

THE **MYTH** OF **SUPERHEROES**

From ANTIQUITY to
CONTEMPORARY ART

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CONTEMPORARY ART

Curated by

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Project & Organization

Contemporanea Progetti S.r.l., Florence, Italy

In collaboration with

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples, Italy



EXHIBITION CONCEPT & STRUCTURE

The MYTH OF SUPERHEROES is the first international travelling exhibition that aims at making visible the common thread linking the past, the present (and the future) of the myths.

It highlights the strict relation between ancient and modern mythology and presents a selection of all the forms of art involved in this mutual process. The different topics of the exhibition are developed through an exceptional selection of original objects: as the exhibition unfolds, archaeological artefacts dialogue with comics, drawings, animations, ancient dolls, and modern action figures, in a highly innovative exhibition pathway for adults and children.

The exhibition is developed into 6 main sections in which the display of the objects is presented through a series of graphic and educational panels, video and video-projections interactive devices and suggestive environments where visitors get lost and find themselves again immersed in the incredible universe of their favourite Superheroes.



INTRODUCTION

The Hero

SECTION 1

The Myths in Time and Space

SECTION 2

Mythological Metamorphoses

SECTION 3

Modern Superheroes

SECTION 4

Artists & Authors

SECTION 5

Cinema, TV & Music

SECTION 6

Modern & Contemporary Art

EXHIBITION PROJECT

TIES BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

“Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed”: Lavoisier’s postulate finds its perfect application to the gradual process of evolution that has brought the myths and legends of yesteryear into the modern world, modifying their costumes without changing their original essence. Direct heirs of gods and heroes of distant eras, the Superheroes represent essential vehicles for the transmission of universal values, sentinels of a world more and more fragile, and in need of protection and solace.

The invention of Superman in 1938 paved the way to a new universe of wonder and awe, populated by almost-divine creatures or brave men determined to do their best to preserve ideals such as justice and peace. Their enemies embody the most despicable and obscure creatures that humanity has ever generated, waking nightmares feeding on death and crime, creating continuous challenges aimed at measuring the values of heroes in leotards who are determined to never give up.

The exhibition invites you to explore this incredibly imaginative world, where men and women are able to fly, read minds, control time and magnetic fields, climb walls and manipulate magic. Everything is possible, and the only limitation is the unbridled imagination of the artists – writers and designers – who in some eighty years of history have created an artform. What began as entertainment meant for the youngest, has gradually turned into a unique form of art that has transcended the boundaries of the print media to arrive on television and in cinemas around the world.

From Hercules to Superman, from Amazons to Wonder Woman, from Mercury to Flash, legends change their appearance, but remain faithful to their original mission to guide new generations towards a better, brighter future, where action and battle are the flip side of a coin that calls for morality and responsibility.

The characters of DC and Marvel Comics, the two publishing houses that invented the genre, are explored and analyzed in 360-degrees, illustrating the multiple facets of the craft with surprising historical and cultural content. In a journey through time, the exhibition reconstructs the evolution of the characters in relation to the real world, from their inception and original powers to the emergence of the action figures, the original comics and trophies that have made their stories neo-mythology. Around the world, many countries have made their contribution to the Superheroes, offering different and contrasting visions, adding pieces to a now planetary mosaic and evidence of a common response without borders.

Tribute to the authors that imagined and created this universe and to the artists who in turn, were inspired, are the background of this enthralling experience with no limits of age and cultures. It is also an in-depth analysis of universal themes with several levels of interpretation, symbols of an innate need to dive into that “sense of wonder” that has fascinated humanity since the beginning of time.

Fabrizio Modina

INTRODUCTION

THE HERO

What are the distinguishing features of a hero? Strength, bravery, dedication, courage?

If historical iconography depicts the hero and the heroine as individuals in perfect physical condition, able to challenge entire armies, head held high and, at the same time, to lift inconceivable weights; today, instead, within our extremely hedonistic culture, the value of a hero cannot be measured in relation to the size of his muscles. What rather distinguishes a hero from a common man is a strong desire for justice and equity, a push towards glory judged on his sacrifices and on his tenacious temperament. A hero is not a hero if he is not moved by a solid moral and, most of all, by a total dedication for the greater good. Aware of his role as a model to follow, the hero builds his existence firmly rooted on his integrity.

The message that the hero – and this exhibition – wish to convey is easy: superpowers are not necessary for being a superhero; everyone can become one by changing the world around them through small, daily acts of solidarity, understanding and respect.

The topic of Modern Superheroes is explored in this first room in close dialogue with antiquity. The visitor has the chance to start this journey with a thorough reflection on the figure of the Hero.

*“We can
be heroes,
just for one
day”*

David Bowie



SECTION 1

THE MYTHS IN TIME AND SPACE

From the remote past, stories of men endowed with extraordinary strength and capable of legendary feats have been bequeathed. Incredible beings that mere mortals looked upon with respect and fear, sometimes benevolent, other times evil, engaged in ceaseless combat have been narrated from generation to generation.

Beyond the backbone of the American Superheroes (Marvel and DC), almost each region of the world has given life to - less mainstream - characters with origins in the cultural, mythological, and religious traditions of their countries. From the mysteries and esoterism of Ancient Egypt (Hawkman) to North European legends where bearded and mighty deities show up among humans, generating storms and chaos (Thor); from the fascinating tales of the Middle East (One Thousand and One Nights), to the mysticism and iconography of Hindu myths. And even more, from the anthropological and mysterious inspirations of the Mayan, Aztec, and Incas civilizations (Aztek), to the zoological heritage of Africa (Black Panther, the first black superhero in history).

In this global panorama, the Eastern culture - Chinese and Japanese - has played such a fundamental role in the development of modern mythology that it has become the main source of inspiration for other topics conveyed in the Western world: from the Chinese traditional stories and symbols - the most known is the dragon, archetype of monsters, heroes, and even robots (Dragon Ball) - and their martial arts (Shang-Chi or Chun-Li from Street Fighter, first female character to show up in a videogame); to the Japanese Samurai which inspired Super Robot (Daitarn 3), heroes and heroines gracefully wielding deadly katanas ("the Bride" from Kill Bill), ninja warriors (Elektra, X-Man Wolverine) and the memorable Jedi knights - the dark Darth Vader and the characters of the Star Wars saga, whose costumes reflect inspiration found in the Japanese kabuto helmet and kimono.

A great multi-projection recreates a world map where the visitor discovers the incredible crossroads of confluence between so many different cultures and the ties between ancient and modern that gave life to the American, Eastern and Western Superheroes.

TOPICS

- **Origins of the Superheroes in the World**
- **Ties between Ancient and Modern**
- **Ancient Mythology and Modern Mythology**
- **Focus: Influences from North Europe: Thor in the Popular Imagination**
- **Focus: Influences from the Middle Ages - the Knight's Armor**



SECTION 1 - The Myths in Time and Space



SECTION 2

MYTHOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSES

Without any doubt, modern mythology is rooted in the epic and in the stories of the ancient Greek-Roman Gods and Heroes. The Olympians rule the sky, the earth and the sea like men and women with extraordinary powers, used for the sake of humanity. Religion turns into mythology, the Gods blend with men, and each story develops over time changing the appearance but keeping the spirit righteous. These are the roots of the Superheroes, half heavenly sons of a secular tradition which started as an oral tale and turned into a comic, conveying, in a popular form, values still relevant today.

This section aims at making visible the common thread that links the past with the present of the myths. Relevant Greek-Roman sculptures from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, Italy, representing some of the most known ancient mythological characters, are exhibited in this section, anticipating some of the most famous Superheroes thanks to the projection of their silhouettes in the background. In this way, the present section intends to highlight the visible bond between different characters and their iconographic mutation: the mutual relationship between ancient and modern mythology is clearly outlined. Works of ancient art usually exhibited in museums of exclusive historical connotation, are here presented to a wider audience with the ultimate goal of stimulating their critical thought, curiosity and interest.



TOPICS

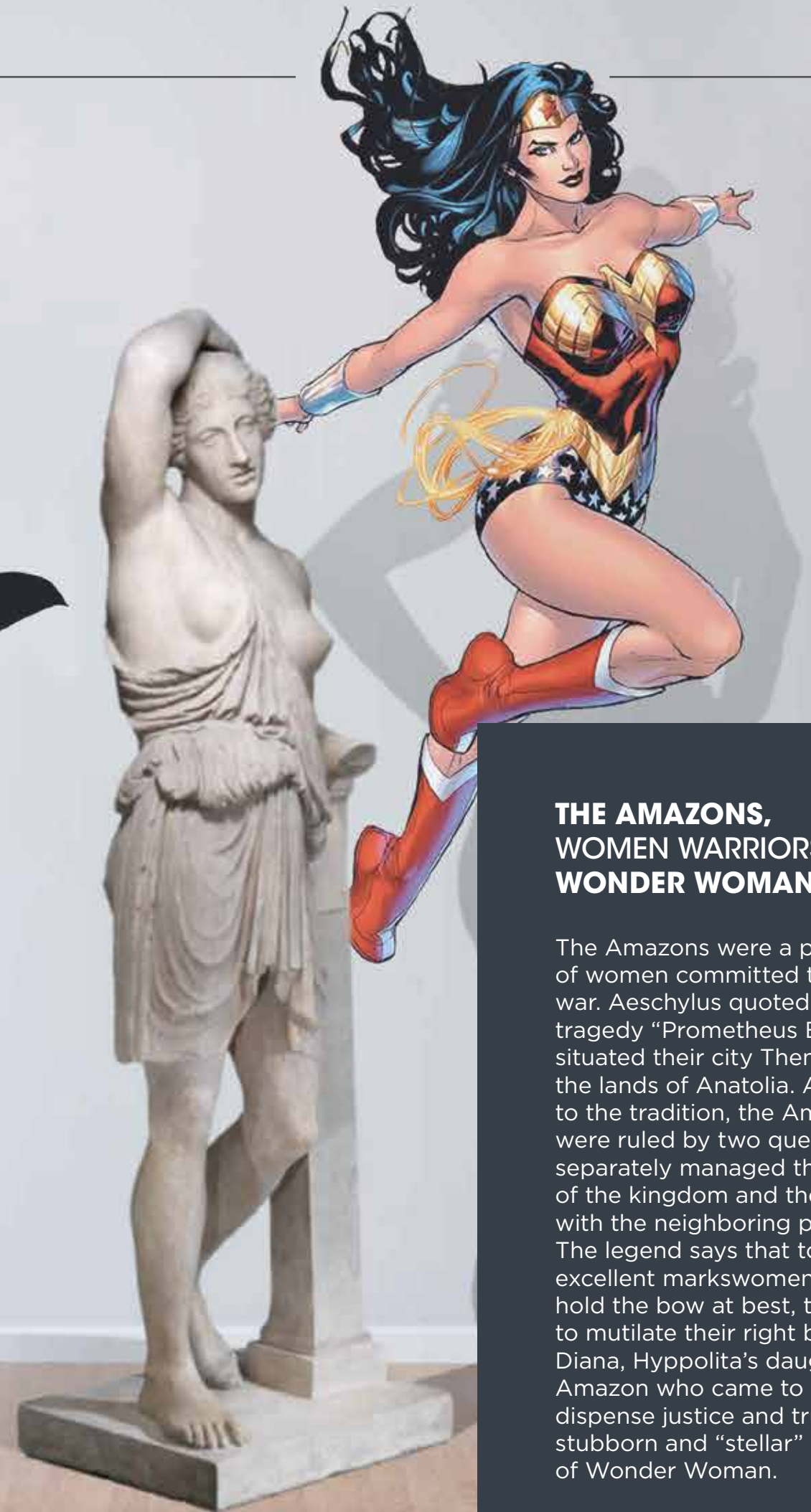
- The Greek-Roman Myth
- Greek Heroes and Modern Heroes

SECTION 2 - Mythological Metamorphoses



HERCULES, THE STRONGEST OF ALL MEN / SUPERMAN

Son of Jupiter, Lord of the Gods, and of the human Alacmena, Hercules is the strongest of all men and nobody can compare to him also in terms of stubbornness and determination. After having won the twelve labors received from Eurystheus, Hercules was redeemed for his sins, and, leaving his mortal condition, was welcomed in the Olympus pursuant to his divine heritage. His sturdiness and prowess have become the primary elements of the concept of superhero and, indeed, Superman, the greatest of the modern heroes and major heir of his fantastic progeny, absorbed them completely.



THE AMAZONS, WOMEN WARRIORS / WONDER WOMAN

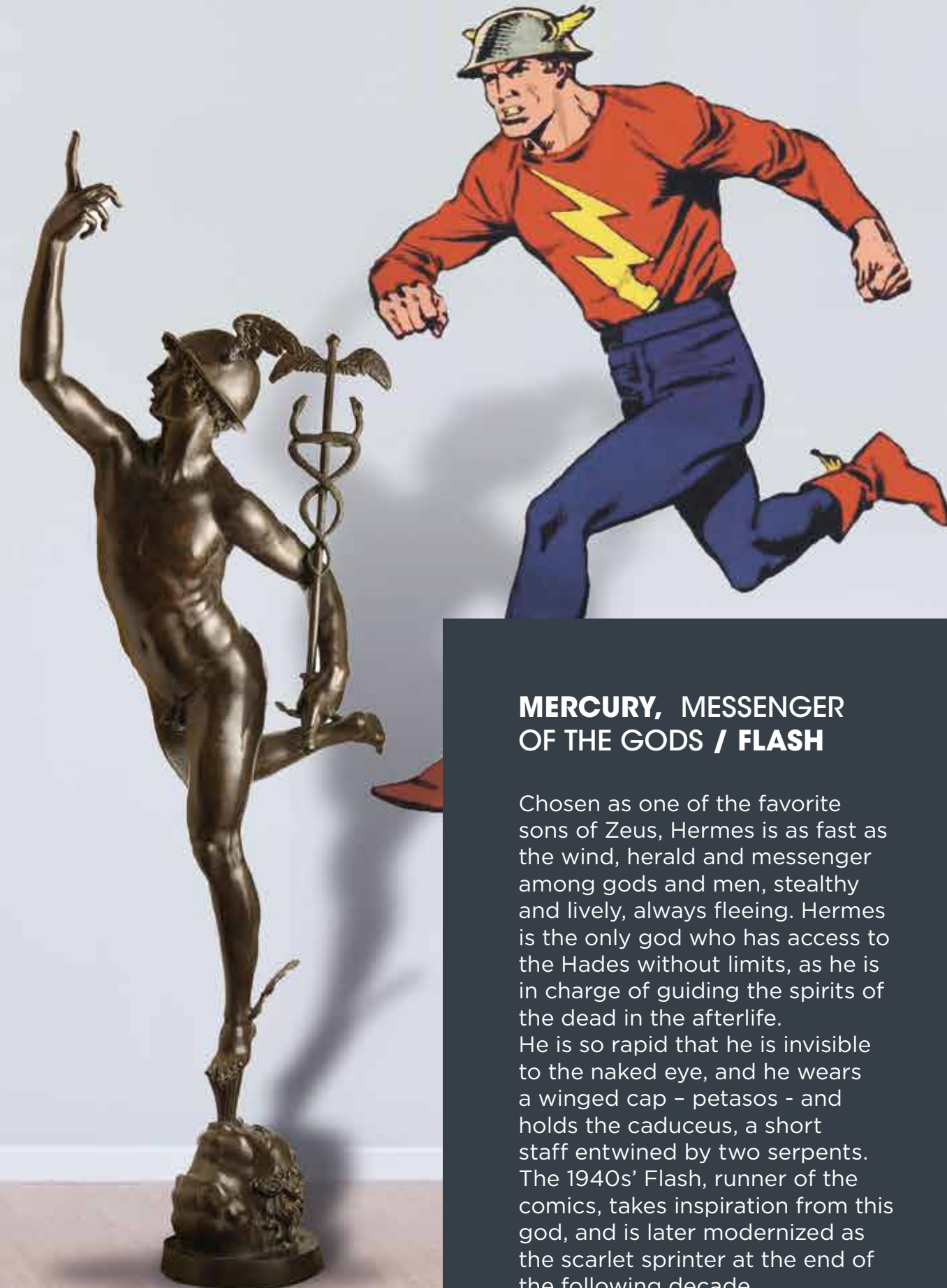
The Amazons were a population of women committed to the art of war. Aeschylus quoted them in his tragedy "Prometheus Bound" and situated their city Themyscira in the lands of Anatolia. According to the tradition, the Amazons were ruled by two queens who separately managed the peace of the kingdom and the conflicts with the neighboring peoples. The legend says that to become excellent markswomen, and to hold the bow at best, they used to mutilate their right breast. Diana, Hyppolita's daughter, is the Amazon who came to our time to dispense justice and truth in the stubborn and "stellar" character of Wonder Woman.

SECTION 2 - Mythological Metamorphoses



NEPTUNE, LORD OF THE SEAS / AQUAMAN

The undisputed Lord of the Seas, brother of Zeus and Ade, ruler of the wider element of earth. Neptune is calm and peaceful, he can turn into storm and seaquake, and from the foam of the water where he swims with his dolphins, he created an animal, the horse, just for fun. His symbol is the trident and he is praised by sailors for the luck in fishing and generosity of the ocean. The amphibians Aquaman and the prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, are the modern Lords of Atlantis, and they are devoted to the millennial worship of Poseidon.



MERCURY, MESSENGER OF THE GODS / FLASH

Chosen as one of the favorite sons of Zeus, Hermes is as fast as the wind, herald and messenger among gods and men, stealthy and lively, always fleeing. Hermes is the only god who has access to the Hades without limits, as he is in charge of guiding the spirits of the dead in the afterlife. He is so rapid that he is invisible to the naked eye, and he wears a winged cap - petasos - and holds the caduceus, a short staff entwined by two serpents. The 1940s' Flash, runner of the comics, takes inspiration from this god, and is later modernized as the scarlet sprinter at the end of the following decade.

SECTION 3

MODERN SUPERHEROES

DC and Marvel Comics are the two American publishing houses that, from the 1930s, invented and developed the concept of modern Superhero, with the launch of Superman - the contemporary Hercules - in 1938.

As the visitor leaves the first sections of the exhibition on the cultural and mythological contaminations between ancient and modern in the Western world (and more), the exhibition path unfolds, thoroughly focusing on the story of modern Superheroes; the most known and familiar belonging to the American tradition, the Superheroes born from the DC and Marvel productions.

Following a chronological and thematic path, thanks to a graphic timeline, visitors explore the birth of modern Superheroes in relation to actual historical facts, learning the origins of their powers, the different categories they belong to, the first sketches and comics that immortalized them, and the evolution of their massive production. If in the 1970s' the Superheroes were reproduced as dressed dolls, in the '80s they turned into plastic action figures, and they were finally brought to life thanks to extraordinary sculptures in the last decades.

An outstanding variety of original objects is at heart of this section, where engaging graphics and suggestive environments accompany the visitor through the discovery of the first comics and of other superb objects.

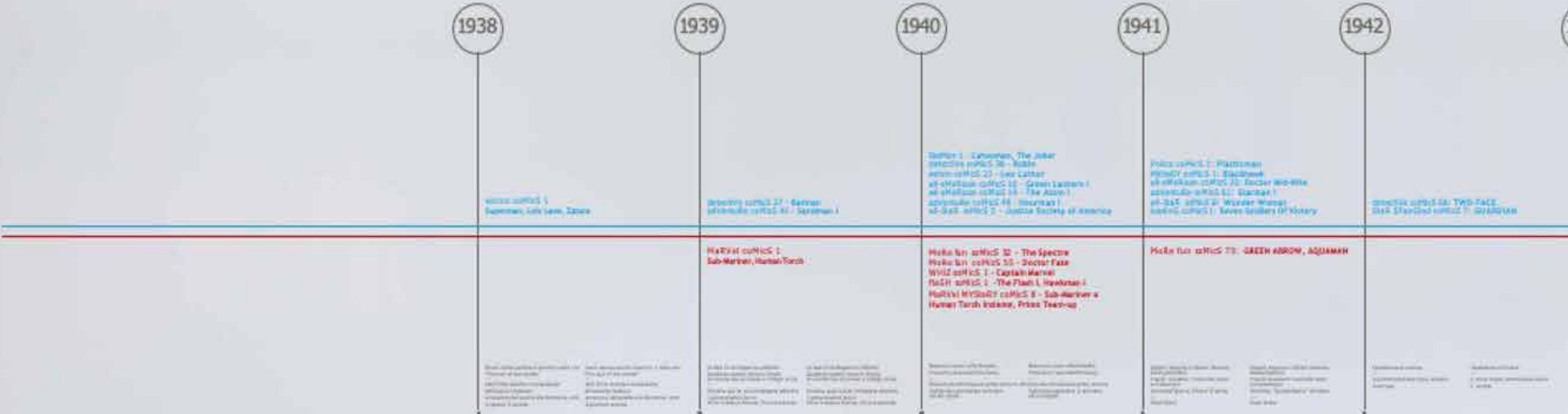


TOPICS

- **Proto-Superheroes and Modern Superheroes**
- **The Origins of Powers**
- **Different Typology**
- **Comics**
- **Development of a Phenomenon**
- **From the First Toys to the Action Figures**



TIMELINE



From 1938 to 2020, the history of the world is intertwined with the history of Superheroes: Marvel and DC blend together in a creative challenge going beyond the boundaries of time and space.

The greatest world events compared to the most significant moments in the history of Superheroes comics.

3.1 PROTO - SUPERHEROES

Before the invention of Superman in 1938, comics were populated by brave and bold men preserving peace through technology and magic; benevolent specters wearing masks and exceptional devices to fight against criminals and mad scientists who wanted to conquer the world.

A series of original comics present the “The Mystery Men”, those heroes who anticipated the Superheroes.



FLASH GORDON 1934

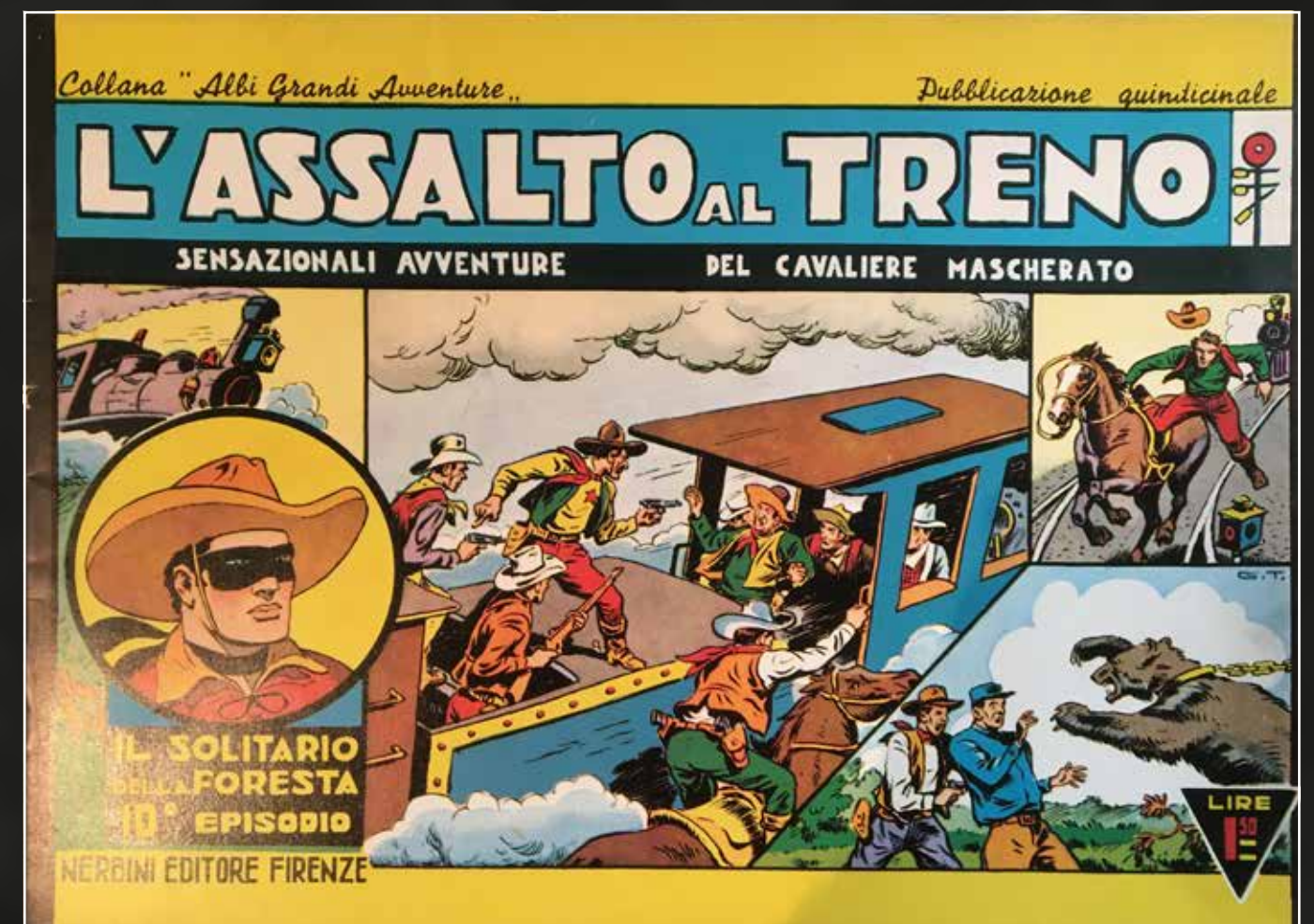
Born from the mind of Alex Raymond, the valiant Flash Gordon defends the Earth from cruel Emperor Ming of the Mongo planet, helped by scientist Doctor Zarkov and by the beloved Dale Arden. His enormous success gave birth to a TV series (whose plot inspired George Lucas for Star Wars), several movies – one with an incredible soundtrack from the Queen (1980) – and cartoons adaptations – the most recent dates to 2007.



MANDRAKE 1934

Created by screenwriter Lee Falk and by designer Phil Davis, the elegant Mandrake masters magic and prestidigitation to fight against racketeering and supernatural entities. He lives in a highly technological home on the top of Mount Xanadu, helped by the strong African Lothar. His name is the synonym of a superior skill and is related to anyone willing to transcend the impossible.

SECTION 3.1 - Proto-Superheroes





3.2 ORIGINS, POWERS, AND TYPOLOGIES

“With great power comes great responsibility”

But what is the nature of powers?

A series of graphics and video-projections guide visitors through the discovery of some of the most famous men and women with extraordinary skills generated by technology, genetic mutations, science flaws or divine and alien births.

3.3 COMICS

Created as humor strips at the bottom of newspapers, comics found their fortune from the 1930s, gradually becoming comic books mainly for children. From mass media to sequential art, comics developed as narrative media with surprising potential.

This section collects and presents one of the main highlights of the exhibition: a selection of original comics – in their original editions – drawing from prestigious private and museum collections, which bear witness to the most amazing events of the Superheroes.



SECTION 3.3 - Comics



FANTASTIC FOUR THE COMING OF GALACTUS

Marvel
1966



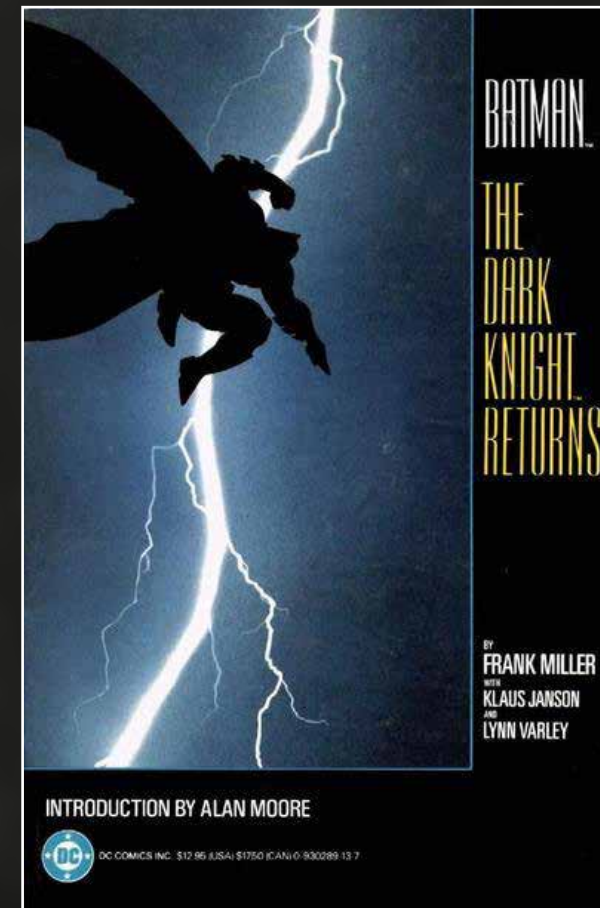
SECRET WARS

Marvel
1984



CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

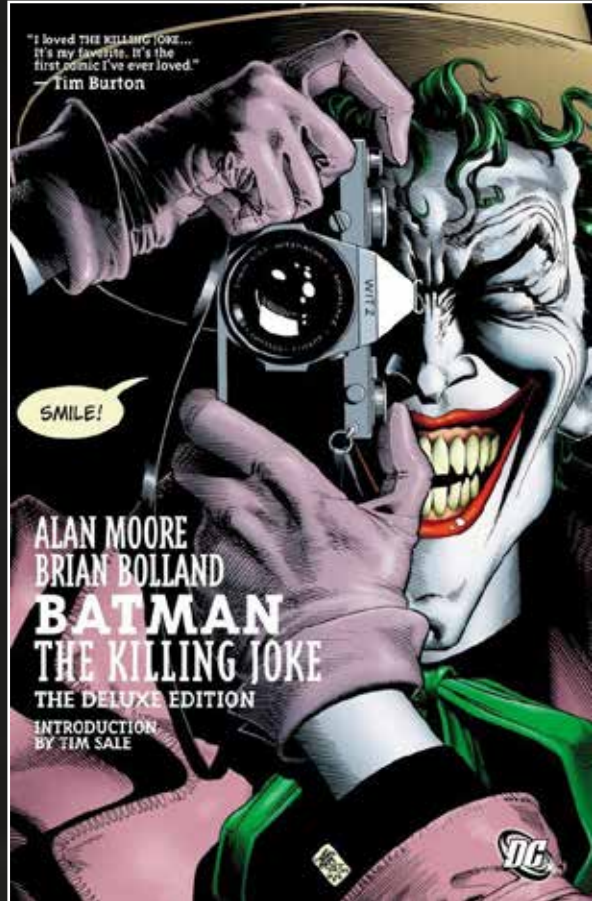
DC
1985



BATMAN THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

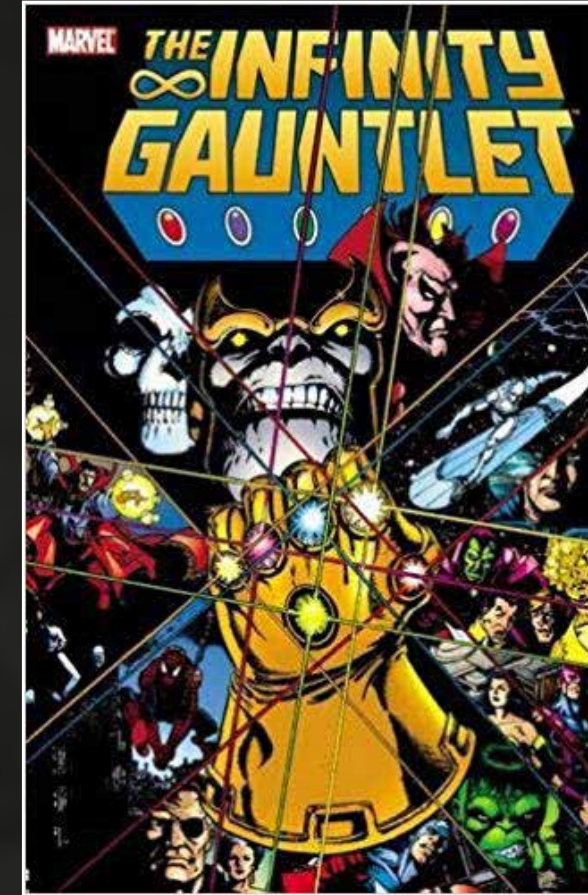
DC
1986

SECTION 3.3 - Comics



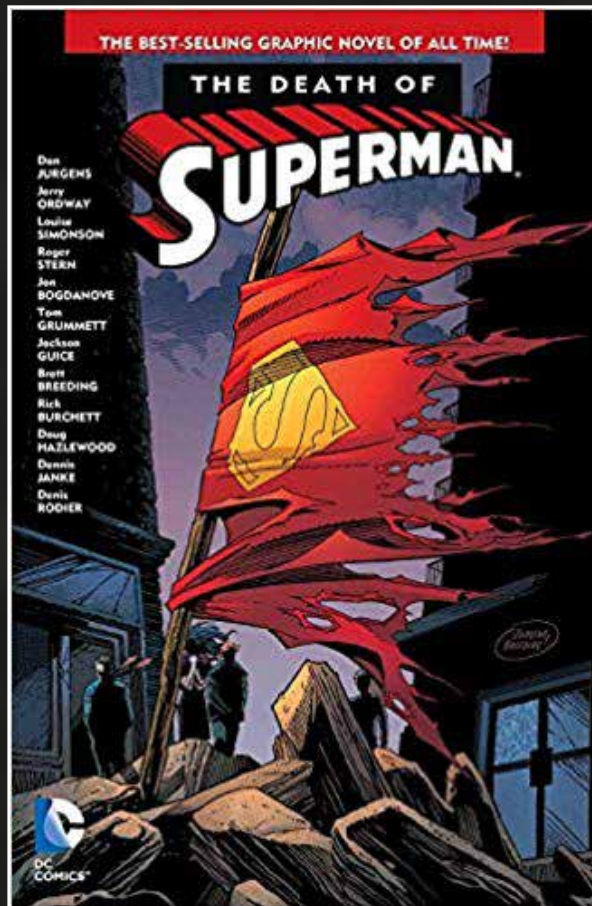
BATMAN THE KILLING JOKE

DC
1988



THE INFINITY GAUNTLET

Marvel
1991



THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN

DC
1992



CIVIL WAR

Marvel
2006

3.4 DOLLS

For a 1970s child there was nothing more exciting than experiencing a thrilling adventure flying with Superman or climbing a skyscraper with Spiderman. Mego Corporation, a small toy design American company, understood this clamorous success and acquired the rights of the Marvel and DC Superheroes, realizing for the first time a series of plastic dolls, with vinyl heads and fabric suits. The “World’s Greatest Superheroes!” conquered the world – from 1972 to 1983 millions of specimen were sold and today they are among the most sought-after objects by collectors, considered, indeed, vintage icons of pop culture.

This section brings to light some original specimen from the 1970s, attesting to the first significant production that transformed the characters of comics into three-dimensional toys.



SECTION 3.4 - Dolls



**“World’s Greatest
Super Heroes!”**

Dolls Mego
Corporation, first half
of the 1970s, U.S.A.

3.5 ACTION FIGURES

From the 1980s, when the Mego success came to an end, Superheroes started circulating again as action figures, initially anatomically simple and then always more articulated, in a developing process that met art, design and the most innovative technologies. The Action figures became relevant means of communication of the world of Superheroes, told through changes in costume, different graphics, secret identities, friends, enemies, and all the information necessary to understand an extremely vast universe which continues to evolve in over eighty years of existence.

A room entirely dedicated to a precious three-dimensional archive of over a hundred of heroes drawing from an extensive private Italian collection – which counts almost a thousand of action figures. On display the best specimen that made the history of these characters: a truly suggestive setting, of an intense visual impact.



SECTION 3.5 - Action Figures



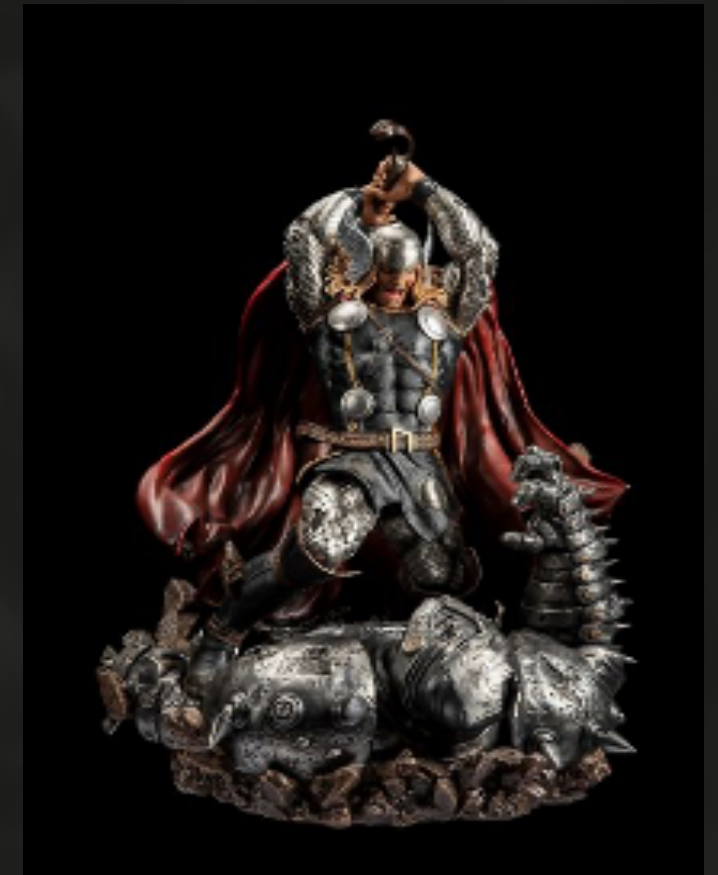
3.6 STATUES

Beyond toys, Superheroes embody the epic ideal of beauty and perfection, becoming the subjects of statues loved by collectors who celebrated their eternal artistic and historic value. Real works of art which, still today, bear witness to the enduring fascination that the world of Superheroes has embodied for over eight years.

Immersed in suggestive environments, this section is further enriched by an original selection of some of the most beautiful statues - in 1:4 and 1:6 scale - from producers and collectors around the world.



SECTION 3.6 - Statues



SECTION 3.6 - Statues

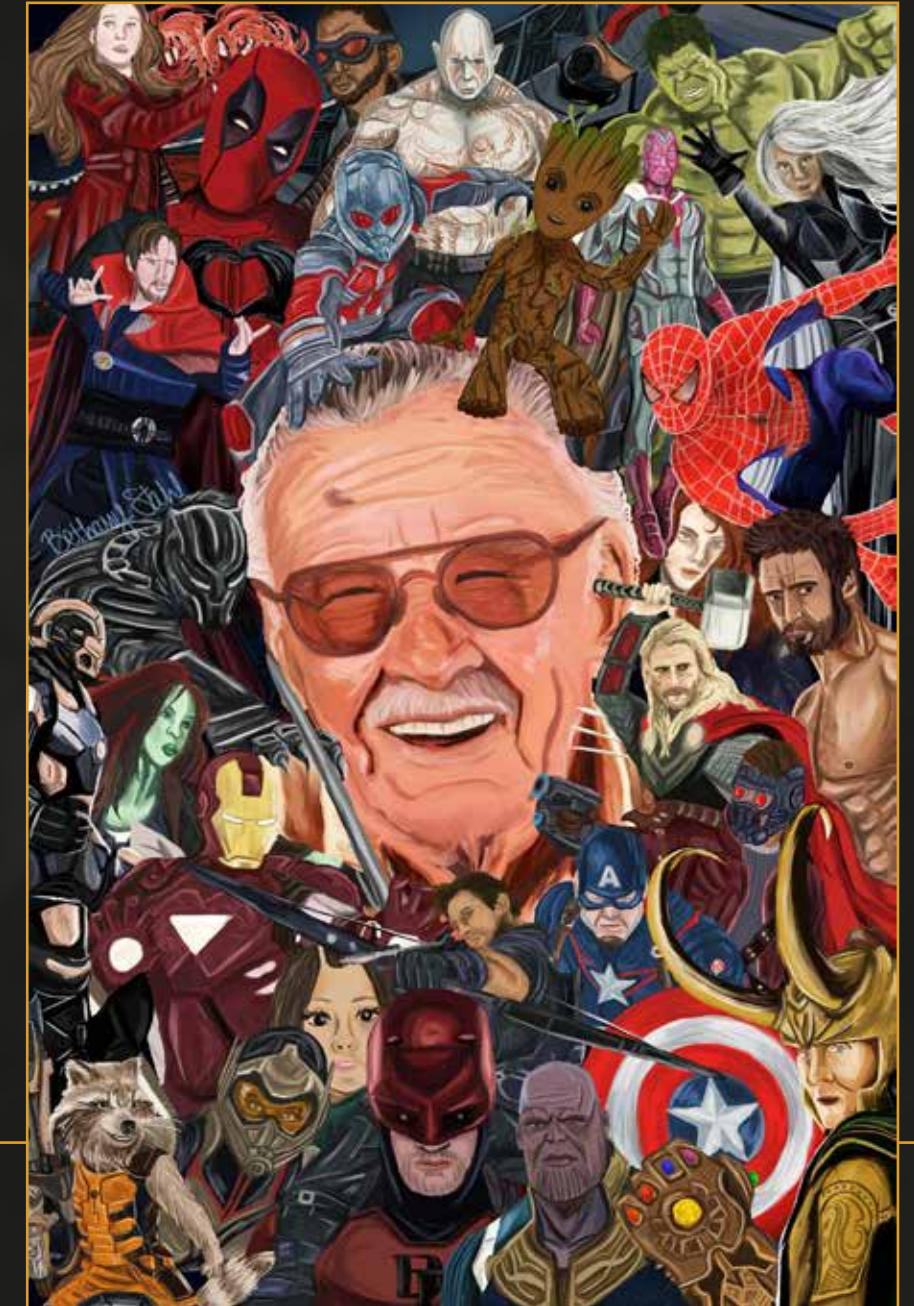


SECTION 4

ARTISTS & AUTHORS

A comic is the result of the work of several artists: a screenwriter, an illustrator, an inker, a colorist; and then the editor, the graphic designer who adds dialogues and manages the layout. A creative editorial process, more similar to a movie than to a book for the complexity of its production, which is rarely recognized as an independent form of art. The comic book, though, is in no way inferior to painting, photography, or cinema. Some of the artists in this field are real legends celebrated for their visionary and innovative spirit, masters of pen and pencils who opened people's imagination to impossible universes, changing the life of entire generations of readers.

This section is totally dedicated to these figures, people who, through their creativity, imagination, and superb prowess, have given life to those characters that, for over eighty years, have been nourishing the curiosity and enthusiasm of millions of people. Names like Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Alex Ross, Gabriele dell'Otto, John Buscema, are just some of the great protagonists of this section, which wishes to homage them through a unique selection of their masterpieces and original drawings, coming from some of the most prestigious private and museum collections.



TOPICS

- **Cartoonists: Authors and Artists**
- **Screenwriters**
- **Artists that Made History**
- **Influences in the Art of Comics**

SECTION 4 - Artists & Authors



Stan Lee



Steve Ditko



Jerry Siegel &
Joe Shuster



SECTION 4 - Artists & Authors



1



2



3



4

1. Gabriele dell'Otto
2. John Buscema
3. Jack Kirby
4. Simone Bianchi

SECTION 5

CINEMA, TV & MUSIC

From the debut of b/w cinema to the blockbuster of the last decade, Superheroes have overcome the two-dimensions of printed media, to conquer global audiences not interested in comics. Protagonists of a narration that fascinated Hollywood, the Marvel and DC characters were also the main subjects of historical tv series and high-quality cartoons, which contributed to the definition of their fame to a wide and inter-generational public over the decades.

In this section the visitor is immersed in a sort of cinematographic Gallery, where the main moments of the most famous Superheroes movies are collected and projected. From the first Superman to the most recent Marvel sagas, including the first cartoon animations, whose precious sketches are here exhibited – authentic works of art selected from some of the most significant Italian and international collections. This section ends up with a reflection on the dystopic universe of contemporary Superheroes, aberrant paladins full of strength, but no moral.

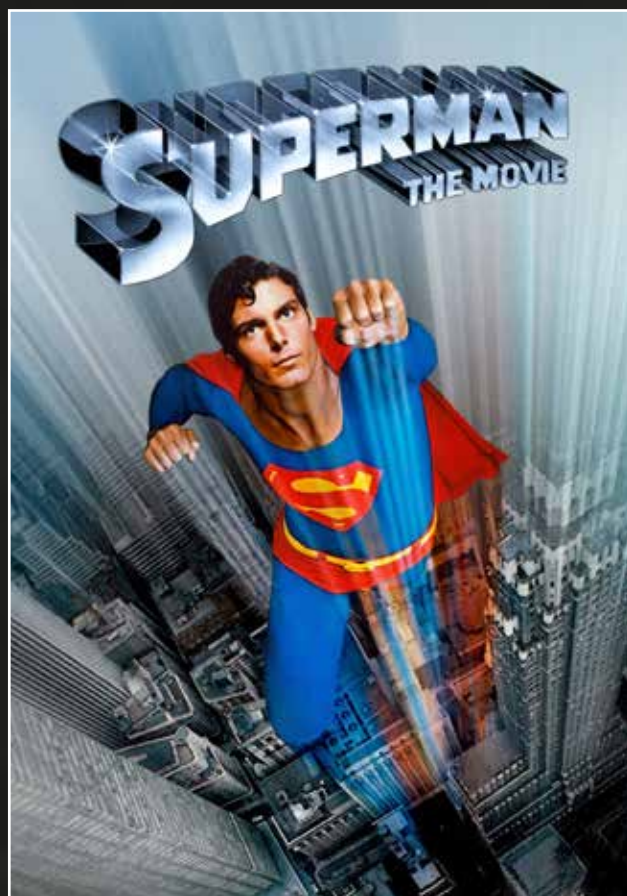


TOPICS

- Animations and Cartoons
- Birth of the Filmography of the Superhero
- Cinematographic Luck
- Discography
- TV Series
- The Dystopia of the Superhero without Values (The Boys, Watchmen)

SECTION 5 - Cinema, TV & Music





SUPERMAN THE MOVIE

Warner
1978



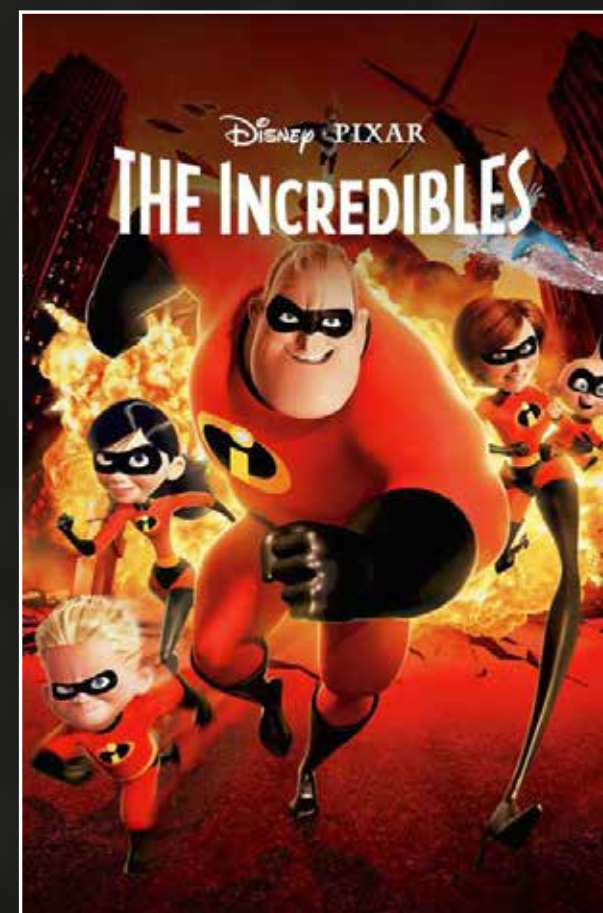
BATMAN

Warner
1989



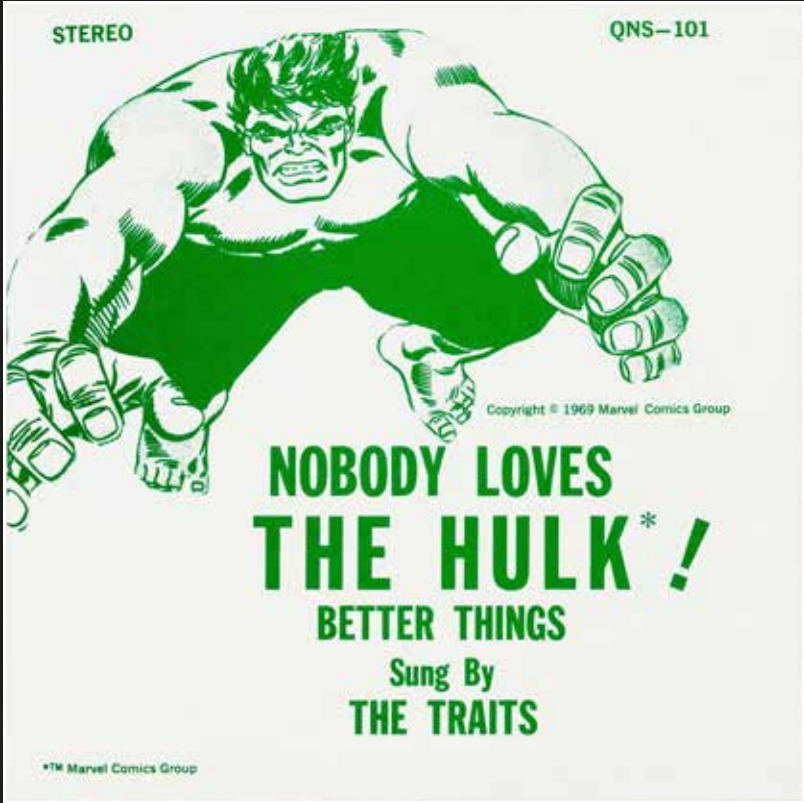
SPIDER-MAN

Marvel Studios
2002



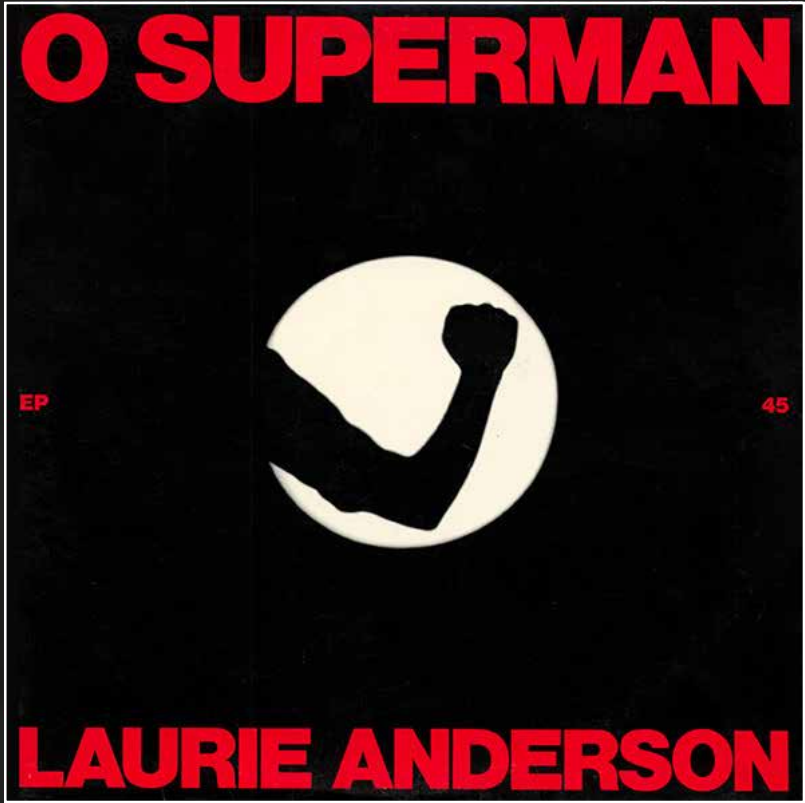
THE INCREDIBLES

Disney Pixar
2004



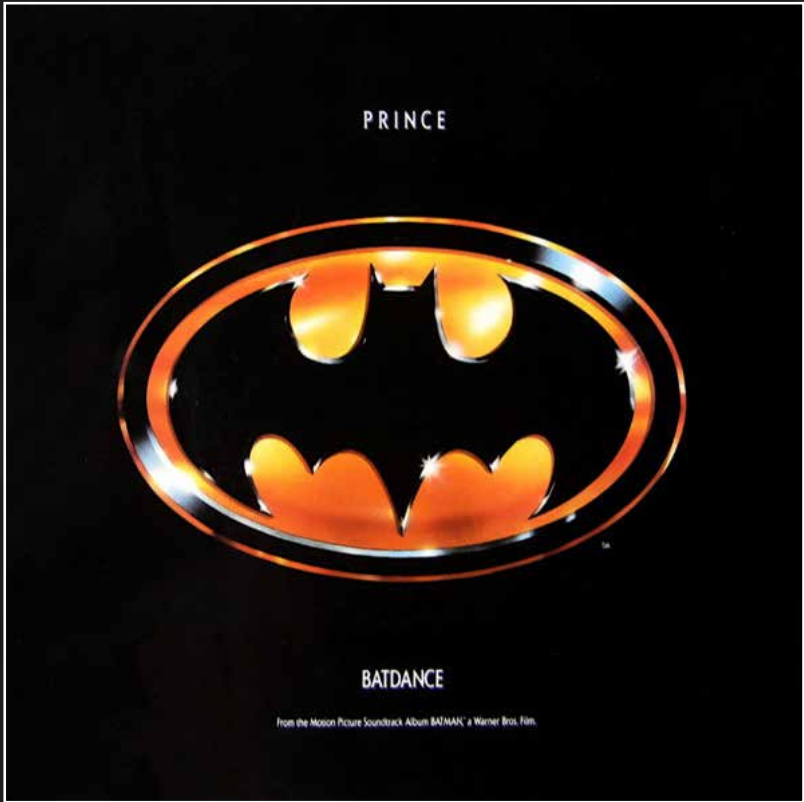
THE TRAITS

Nobody Loves
The Hulk
1969



**LAURIE
ANDERSON**

O Superman
1982



PRINCE

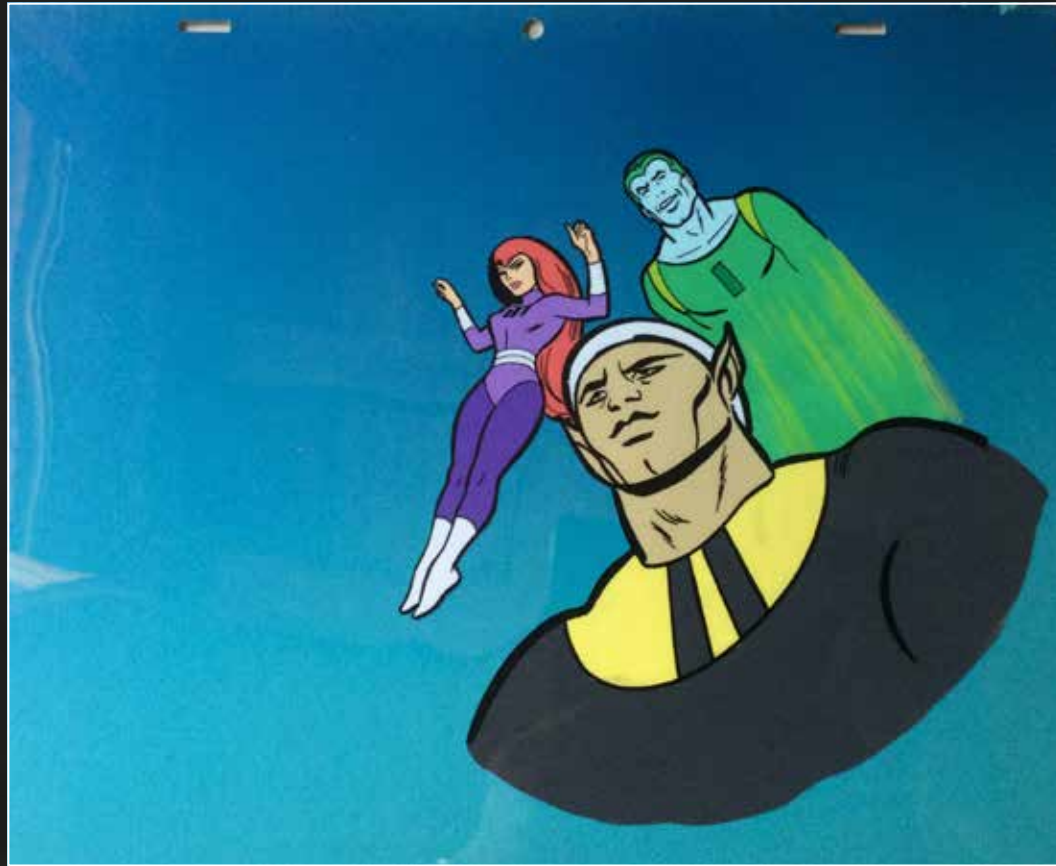
Batdance
1989



883

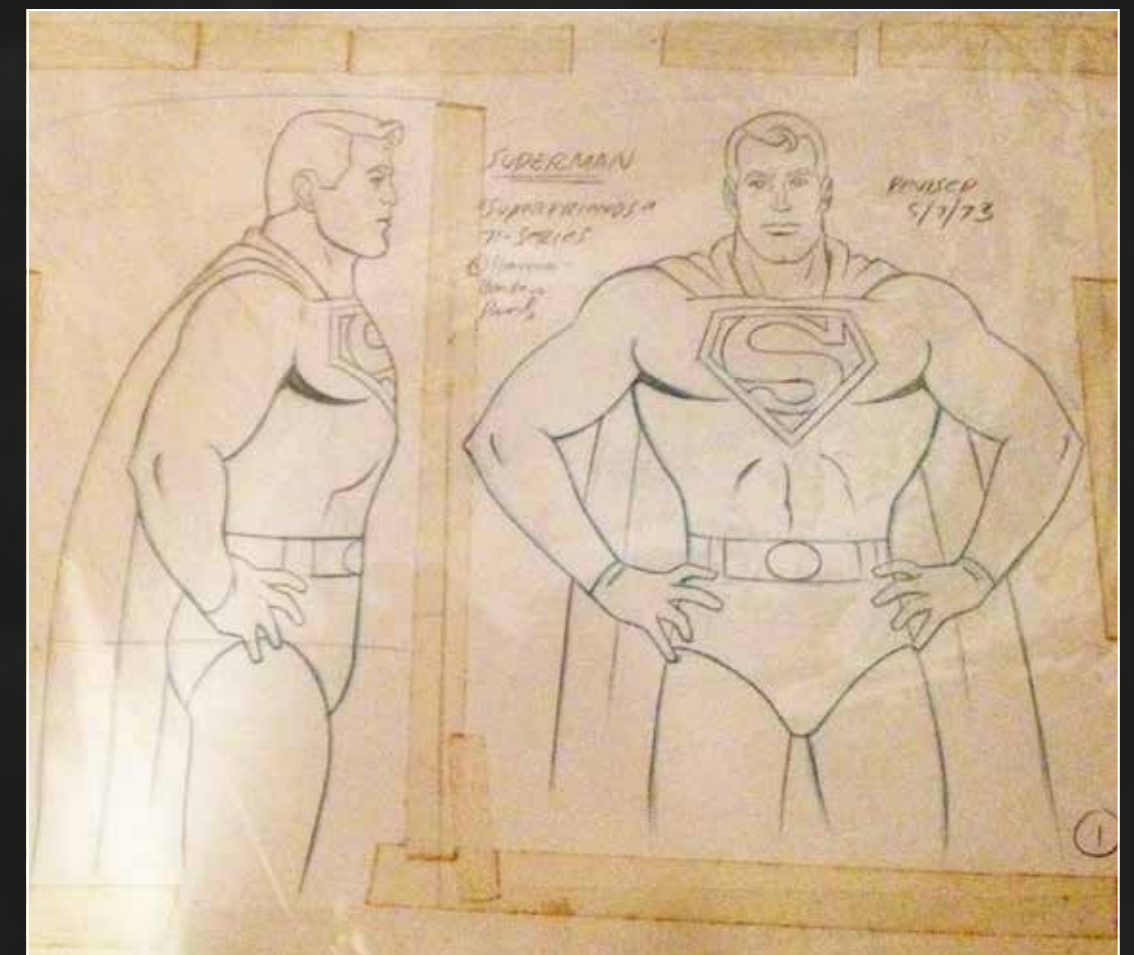
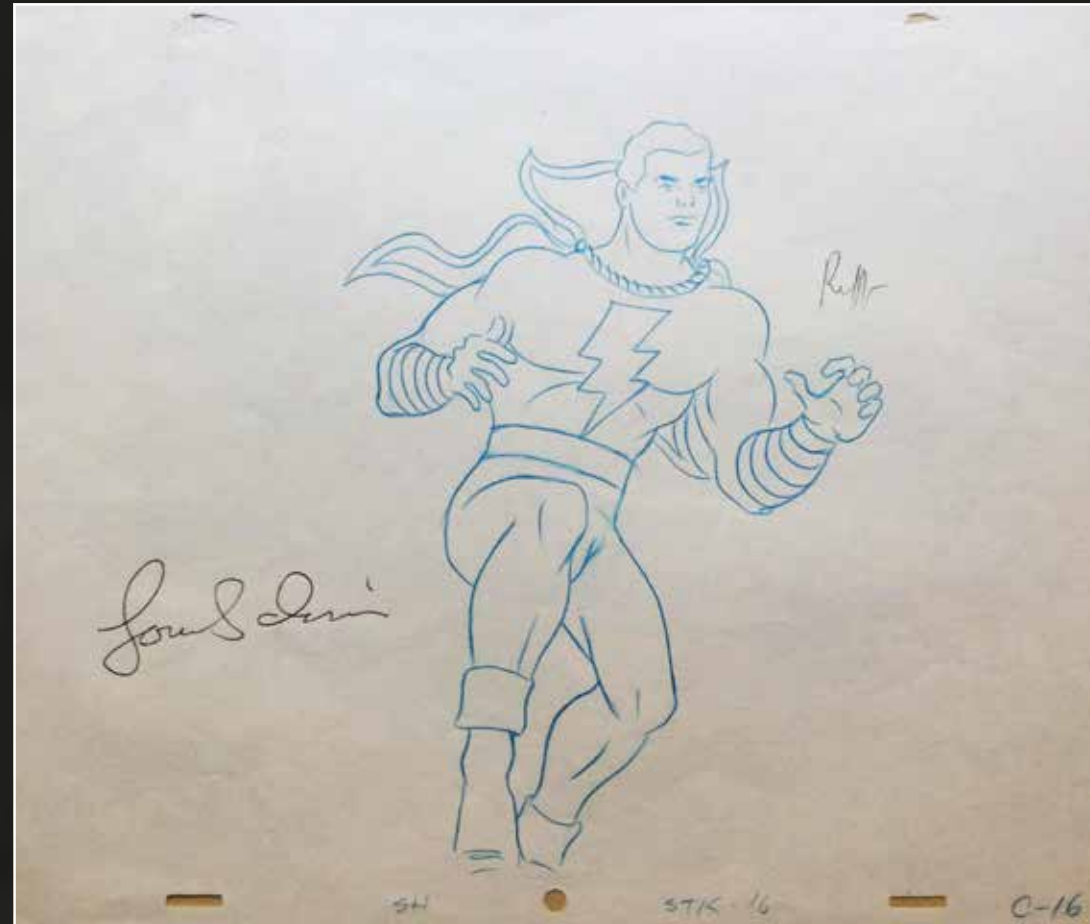
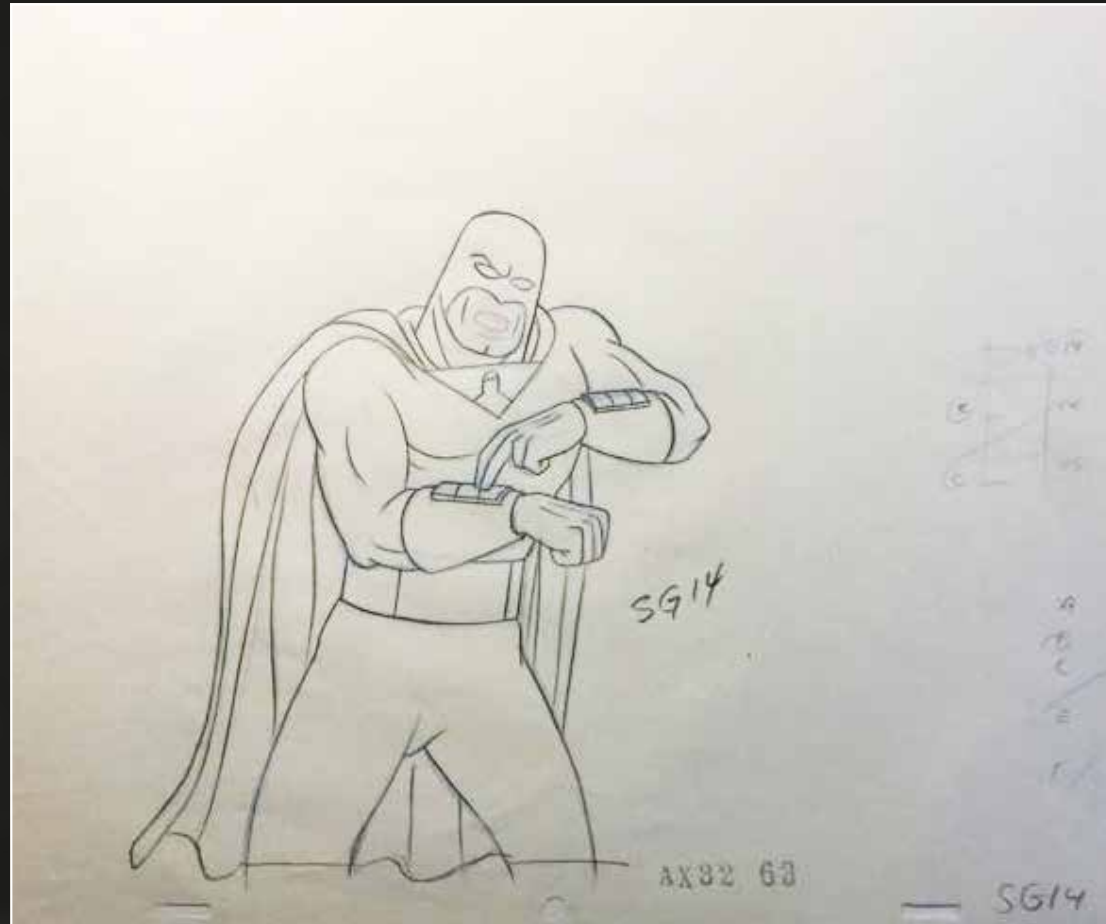
Hanno ucciso
l'Uomo Ragno
1992

SECTION 5 - Cinema, TV & Music



Animation cel with background and original studies,
Hanna & Barbera Studios, Filmation

SECTION 5 - Cinema, TV & Music



Layout and Character
Reference,
Hanna & Barbera Studios,
Warner Bros Animation

SECTION 6

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART

Just as the stories and characters of ancient mythology have been the subjects of several representations since ancient times, up to the climax in Renaissance and Neo-Classic paintings, modern Superheroes too have been source of inspiration for a great number of contemporary artists since the '50s and '60s of the 20th century.

Icons to celebrate, deconstruct, idealize, demythologize, perfect bodies where contemporary artists provocatively operate, extrapolating their mythological spirits and filtering them with their personal pictorial and plastic view. Minor Art inspiring major Art in an incessant process of mutual influences.

The exhibition ends up with the display of these contemporary interpretations, from Sacha Goldberger and Eugenio Recuenco photographic series to Adrian Tranquilli suggestive original sculptures, guiding the visitor to the end of this exciting journey of the “Myth of Superheroes” with some of today’s latest interpretations. A phenomenon that, linking past, present and future, is an unlimited source of fascination and inspiration for every form of art.



TOPICS

- **Superheroes Art – Influences and Contaminations**
- **From Pop Art to Present Days: Superheroes**
- **Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein**
- **Photography and Superheroes**
- **The Great Sculptures:
from Adrian Tranquilli to Nathan Sawaya**

SECTION 6 - Modern & Contemporary Art



Andy Warhol
Superman
1981



Sacha Goldberg
Batman
2005



Eugenio Recuenco
for Lavazza
2007



Adrian Tranquilli
In Excelsis
2013

© Photo Claudio Abate



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