around sustained character studies, guiding readers not through actions, but through various aspects of a subject's life; they sewed dramatic dialogue, poetry, and byzantine puns into their captions; they used circle-shaped spreads to reproduce the crowd at popular exhibitions. In all of this, artists in the United States were inspired by the form of the Francophone picture story, but they were also eager to strike out into new directions.

Much of the artists' ability to experiment was driven by the freedom they enjoyed within the medium of the humor magazine. Where other outlets brought a host of stylistic and spatial limitations, humor magazines gave artists a free hand to develop their storytelling sequences. The decision to write for humor magazines seems, in several cases, to have been a conscious choice. McLenan, for instance, was one of the most sought-after book and magazine illustrators of his generation; he illustrated Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations* and regularly contributed to *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Despite the opportunities for higher-profile options, he worked as the primary illustrator for *Yankee Notions* from the time of his arrival in New York until his death. While an artist like McLenan would have been limited to no more than a single page in his illustrations in *Harper's Bazaar*, the humor magazines allowed him elaborate sequences that stretched on for as many as eighteen pages and could be carried over into future issues. This space and flexibility allowed artists and writers to experiment with new kinds of comic strips in ways that had been difficult to achieve in earlier publications.

These experiments in the comic strip were also significantly influenced by broader shifts in the history of visuality. Specifically, the 1850s

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