

## **Beano: The Art Of Breaking The Rules**

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There are two separate exhibitions happening at once in Somerset House's "Beano: The Art Of Breaking The Rules", one of which is significantly more successful than the other.

The first is a fascinating retrospective of Beano strips going all the way back to the comic's beginnings in 1938, with original artwork sitting next to vintage comics. The curator, Andy Holden, has done a great job of bringing together rarely-seen originals that still fizz with life decades later. The work of established greats like Leo Baxendale and Dudley Watkins sing with excitement, and Jim Petrie's Minnie The Minx similarly bursts from the pages, even when those pages are browned with age. Seeing the work up close like this is a real thrill, especially when you notice margin notes like the conversation between Leo Baxendale and his wife about the need to get the page inked and round to DC Thomson office's by the next day.

Throughout the show the original artwork is treated with respect, with artists properly credited and captions which tell the story of how The Beano became such an entrenched part of British life. The discussion on how a "slap-up feast" came to be such a constant of the comic during wartime was especially illuminating, and anyone who has ever been a child in the UK is bound to get a few rushes of nostalgic joy. For me it was seeing original cover art for "Plug", a comic I've not thought about for at least 40 years, and the sight of those much coveted Dennis and Gnasher fan club badges and "smart wallet".

It's also surprisingly funny. Like many, I gave up on The Beano as a surly twelve-year old ready for the more "grown-up" delights of Marvel and 2000AD, so was surprised by how many times I laughed out loud. There's a cheeky, mildly subversive sense of humour that is highlighted throughout, in the showcased strips as well as other parts of the exhibition. Favourites here were a handwritten letter to the editor from 1948 ("Will you please stop Lord Snooty") and the caption for a Banksy screen print which says "Banksy declined to be in the show but we ... included him anyway, because Dennis and his pals never accept an authoritative 'no.'"

The second exhibition could have done with a lot more of this sort of attitude. As with their "Good Grief Charlie Brown" show in 2018, Somerset House don't seem to be confident enough to do an exhibition just about comics, and have to drag in some Proper Art as well. There are some commissioned works which in theory are responses to The Beano, but mostly it's pre-existing art that only has a very tenuous link with the main theme, and appears to be there as way to guide children away from comics and towards something more culturally acceptable.

Honourable exceptions to this include Horace Panter's answer to David Hockney's "Splash" and David Litchfield's Lowry-inspired "Beanotown", both most of the rest of the Proper Art looks rather dull and pompous next to the exciting, dynamic and witty world of the Beano strips. A piece inspired by "The Numbskulls", for instance, looks like a dreary exercise in stating the obvious next to the wild invention of the actual comic, and seeing expensive, ponderous Proper Art described as "playful" or "witty" just seems daft in a room full of cheap, accessible, and genuinely funny Beano strips down the years.

Despite all that, this remains a beautifully put together exhibition showing off a wildly inventive part of British culture that does not get anything like enough attention. It's a shame that Teacher had to get involved so much, but in the end Dennis, Minnie and all the others are the real stars of the show.