



WHEN SCHULZ CAME TO COMIC-CON

CELEBRATING
100 YEARS OF
CHARLES M. SCHULZ

BY ALEXIS E. FAJARDO

Charles M. Schulz attended San Diego Comic-Con in 1974. He was approaching the 25th anniversary of his comic strip *Peanuts* and was a featured guest. There, Schulz took the stage to receive an Inkpot award, did a live-drawing of Linus, Snoopy, and Charlie Brown and talked about his work. Schulz even did some fan art and drew a spot-on Popeye for the crowd. The most fantastic piece of art was in that year's program book—a one-of-a-kind jam piece featuring Russell Myers's Broom-Hilda trading lightning bolts with Jack Kirby's The Demon while Linus and Snoopy were caught in the crossfire.

Though it was Schulz's one and only appearance at the show, that did not belie his lifelong love for all things comics. Born in 1922, at just two-days old Charles Monroe Schulz was immediately christened "Sparky" by an exuberant uncle. "Sparky" was "Spark Plug," a comic-strip racehorse from the wildly popular newspaper comic strip *Barney Google*. It was only fitting Schulz would grow up loving comics.

When he was old enough, Sparky read *Barney Google*. He also read: *Popeye*, *Skippy*, *Wash Tubbs*, *Prince Valiant*, and *Buck Rogers*. His father Carl, a working-class barber, made sure to buy all four weekend papers in St. Paul,

Minnesota—not for the news, but for the comics. He and Sparky would pore over the funny pages on the living room rug. When comic books came on the scene Schulz bought those too: *Famous Funnies*, *Tip-Top*, "and I can still remember the day when Superman came out in *Action Comics*. I took it over to a friend of mine and we thought, wow ... I knew this guy had something." Schulz, by his own estimation, was a fanatic.

Growing up, Sparky drew a lot too. Like many aspiring artists, he copied what he saw. No one at school could draw a better-looking Popeye or Mickey Mouse. His classmates begged him to draw cartoon characters on their binders, and he obliged. His teachers recognized his ability too, and Sparky was quick to dive into projects when drawing was involved. At just fourteen years old, Schulz's first submission to a newspaper was accepted for *Ripley's Believe It Or Not!* It featured a stoic profile of his black-and-white dog Spike: "a hunting dog that eats pins, tacks, and razor blades." The piece was signed by "Sparky" and published in 1937.

Schulz was a product of the times: "comic strips were very important when I was growing up ... radio shows, Saturday afternoon movies, and comic strips were the real thing. And, of course, I could draw. I could never draw



OPPOSITE:
Charles M. Schulz in his
Studio circa 1971.
Photo: Richard Rowen



ABOVE:
An in-class assignment from 1938. Schulz was instructed to draw 'three of anything.' Schulz's rapid-fire drawing suggests a mind always at work.

OPPOSITE TOP:
Li'l Folks' was a feature Schulz created in 1947. It was ran in the St. Paul Pioneer Press and was developed into the feature that would become Peanuts.

OPPOSITE BELOW:
A sample strip Schulz created for United Feature Syndicate to show his ability to draw recurring characters in comic strip form.

real well—I could never paint or anything like that—but I could draw." His parents nurtured this interest. Even during the Depression (and on a barber's modest income) his father and his mother, Dena, made sure Sparky got the instruction he needed. They signed him up for correspondence classes from Art Instruction School across the river in Minneapolis.

Despite the confidence he felt with a pencil in his hand, it took time before Schulz felt comfortable in his own skin. Athletics helped, but skipping grades, schoolyard slights, and being the short one on the ballfield all made an impact. Throughout his whole life, Sparky remembered the pain and humiliation of growing up. When he lost his mother to cancer shortly after being

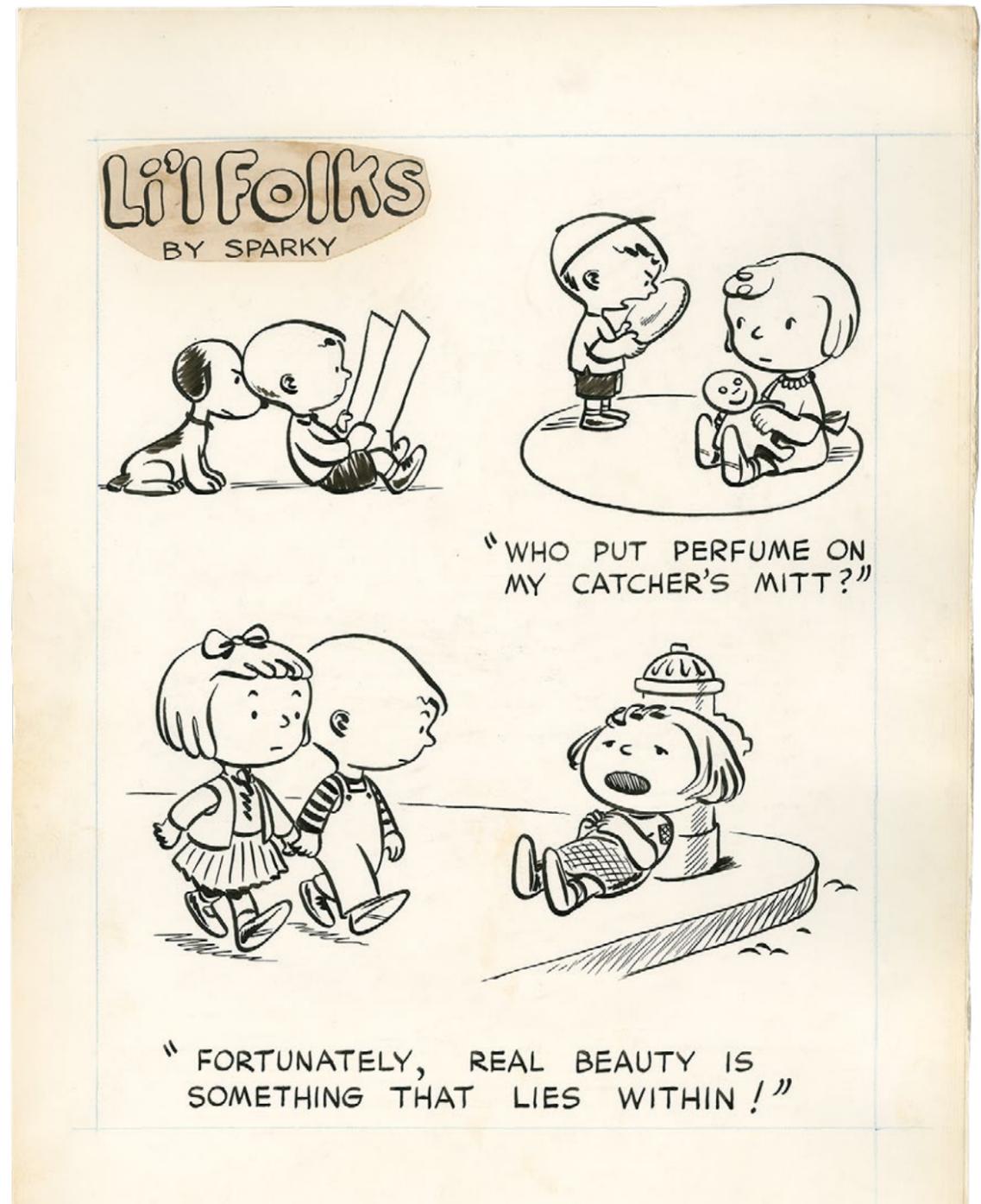
drafted into World War II, he was heartbroken. "The three years I spent in the Army taught me all I needed to know about loneliness, and my sympathy for the loneliness that all of us experience is dropped heavily upon poor Charlie Brown." He found solace in his sketchbook and made lasting friendships in the Army. In 1946, finally discharged from the Army, Schulz returned home with newfound self-confidence, eager to pursue a career in the only thing he ever wanted to do: make comics.

Schulz got his foot in the door where he could. He began his comics career in production — lettering pages for *Topix* comics, a local publisher of Catholic-themed stories for children.

He also got a job working at Art Instruction School, now grading assignments on the other side of the correspondence school desk. It would still be several years before Schulz drew Charlie Brown's oblong head, but he was making friends with similar goals. He was learning about the industry and he was ambitious to find a foothold. He found early success with single-panel gag cartoons, features called *Just Keep Laughing* and *Li'l Folks* appeared in *Topix* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, respectively. Schulz always had an iron in the fire: "You should always have something in the mail working for you. As soon as you complete a dozen gag cartoon roughs and send them off to a magazine, you should forget about them and begin to work on a newspaper feature. If it is a comic strip, as soon as you complete two or three weeks' material, mail it off to a syndicate and once again, forget about it."

Schulz's work ethic was paying off, and the gags he was developing—many of which featured precocious children spouting big ideas—were getting published in one of America's premiere publications, *The Saturday Evening Post*. The prime publication real estate in the late 1940s was still the newspaper, and Schulz's ambition to see his own strip "roll off the presses" drove him to submit his work to those newspaper syndicates. He packed his portfolio, hopped the train, and made the rounds of the midwest newspapers, where he shared what he was working on.

At just 27 years old, Schulz was still searching for his style. He had success with his sparsely drawn, "clear-line" gag cartoons, and it was that material he presented to editors. It was a drawing style in contrast to the fully rendered, charismatic style of Milton Caniff, Al Capp, and Chester Gould—some of Schulz's cartooning heroes and creators of the most popular comic strips at the time. United Features Syndicate liked what they saw in Schulz's samples and asked him to develop those one-off gags into a comic strip. Over the next few months, Schulz diligently incorporated his best ideas, panel gags, and character designs and developed a comic strip he was proud of. United Features in turn bought it as a "space-saver" strip so it could be arranged horizontally, vertically, or stacked;





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they launched it in seven papers, and called it *Peanuts*.

“Right then was when they made this fateful decision that it was going to be a space-saving strip, which I have resented all my life. Now it may have gotten me started, but I’m not sure, so I had to overcome the fact that I was drawing a space-saving strip under the title *Peanuts*, which was the worst title ever thought up for a comic strip.”

Schulz’s Midwest modesty, combined with his internal desire to become the world’s best cartoonist, helped him persevere. He took the limitations foisted by the syndicate and made them work to his advantage. His “minimalist” approach helped the strip pop off the page against those larger, denser, comic strips that crowded around it. Schulz traded in the tight urban landscape of

the comic strips of his childhood for a more open, residential setting. This subtle change made the strip new, refreshing, and topical; it matched the suburban landscape that was popping up across post-war America.

The cast was small at first, in stature and in numbers: Charlie Brown, Shermie, and Patty played on the sidewalks and empty streets of a nameless neighborhood. Schulz gave them big heads per his evolving style. This feature made the *Peanuts* characters look funny, but it also suggested these kids had big ideas. They rode tricycles and sold mud-pies, but their commentary about it was rarely childlike—they spoke like adults which replaced the need for adults in the strip.

“It was the way I drew the characters, they filled up the strip and I drew them from the side view. The type

of humor that I was using did not call for camera angles. I liked drawing the characters from the same view all the way through because the ideas were very brief and I didn’t want anything in the drawing to interrupt the flow of what the characters were either saying or doing. So there was no room for adults in the strip.”

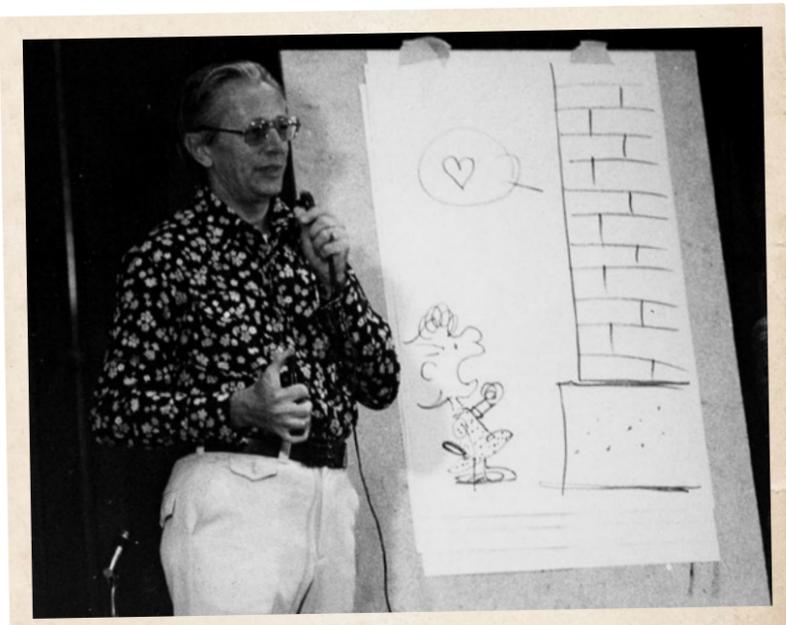
Schulz added a fifth character to the ensemble too—an irrepressible puppy named Snoopy. In the early months of the strip, Snoopy palled around with all of the kids as the neighborhood dog. Eventually, Schulz gave him an owner in Charlie Brown. This pairing of boy and dog would become the nucleus of the comic strip. United Features Syndicate launched *Peanuts* on October 2, 1950, to an inauspicious start—it was only seen in seven papers. By the end of its run approximately 50 years later,

it would be printed in 2,600 newspapers, in 75 countries, and in 21 languages. Charlie Brown and Snoopy would become household names, and Charles M. Schulz would be one of the most highly renowned and recognized cartoonists in the world.

By 1974 the full cast of *Peanuts* had emerged and been on the scene for close to 25 years. Though the Sunday comics featured “Good Ol’ Charlie Brown” in the masthead, Snoopy and his pal Woodstock were center stage. Fan favorites like Peppermint Patty and Marcie proved a great source of inspiration for storylines and even long-time foil Lucy Van Pelt had softened. Snoopy had been to the moon, both figuratively in the comic strip as the

ABOVE: A sampling of Peanuts comic strips through the decades. Schulz’s style was always evolving as he fine-tuned his craft over the strip’s fifty year run.

OPPOSITE: Schulz at Comic-con in 1974.



Schulz at Comic-con in 1974.

“IT WAS A RATHER HEADY WEEKEND FOR ME BECAUSE I HADN’T BEEN AROUND CARTOONISTS UNTIL THEN. WE HAD A LARGE ROOM AND ONE OF THE EVENINGS SPARKY INVITED A GROUP TO THE ROOM AND WE ALL SAT AROUND WHILE THE CARTOONISTS TALKED. I REMEMBER RUSS MYERS (BROOM-HILDA) AND THE WRITER OF STEVE CANYON, MILTON CANIFF. IT WAS WONDERFUL TO HEAR THESE ARTISTS TALKING SHOP AND SHARING STORIES OF THEIR CRAFT AND EXPRESSING THEIR MUTUAL ADMIRATION.”

—Jean Schulz on her memories of the 1974 San Diego Comic-Con

“first beagle on the moon,” and literally as a NASA-named space module and astronaut lapel pin.

Buoyed by annual televised airings of *It’s the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*; the new animated specials that Schulz, animator Bill Melendez, and producer Lee Mendelson continued to make; a continuous stream of book collections and publications; and a vast licensing empire to oversee, Charles Schulz and *Peanuts* had become fixtures in the pop culture firmament.

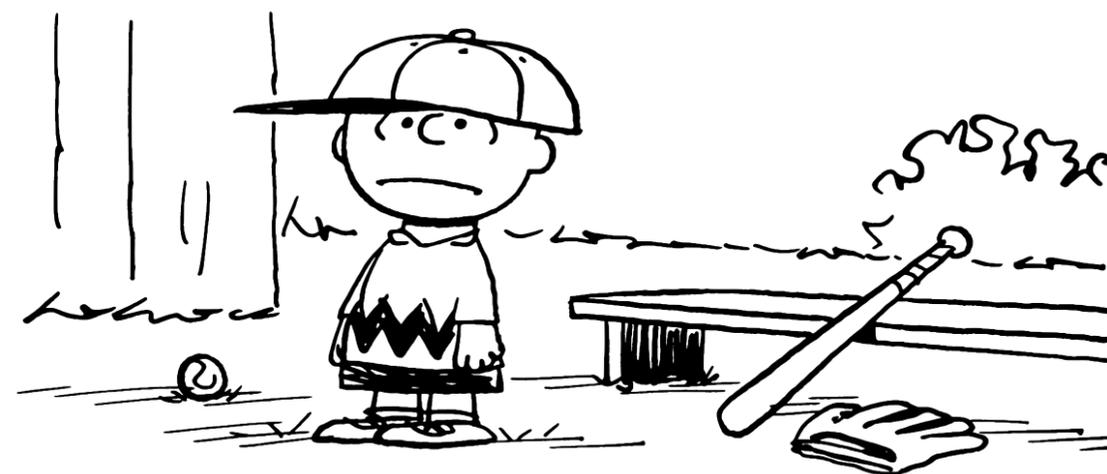
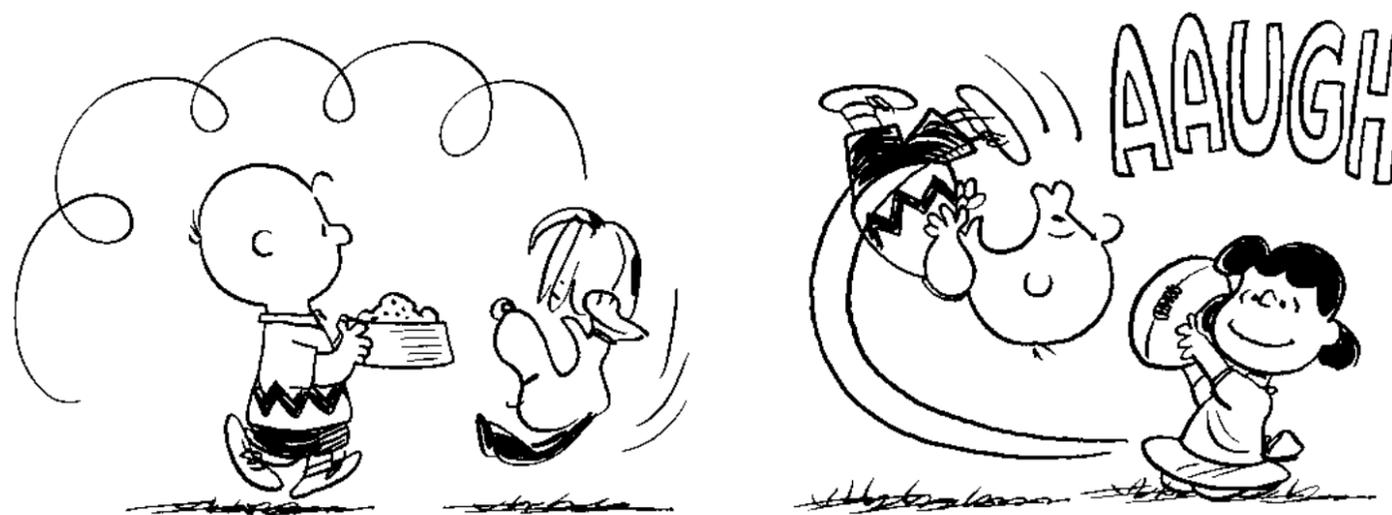
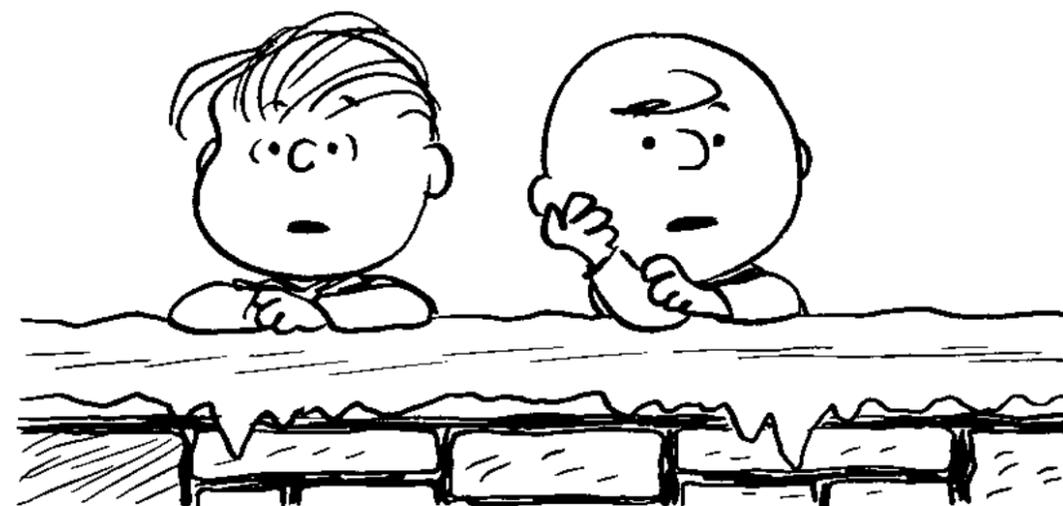
Despite the full slate of projects, Schulz continued to produce his comic strip as he always did: day in and day out, in his studio, alone at his drawing board. He had no assistants or writing partners, no gag-men or sounding boards unlike some of his peers (a tradition in cartooning). It wasn’t that Schulz eschewed the practice, it was more that assistants would have had little to offer since the ideas, gags, and storylines Schulz was mining for *Peanuts* came directly from his own memory and life.

“Every thought that I have, and every remembrance, goes into this strip. [Once] I was sitting at my desk at the art instruction school—I suppose I was 26—and nothing had been going right lately. I hadn’t had any dates of any kind. I was lonely, and this very pretty young girl would come up with some letters to be signed. I’d see her walking around the room, day after day after day. It took me great courage, but I said, ‘Would you be interested in going out for dinner and a movie?’ and she said: ‘Aren’t you kind of old for me?’ Oh boy, it would have been better if she had just reached over and punched me in the nose.”

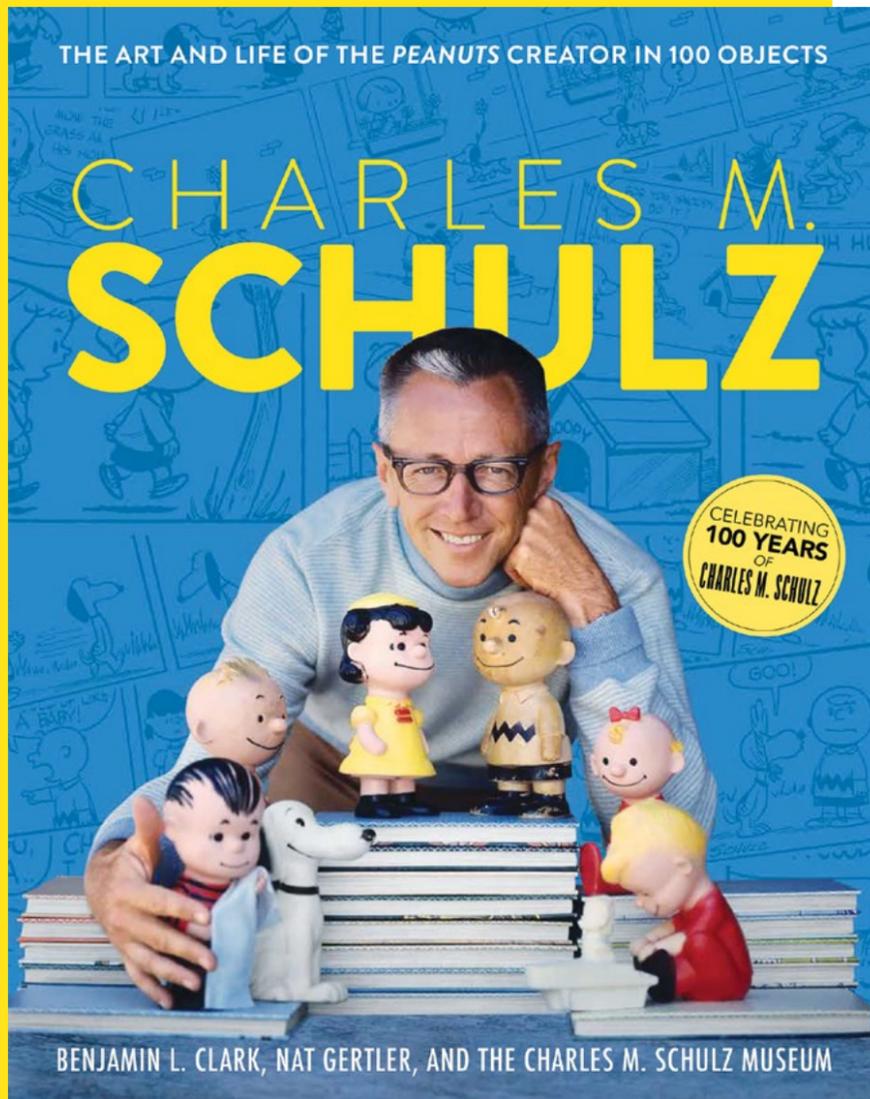
It was precisely this recall of his past and remix in his art that made Schulz’s brand of humor so unique. The humiliation Charlie Brown feels after losing a ballgame 40-0 is the same Schulz felt when he was growing up. The unrequited love Charlie Brown holds for the Little Red-Haired Girl (or Lucy has for Schroeder ... or Sally has for Linus ... or Linus for Lydia) are all shades of the same heartbreak Schulz endured. The melancholy Charlie Brown feels alone on the bench at recess is the same sort Schulz felt growing up.

The counterpoint to this grief and realism was the joy and fantasy that Schulz put into the strip. This exuberance was often embodied by Snoopy, whether he was “happy dancing” at suppertime or zooming the skies as the World War I Flying Ace. Happiness was a warm puppy after all, and whatever scenario Schulz produced at the tip of his pen was felt by his readers.

“I think that has been one of the secrets to whatever success I’ve had. Everything that I cartoon or write about is done with authenticity. The notes [in Schroeder’s music] are actually notes from different piano works, and I copy them out very carefully ... So when I do things about medicine, or historical things from World War I,



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Many of the objects and photographs used in the piece are featured in the upcoming book *Charles M. Schulz: The Art and Life of the Peanuts Creator in 100 Objects*, a heavily illustrated centennial volume in which Schulz's family, friends, and colleagues share their favorite 100 objects from the Charles M. Schulz Museum collection. The book is curated by Benjamin L. Clark and written by Nat Gertler. All items and photographs shared here are used with permission by The Charles M. Schulz Museum.

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where Snoopy is over in France, it's all very authentic. I think it's important to try to break beneath the surface in everything you are doing, rather than just drawing surface cartoons."

Schulz wasn't the first "auteur" cartoonist, but his authentic approach to the craft of cartooning had a deep impact on a new generation of cartoonists. Lynn Johnston, Bill Watterson, Cathy Guisewite, Patrick McDonnell, and countless others have cited Schulz's influence on their work. Ironically, the "space-saver" strip that the syndicate imposed on Schulz at the start of his career would become the template for most comic strips in the latter half of the 20th century. Those who could adapt their styles to accommodate the (increasingly) small real estate of the comics page saw success. These cartoonists often employed the same techniques Schulz developed.

"I am very proud of the comic strip medium and am never ashamed to admit that I draw a comic strip. I do not regard it as great art, but I have always felt it is certainly on the level with other entertainment mediums which are part of the so-called 'popular arts.' In many ways, I do not think we have realized the potential of the comic strip, but sometimes I feel it is too late. Many regard the comic page as a necessary evil and a nuisance, but it is there and it helps sell newspapers. With a little more tolerance and with a little more dedication on the part of those who create the comics, perhaps we could do better."

Now, a full century since Schulz's birth, the syndicated newspaper comic strip—once the dominant publication space for comics and the ultimate marker for success—has been upended. Thankfully, the art form Schulz loved since childhood has remained and has adapted to the changing times. Instead of the daily routine of reading newspaper comics with your Cheerios, we scroll through comics on our phones via Twitter, Instagram, and elsewhere online. Comic strips have given way to webcomics and bestselling graphic novels. And even if many of these readers are not intimately familiar with Charlie Brown and Snoopy, the ripple effect of Schulz's artistic influence is seen in today's cartooning stars like Dav Pilkey, Raina Telgemeier, Jeff Kinney, Dana Simpson, and so many others.

When speaking with young cartoonists, Schulz would often quiz them if they knew who Percy Crosby, Elzie Segar, or George Herriman were. It was a test of cartooning knowledge and history that helped Schulz determine if he was talking to a serious student. As we celebrate this centennial year of Schulz's birth, "Charles M. Schulz" has become like the cartooning idols of his youth—a master of the form whose work continues to be read, enjoyed, and analyzed all over the world. Not a bad outcome for a kid who just wanted to make comics. 🐾



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