Comics, Comic-Con, and SDSU: A Symbiotic Relationship
Comic Arts Conference 2012

The San Diego State University Library’s Comic Arts Committee was convened by Dean Gale Etschmaier in September 2011 and charged with “exploring new ways for the library and campus to optimize participation in and association with Comic-Con.” While the SDSU library had previously enjoyed some association with Comic-Con, the creation of the Comic Arts Committee by Dean Etschmaier (which was one of the first committees she created, having just begun as SDSU library dean during the summer of 2011) sent the message that closer ties to Comic-Con International were not just being supported but were being actively promoted by the new library administration. Etschmaier populated the committee with librarians and library staff members whose regular job descriptions bolstered the committee’s goals:

* **Pamela Jackson** is the bibliographer for TV, film, theatre, and new media.

* **Michael Lapins** is the Media Center Supervisor.

* **Roberta Niederjohn** is the library’s Marketing and Communications Specialist.

* **Robert Ray** is the Head of the Special Collections division.

* **Markel Tumlin** (chair) is the bibliographer for English and American literature.

* **Wil Weston** is Head of Collection Development.

*While not one of Etschmaier’s originally appointed members, SDSU student **Jonathan Valdez** heard about the committee from one of his professors, exhibited a great enthusiasm for the committee’s work, and was also invited to join.

The committee immediately began meeting weekly, and this presentation highlights a few of its more noteworthy accomplishments to date. In addition, the committee has prepared a web page – library.sdsu.edu/comicarts – to be a clearinghouse for its efforts. However, before looking more closely at the committee’s accomplishments, let’s take a brief look at the SDSU’s pre-September 2011 comics- and Comic-Con-related activities.

While Comic-Con began in 1970, quite a few years passed before an effort was made by the SDSU library to forge any kind of relationship with it. And that is not really too surprising. San Diego’s location, weather, and convention facilities ensure that numerous such events are held here every year, and it is not part of the library’s mission, generally speaking, to become involved with them. Not only that, but it’s worth remembering that Comic-Con International has not always been the attention juggernaut that it has become in recent years. While Comic-Con today attracts upwards of 130,000 attendees, it took almost twenty years from its 1970 inception to break the 10,000 mark, and the 100,000 mark was not attained until its 35th year of existence. Nonetheless, since the turn of the 21st century, Comic-Con has become such a huge,
internationally recognized cultural event that it has become difficult for even San Diego’s most mainstream academics to ignore it. (Cutting-edge professors, of course, were already on board.) Furthermore, the dramatic growth of Comic-Con’s attendance numbers reflects the expansion of its intellectual focus to include related media such as film, television, and games. That, in turn, has naturally increased the number of academics with an interest in its offerings, and the SDSU library has responded to its growing scholarly demand.

Although there were notices of Comic-Con’s activities in the local press from the beginning, the first mention of SDSU in an article about Comic-Con was in the July 22, 1976 edition of a newspaper then known as the *San Diego Union*. That article mentions Comic-Con participant Vernor Vinge, “a San Diego State University mathematics professor who keeps a library of 3,000 sci-fi books and has written two of them.” Of course, that article appeared years before Vinge went on to win five Hugo Awards for his work as a top science fiction author. Two other Hugo Award winners also have ties to SDSU. Joan Vinge, author of *The Snow Queen*, was a 1971 graduate, and Greg Bear, who graduated in 1973, returned to claim an SDSU Monty Award for distinguished alumni in 2006.

While a student at SDSU, Greg Bear also worked as an assistant to Professor Elizabeth Chater, who pioneered SDSU’s science fiction creative writing course. In addition to her cutting edge contributions in the classroom, Chater also generously began donating her collection of rare science fiction books and manuscripts to the library during the 1970s; that collection is now held in the SDSU library’s Special Collections department. The library’s holdings in Special Collections have additionally been enhanced by other donations of significant science fiction and comics-related materials. A later section of this presentation focuses on those collections in more depth, but special mention must be made to the contributions of SDSU alumnus Dan Hager. His donations not only significantly enriched SDSU’s holdings of published and manuscript materials, it also helped to spark a greater interest at SDSU’s library in Comic-Con International.

In addition to these on-campus developments, there was also a simultaneous publishing revolution occurring in the comics industry, and this was attracting more scholarly attention in general. The popularity of Marvel Comics’ *anti-heroes* during the 1960s helped send the message that comics were evolving into a more complex and interesting art form, and the rise of independently published comics and graphic novels over the next few decades received a lot of deserved attention. A milestone in academic responses to comics was the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in 1992. *Maus* was soon finding itself on college reading lists across the country, and college professors’ attention was being increasingly drawn to this developing, innovative form. To illustrate the rising interest of academics over the past two decades, please consider the following: the *MLA International Bibliography* database (which indexes scholarly articles of literary criticism) reveals that a search of “comic books or graphic novels” for 1990 finds only 19 articles, whereas the same search in 2010 finds 166. That’s more than an eightfold increase!
These developments coalesced at the SDSU library to create a heightened interest in Comic-Con International by the early part of the 21st century. The library’s Special Collections department, interested in adding to its growing collection of comics and related materials, operated a booth on Comic-Con’s exhibition floor in 2006 and 2007. Among the volunteers who assisted Special Collections in its operation of the booth were Dan Hager and graphic artist Donna Barr, the author of such works as *Stinz* (1984) and *The Desert Peach* (1986), whose manuscripts are held at SDSU. While interest amongst many SDSU librarians and library staff remained high in the following years, unrelated institutional factors prevented a return to the exhibition floor.

This year’s Comic-Con is the first one held since the formation of SDSU’s Comic Arts committee, although we hope to have a persistent presence in perpetuity. This year also marks the first time that SDSU’s library has designed a promotional button for Comic-Con International, and it features characters from SDSU alumnus Lalo Alcaraz’s *La Cucaracha* comic strip.

![La Cucaracha created by Lalo Alcaraz, SDSU Alum, 1987](http://library.sdsu.edu/comicarts)

While the committee has engaged in many activities since September, this poster presentation focuses on only three. First, **Pamela Jackson** reveals the results of the Comic-Con/comics-related faculty survey conducted last fall. **Rob Ray** is reporting on the current and future state of comics and related collections in SDSU’s Special Collections department. **Michael Lapins** is premiering the first of the oral histories SDSU is recording to document the early history of Comic-Con.

Thanks much for your interest, and please check out our web site for more information.

Markel Tumlin
Chair, SDSU Comic Arts Committee