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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Borges manuscript sure to inspire

An important manuscript in the hand of Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), one of the twentieth century's greatest writers, now resides in Special Collections as a gift from Professor Emeritus Donald A. Yates. The manuscript is the 1950 essay, "La Muralla y Los Libros" ("The Wall and the Books"), which first appeared in book form as the lead essay in *Otras inquisiciones*, considered to be Borges's most important prose collection. The title of the essay is a reference to the Great Wall of China and to the order of a third century emperor who extended the building of the wall and the destruction of most books. The manuscript, only two pages and 1,000 words in length, is unsigned and in Borges's usual tiny, tight printing. The essay's shortness belies its large literary importance, however, concluding with one of Borges's best known lines: "Music, feelings of happiness, mythology, faces worn by times, certain twilights and certain places, want to tell us something, or they told us something that we should not have missed, or they are about to tell us something; this imminence of a revelation that is not produced is, perhaps, the esthetic event."

Special Collections holds a notable Borges collection of published books, but never a manuscript due to their rareness and expense. Now, thanks to the generosity of Professor Yates, we have one of the finest, which seems fitting given the long relationship between Borges, Yates, and Michigan State University. It began with Donald Yates's arrival at MSU as an assistant

professor of Spanish in the early 1960s. Here he became a highly respected specialist in Hispanic and Latin American imaginative literature, and especially the work of Jorge Luis Borges. As the coeditor and translator of Borges's first collection of fiction to appear in English, Yates had a long relationship with Borges that resulted in several visits by the distinguished Argentinian writer to MSU, where he received an honorary doctorate. In fact, it was before visiting East Lansing in 1975, that Borges gave to Yates "La Muralla y Los Libros" as gift. I am confident that Señor Borges, once the Director of the Argentine National Library, would be pleased to have his manuscript in the Michigan State University Library where it will help educate, enlighten, and inspire present and future generations.

—Peter Berg

Did you know...

◆ Special Collections holds a rare copy of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, edited in 1535 by Michael Villanovanus, better known as Servetus, whose unconventional religious views managed to upset both Protestants and Catholics. *Geographia* makes use of the same maps produced for the 1522 edition of *Ptolemy*, and one of these – a map of the world – incorporates the newly discovered continent of America, and was the first map on which the name America appeared. Many copies of the 1535 printing were ordered burned by Calvin at the time of Servetus' execution in 1553.

◆ Over 2,000 textbooks, many from the nineteenth century, draw to Special Collections students and researchers interested in the pedagogical equipment of the American public school over the last two centuries. Besides teaching the basics, spellers; readers and grammars; histories and geographies; and arithmetic texts also reveal the beliefs and values of their times and how they changed or remained the same generation to generation.

◆ The intent of Special Collections to collect all the written works by the well known writer Jim Harrison (MSU '60) has led to the acquisition of two bottles of Michigan wine from Leelanau Cellars: a red and a white table wine, vintage 1991. The label includes an excerpt from "Cabin Poem," in Harrison's book, *The Theory and Practice of Rivers and New Poems*. Cheers!



Jorge Luis Borges (left) with Donald Yates at a lecture in MSU's Fairchild Theatre in March, 1972. Photo: MSU University Relations.

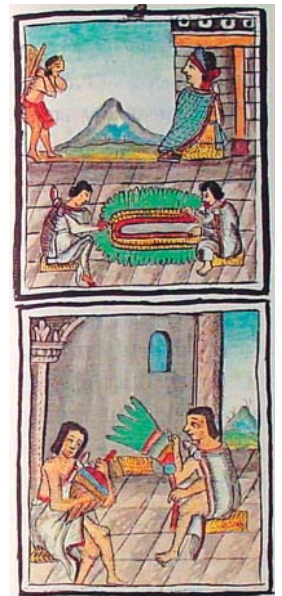
I would like to thank Charles A. Goldsmid, who appraised the manuscript, for his assistance in providing information for this article.

The Painted Books of Mexico

Manuscript painting was an art form that flourished in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. Known today as codices, these pictorial records documented all aspects of the lives of the societies that produced them, with subjects ranging from the genealogies of rulers and histories of populations, to religious rituals and books of songs, to tax and tribute records. There is archaeological evidence of manuscript painting from Mayan tombs dating to 600 BCE, but only a handful of codices from the pre-Columbian era survive. After the Conquest, Spanish friars sponsored manuscript painting to which they added explanatory text, resulting in illustrated “cultural encyclopedias” of native life. The many codices that have come down to us from the Early Colonial period are invaluable resources for students of Mesoamerican history and cultures. Special Collections has recently acquired several fine facsimile reproductions of important codices from early colonial Mexico.

Relación de Michoacán (*The Chronicles of Michoacán*), attributed to the Fray Jeronimo de Alcala, circa 1540, is based on the testimony of the indigenous elite of the Lake Pátzcuaro region of Western Mexico. It records the lineage of the elite class, and by extension the history of the population in the region. The document also describes pre-Hispanic governance as well as the Conquest and its aftermath, offering a unique view of the impact of that world-altering event on the conquered peoples of the region. Produced by Testimonio Compañía Editorial of Madrid, the pages have the look and feel of the original held in Spain’s Escorial monastery library.

Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva Espana (*General History of the Things of New Spain*) is based on the accounts of indigenous informants to the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the mid-sixteenth century. An extensive and lavishly illustrated compendium, the *Historia* is considered a key document for the study of Aztec culture and society. More than 1,200 leaves in length, and with more than 1,800 illustrations, Sahagún’s monumental ethnographic work is organized into 12 books describing native society, history, religion and language, and culminating with an account of Cortes’ conquest of Tenochtitlan (present site of Mexico City), 1519-1521, told by survivors of the calamity. The final version of the work, taken to Spain in 1580 and now held in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Italy, was written in Spanish and Nahuatl and is known as the *Florentine Codex*. A new 3 volume facsimile edition by Giunti Gruppo Editoriale of Florence has recently been acquired, giving students an opportunity to fully appreciate the wonder of this work.



The work of feather artisans is illustrated in *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva Espana*.



Far from a standard photographic facsimile, the Testimonio edition of *Relación de Michoacán* is distinguished by its high degree of craftsmanship. Photos: Louis Villafranca.

The Codex Magliabechiano is another important ethnographic source for understanding Aztec cultural life, particularly valuable for its documentation of Aztec religion and mythology, and presentation of the Aztec calendar. Created in the mid-sixteenth century, it is the most faithful of a family of manuscripts based on an earlier, lost prototype. Special Collections holds a reprint of the rare 1893 lithographic facsimile that was made following the discovery of the *Codex Magliabechiano* in the Biblioteca Nazionale Central in Florence, Italy, and published under the title *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans*. *The Codex Veytia*, an eighteenth-century manuscript based in part on the same lost prototype and focusing on Aztec rites and ceremonies, has also been issued in a fine facsimile edition by Testimonio. It has the title *Modos que tenían los yndios de zelebrar sus fiestas en Nueva Espana* (*Ways in Which the Indians Celebrated Their Festivals in New Spain*). —Mary Jo Zeter



"Wisconsin Story" by Sharon Rudahl is three pages of autobiography about life as a radical, told in retrospect in February 1976.

The New Left in Pen and Ink

"BRADAP! FOOM! EAT LEADEN DEATH, IMPERIALISTIC REACTIONARY BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION MAJORS!" —CLASS WAR COMIX, 1969

The Underground Comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s was exactly concurrent with the largest student protest movement this country has ever known. The spirit of the "underground press," which was never really underground except for a few early skirmishes with local laws, is clearly an aspect of a general spirit of pushing boundaries by a large number of young people of the time. The student radicals, some of whom finally did go "underground" in the 1970s, did lots of things that would have made good comic book stories, either as political adventures or as cautionary tales. In the 600 plus comix of the period now located in Special Collections, there are about 20,000 pages of certifiably counter-cultural writing and drawing. One might expect to find the New Left fully chronicled in this body of work. This is not the case.

It seems, from the perspective of a half-finished indexing project in the underground comix, that adventures in drugs and sex were much more attractive to the artists of the time than were adventures in anti-war protest. If memory serves, as the 1960s became the 1970s, the artistic crowd started to see the political crowd as a bunch of power-tripping idealists, while the more ideologically oriented slotted the paisley types into their world view as, at best, "cultural radicals." This division was not obvious to the silent majority and its media, and even within the youth culture it was easy to slip from one side to the other. It was possible, in other words, for activists to really go "underground" by changing clothes and growing hair. Though we can argue that there were two worlds of rebellion, they were inextricably intertwined. In the underground comics, explicit political content is fairly rare, but politics is never far from the surface.

This said, underground comics do indeed bring us some important scenes from the revolution. Skip Williamson's Class War Comix were often quoted by the more "serious" radicals. "An' when yer smashin' the' state, kids, don't fergit t' keep a smile on yer lips an' a song in yer heart!" (1969).

There are some explicitly political comics titles, like *Anarchy Comics* and *Merton of the Movement*. These and a scattering of movement-related stories by other artists and writers throughout the genre make this a promising field of study for those interested in the intersection of art and politics. This is not to be undertaken lightly, however. Twenty thousand pages of comix will take a few months to read. The Underground Comix collection in Special Collections has recently been deacidified, and is in the process of being indexed by author and title on the Division's comics website at www.lib.msu.edu/comics

—Randy Scott



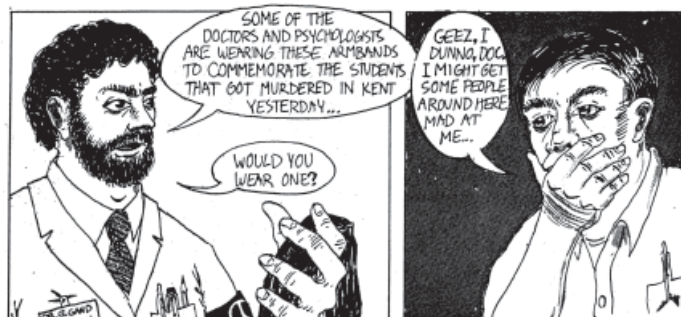
Skip Williamson. Class War Comix, 1969.

References:

- Pekar, Harvey and Brian Bram. "May 4-5, 1970" 12 p. in *American Splendor*, no. 2 (1977).
 Rudahl, Sharon Kahn. "Wisconsin Story" 3 p. in *Snarf*, no. 6 (1976).
 Williamson, Skip. *Class War Comix: A Brief History of the Revolution*. River Forest, IL: M. Johnson, 1993. 8 p. — Reprints strips from 1969-1970.

Further reading:

- Rosenkranz, Patrick. *Rebel Visions: the Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975*. Seattle, Wash.: Fantagraphics Books, 2002. 292 p.



Harvey Pekar's story titled "May 4-5, 1970" (1977) is a 12-page reflection on the impact of the National Guard killing of four students at Kent State University.

sell the stock and the remarkable reference collection in a series of auctions which began last fall. We were informed of the closing in a short letter sent to all "Clients" that ended, "We thank you for your past business and hope your future collecting will prosper without us." Collect we will and must, but it will seem a little lonely to do so without the presence of H.P Kraus, Inc.

—*Peter Berg*