

 **Tintin and the cultural coup**  
By Charlotte McDonald-Gibson

*A curious boy and his little dog have overcome a big limitation (not existing) to become ambassadors for Belgium and represent the small nation's better nature on the world stage*

The great statesman Charles de Gaulle may have helped forge peace and unity in post-war Europe and pioneer a diplomatic thaw with China in the 1960s but he had unexpected Francophone competition on the world stage. “Tintin is my only international rival,” he declared while still president of France.

“Tintin is a global character; all cultures understand him,” says Robert Vangénéberg, managing director of the Hergé Museum, an institution devoted to Tintin’s creator that sits on a leafy university campus about 30km from Brussels.

Vangénéberg sees many parallels with his own country, which – despite its modest stature – has put itself at the centre of world affairs: historically as a trading centre and today as home to EU and Nato headquarters. “We are a global culture but a humble and simple culture,” he says. “I think those are very Belgian characteristics: modesty and humility.”

Such an amiable outlook combined with an insatiable appetite for foreign travel are valuable qualities in any ambassador. In the 23 books Hergé finished between 1929 and his death in 1983, Tintin travelled to six continents, the moon and a fair few fictional destinations. This creates a long list of nations with their own unique connection to the young adventurer.

In the world of diplomacy a Tintin poster in a Belgian embassy depicting the hero’s visit to that country proves a great icebreaker. And Tintin’s reach is growing. “China is now our biggest market in terms of quantities,” says Simon Casterman, director of marketing for Tintin publisher Casterman. Sales have gone from one million books a year in 2010 to double that figure today.

The guardians of Tintin’s legacy – Hergé’s widow Fanny Vlamynck and her British husband, Nick Rodwell – pay close attention to copyright,

however; images of the youngster are unlikely to be found on lunch boxes and cereal packets.

The Hergé Museum epitomises the effort to propel Tintin to high art. Designed by French architect Christian de Portzamparc and opened in 2009, it is a temple to the artistic vision of Hergé. In the museum shop you will find only a tasteful collection of mugs, figurines and soft toys. Hand-painted collectibles cost upwards of €1,500.

But Tintin is a controversial ambassador. Hergé barely left Europe until the 1960s so sorties overseas were often dreamt up from his desk in Brussels. A consequence of using the sources of the time was a tendency towards crude stereotype.

*Tintin in the Congo* remains his most divisive title. The book was written in the 1920s when the African country, then a colonial possession of Belgium, was reeling from the slaughter of millions in the late 19th century as King Leopold II plundered its rubber and ivory. In it, Tintin is greeted as a hero by cheering crowds while the Congolese are presented as primitive savages. Hergé amended the text in the 1940s, accepting that it reflected colonial attitudes of the time.

“*Tintin in the Congo* is undoubtedly offensive to some people,” says Jogchum Vrieling, a legal scholar at the University of Leuven, adding that the text and its historical context “do require critical debate and analysis”. But after a number of attempts to ban it, sales of *Tintin in the Congo* soared; it remains the most popular book in the French-speaking market today.

Vangénéberg believes most readers still see Tintin’s universal qualities of honour and decency. The only downside to the character’s international appeal is having to make sure foreign readers know which country he hails from. “For many French people, Tintin is from France,” laments Vangénéberg. De Gaulle would be delighted. — (M)



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- 01 Lombard publishing house in Brussels
- 02 Hergé Museum
- 03 Museum entrance
- 04 Main hall in the museum
- 05 Museum shop
- 06 Translated adventures
- 07 Robert Vangénéberg
- 08 Chinese edition of 'The Blue Lotus'
- 09 Figures in the shop
- 10 Museum's copy of Nat Neujean's 1976 bronze



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