

ZAP! POW! BAM! THE SUPERHERO @ Skirball Cultural Center

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Premiere Merchandise Vendor: **Meltdown Comics and Collectibles.**



**Skirball Cultural Center presents
ZAP! POW! BAM! THE SUPERHERO
The Golden Age of Comic Books, 1938–1950 February 19–August 9, 2009
West Coast debut at the Skirball features exclusive companion exhibition,
Lights, Camera, Action: Comic Book Heroes of Film and Television**



Left: Superman #14, cover art (detail) · Artist: Fred Ray · © 1941 DC Comics Superman™ and © DC Comics · All rights reserved · Used with permission · Collection of Jerry Robinson Right: Batcycle · Courtesy of Petersen Automotive Museum

LOS ANGELES—Remember the thrill of hiding under the covers to read comic books after lights out? Many of us do. Along with movies, comics may be the quintessential American art form, and they owe their enduring popularity to precedents established during the Great Depression and World War II. ZAP! POW! BAM! The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books, 1938–1950 tells the story of this exciting moment in popular culture, when Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Wonder Woman (1941), Captain Marvel (1940), and numerous other Superheroes were born.

On view at the Skirball Cultural Center, in its first West Coast engagement, from February 19 through August 9, 2009, ZAP! POW! BAM! was organized by the Breman Museum in Atlanta and is guest curated by Jerry Robinson, part of the original Batman team and a lifelong professional cartoonist. Through never-before-exhibited art and objects culled from private and institutional collections, the exhibition explores the early years of the comic book format and the genesis of the Superhero as cultural icon. Objects on view include rare vintage artwork and books, 1940s Hollywood movie serials, and colorful interactive displays, including a drawing studio, newsstand, vintage Batmobile ride, and stations that allow children to dress up as Superheroes via a quick costume change in a telephone booth. In addition, the Skirball has organized an exclusive companion exhibition, Lights, Camera, Action: Comic Book Heroes of Film and Television. Robinson will give a curator's talk on ZAP! POW! BAM! on Thursday, March 5, at 8:00 p.m. An artist on the Batman series, Robinson is credited with creating the first enduring comic book villain, The Joker, and naming Robin, Batman's crime-fighting, "boy wonder" companion. He has published some thirty books on comic book art and served as president of both the National Cartoonists Society and the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists. As the season progresses, the Skirball Cultural Center will continue to schedule films, lectures, classes, and family programs that explore issues in the exhibition.

Background

Emerging from serialized comic strips in daily newspapers, the comic book—containing an entire narrative in a magazine format—found enormous popular success in the 1930s. It was perhaps telling that Superman, rejected as a syndicated strip, instead became the first comic book Superhero in 1938. In the midst of the economic and political turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s, Americans were hungry for escapist entertainment. In Superman and his many super-compatriots, the popular imagination embraced champions—whose alter egos were ordinary people—who symbolized human potential and the triumph of good over evil. The Superhero genre was created, for the most part, by young Jewish artists, primarily products of New York City high schools, often with refugee teachers who had fled Nazi persecution. Drawn to one of the few professions open to Jewish artists at that time, the comic book creators shaped the values of a generation, encapsulating "Truth, Justice, and the American Way" in every story. Tapping universal mythological and religious prototypes (note Superman's "Achilles heel" or the parallel of his origins and Moses's), the Superheroes provided characters with deep emotional resonance. As the world went to war, these champions of the common man became defenders of America's freedom and ideals. Comic artwork was used in propaganda posters, war themes imbued comic books, and new characters rose to the rescue, including Yankee Doodle Jones, Boy Commandos, Uncle Sam, and Atomic Man.

ZAP! POW! BAM! Overview

Offering an immersive, interactive world of Superheroes, ZAP! POW! BAM! includes more than seventy neverbefore-displayed comic books and memorabilia. Concept sketches, original artwork, and scripts, including items from Jerry Robinson's personal collection, offer insight into the creative process. The broad influence of comic books can be seen in the many toys, collectibles, and promotional items in the exhibition, including puzzles and games, toy race cars, dime banks, tattoo transfers, and punch-out figures. Visitors can go back in time in a theater showing 1940s movie theater serials, and watch video interviews of comic book legends. Special highlights for kids include an original, working Batmobile ride, a vintage interactive phone booth, a comic drawing studio, a 1940s-style newsstand with comics to read, an interactive Kryptonite display, and child-sized costumes to try on. Among the talented creators of comic books featured in the exhibition are Will Eisner (the "father of the graphic novel" and creator of *The Spirit*); Bob Kane, Bill Finger and Jerry Robinson (the Batman team); Jack Kirby (cocreator of *Captain America*); Stan Lee (co-creator of *Spider-Man*); and Jules Schwartz (editor of *Green Lantern*). Other featured creators include Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel (co-creators of *Superman*), artist C.C. Beck (*Captain Marvel*), writer Otto Binder (*Captain America* and *Captain Marvel*), publishers Martin Goodman, and M.C. Gaines, and more.

Lights, Camera, Action Overview

The Skirball has organized an exclusive companion exhibition to ZAP! POW! BAM! exploring the long connection between comic book Superheroes and the moving image. Superheroes have been a vital part of American popular culture ever since the first appearance of *Superman* in *Action Comics* established the comic book as a viable artistic form. Almost immediately after their rise to prominence in comic books, Superheroes transcended their pulpy origins to find expression in theater, music, films, and television. *Lights, Camera, Action* examines the close relationship and parallel development of the comic book and motion picture industries. Objects on view include the original 1966 *Batcycle* from the *Batman* television series on loan from the Petersen Automotive Museum, along with vintage movie posters on loan from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, original comic books on loan from the University of California, Riverside, and other movie and television memorabilia.



Exhibition-Related Programs

During the run of the exhibitions, the Skirball will present several related public programs:

- **GALLERY TOURS:** Exhibition walkthroughs led by docents. (Tuesday–Sunday, 2:30 p.m.)
- **FAMILY WORKSHOP:** A hands-on art workshop in which children and their families create Superhero emblems, crowns, and masks. (Sunday, February 22, 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. and 1:00–4:00 p.m.)
- **CURATOR’S TALK:** A lecture by exhibition curator Jerry Robinson on the Golden Age of Comic Books. (Thursday, March 5, 8:00 p.m.)
- **CLASS:** A three-session adult-education course exploring the art and narrative of the graphic novel. Reading assignments to include *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, *The Watchman*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*. (Saturdays, April 11 and 25 and May 1, 10:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m.)
- **FILM SCREENINGS:** Free matinee screenings of *Batman*, starring Adam West (Tuesday, May 12, 1:30 p.m.); *Supergirl*, starring Faye Dunaway, Helen Slater, and Peter O’Toole (Tuesday, June 2, 1:30 p.m.); and *Superman*, starring Christopher Reeve (Tuesday, June 9, 1:30 p.m.).
- **FILM SCREENING:** A complete screening of *Batman* (1943, 260 min.), the classic serial film about Batman’s efforts to rid Gotham of a Japanese spy ring, offering viewers a glimpse into how the Superhero genre was employed to advance war propaganda and fuel racial stereotyping. (Sunday, August 9, time TBA)
- **LECTURE:** A talk by comic-book artist and *MAD Magazine* writer Arie Kaplan about his book *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*. (date and time TBA)
- **FAMILY SLEEPOVER:** An overnight program in which young visitors and their families will come dressed as their favorite Superhero, participate in a tour of the exhibition, enjoy storytime and other activities, and sleep over at the Museum. (date and time TBA) Additional public programs may be announced at a later date; visit www.skirball.org for updates. Finally, as part of its extensive outreach to local schools, the Skirball is offering a gallery-based program for students in Grades 5–12. Students will examine the genesis of the Superhero genre, tracing the artistic process of the artists who created some of the most enduring characters in popular culture, including *Batman*, *Captain America*, and *Superman*. Students will also learn about the social origins of the comic book and its links to the Great Depression and World War II. The program will include an art-making experience in which students will conceive a Superhero of their own, designed to tackle problems facing the world today, and begin to lay out an original comic-book page.

Catalogue and Merchandise

The catalogue for *ZAP! POW! BAM! The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books, 1938–1950* (2004, 62 pages, 47 illustrations), published by the Breman Museum, features images from the exhibition and contributions by exhibition curator Jerry Robinson, Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Michael Chabon and acclaimed cartoonist, author, and playwright Jules Feiffer. It will be available for purchase at Audrey’s Museum Store at the Skirball. Audrey’s Museum Store will also offer a line of books, apparel, and other merchandise celebrating comic book art and other themes explored in the exhibition.

MEDIA SPONSOR: KCRW 89.9 FM

PREMIERE MERCHANDISE VENDOR: MELTDOWN COMICS will also be selling catalogs, books and merchandise from the exhibition

Visiting the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049 (exit 405 Freeway at Skirball Ctr Dr). Parking is free. The Skirball is also accessible by Metro Rapid Bus 761. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday 12:00–5:00 p.m.; Saturday–Sunday 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.; closed Mondays. Museum admission: \$10 General; \$7 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$5 Children 2–12.

Exhibitions are always free to Skirball Members and Children under 2. Museum admission is free to all visitors on Thursdays. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit www.skirball.org. The Skirball is also home to Zeidler's Café, which serves innovative California cuisine in an elegant setting, and Audrey's Museum Store which sells books, contemporary art, music, jewelry, and more.

About the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is dedicated to exploring the connections between 4,000 years of Jewish heritage and the vitality of American democratic ideals. It welcomes and seeks to inspire people of every ethnic and cultural identity. Guided by our respective memories and experiences, together we aspire to build a society in which all of us can feel at home. The Skirball Cultural Center achieves its mission through educational programs that explore literary, visual and performing arts from around the world; through the display and interpretation of its permanent collections and changing exhibitions; through an interactive family destination inspired by the Noah's Ark story; and through outreach to the community.

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