

Part II: (Re-)Productions

Untangling History and Patrimonialization: Woodcut Novel Reprints and Jean Davallon's Model

1. Introduction

Comics history is established through academic research, but it is also largely dependent on other sources: Reprints, reviews and awards —such as Angoulême's *Prix du patrimoine* since 2004—, all of these selective operations contribute to our current conceptions about comics' past, by organizing knowledge, accessibility, evaluation and (re)qualification of past works. When considering the past, it is thus hard to distinguish between what comes from historical research and what comes from patrimonialization, which is the social process of selecting elements of the past to give them a new status in the present.¹

In *Le Don du patrimoine* (2006, *The Gift of Heritage*), Jean Davallon describes the symbolic and social processes that give an object from the past its status as a piece of heritage in contemporary times. Several moments or *gestures* (“gestes”) form this process of patrimonialization (119-126). After what Davallon would describe as a fall into oblivion (a break between the past world of the object and our present world, which can occur for any of a wide variety of reasons), the object reappears through a *finding* (“trouvaille”), such as an archaeological find. This finding starts a series of backward operations, involving historians and heritage experts, that go from the present to the past: the certification of the object's origins and the confirmation of its original context. Based on historical knowledge, this retrospective process rebuilds the lost continuity between the past (the object's original context of creation) and the present and creates new obligations for the present owners or custodians of the object, such as preserving it, presenting it to the public and transmitting it to future generations. Considering the temporal direction of this process, Davallon

1 A first version of this paper was published online on the *Comics Forum* website in May 2021 (<https://comicsforum.org/2021/05/10/the-comics-patrimonialisation-of-woodcut-novels/>). I thank Annick Pellegrin for her help in editing the original text. For practical reasons, it has not been possible to include in this version woodcut novels reprints or academic published after the end of autumn 2022.

compares it to the “reverse filiation” (“filiation inversée”) described by the anthropologist Jean Pouillon (1975, quoted in Davallon, 97; English translation by JMM): patrimonialization is the way present agents acknowledge the past and selectively define how and what they inherited from it. One key aspect of this model is indeed how it highlights the direction of the patrimonialization process: it’s a process that goes from the present to the past, contrary to the trajectory of the object itself, that ‘travels’ from the past to the present. The consequence of this is that this process is necessarily embedded in contemporary representations and stakes.

Focusing on a specific case study dealing with the contemporary reprints of early Twentieth Century woodcut novels in France, this paper offers an illustration of Davallon’s model of patrimonialization applied to comics. Discussing the editorial aspects of these reprints, and especially their paratextual dimension, it underlines the requalifying nature of this process and how comics patrimonialization of woodcut novels has to be understood in a context of strategies of distinction and legitimation, of actors as well as of the comics form itself. The present reintroduction of woodcut novels in comics’ past, through their likening to the contemporary “graphic novel” model, thus appears more as a result of these strategies than as a linear historical filiation. By reminding us of the presentness of every definition of heritage and of how the writing of history is dependent on present social issues, Davallon’s model helps us to distinguish between chosen inspirations of comics creators and the historical past of comics.

The three parts of this chapter analyze the current comics valorization of decades-old woodcut novels. In the first part, the theoretical model of patrimonialization (Davallon) helps to shed light on this process, which relies on a specific relationship with the past, made of both rediscovery and reinvention. Next, in part two, I explain how the editorial paratext of the current reprints plays a central role here. It is a means to equate ‘woodcut novels’ and ‘graphic novels’ and to bring together distinct fields of artistic creations. And in part three, I discuss why the symbolic stakes of this patrimonializing process are important: for comics and for their publishers, it is part of a quest for legitimacy and for an artistic autonomy that Masereel and Ward could embody.

2. The Current Comics Patrimonialization of Woodcut Novels

Woodcut novels form a genre of graphic narratives that emerged in Europe at the end of the 1910s with the works of the Belgian Frans Masereel. It was later explored and expanded by several European and Northern American artists, among whom the American Lynd Ward was one of the most influential (Cohen, Beronä, Walker). These books may differ in style or in their themes—even though a strong social vein runs through many of them. But they share a common narrative approach, based on a succession of silent woodcut images, most of the time in black and white, collected in a book to be browsed as a unified narrative. The genre waned in the 1950s, but its influence has been claimed by diverse artists, especially in the comics field.² In recent years, key works of the genre were reprinted and considered important elements of comics' heritage.

My analysis only deals with the present interest in France in woodcut novels in relation to comics. But this current phenomenon of course takes place in a larger context, with several moments of rediscovery of woodcut novels by comics creators, critics and historians, in France as well as in other countries. The most recent French rediscovery of woodcut novels seems to closely follow American efforts, even though it partially precedes them.³ I can only briefly touch upon this context here. In the United States, there are at least two key periods when comics looked at woodcut novels. In the Seventies, reprints of such works were made in conjunction with comics. Dover Publications, for example, reprinted at about the same time works by Masereel alongside those of Wilhelm Busch, Milt Gross and classic comic strips such as *Buster Brown* or *The Katzenjammer Kids*. In 1978, Will Eisner mentioned Lynd Ward as a key influence in the creation of his *A Contract With God*, establishing woodcut novels as a possible template for new comics ambitions. The magazine *World War 3 Illustrated*, whose aesthetic and agenda often overlap with those of woodcut novels, was launched in 1980. A second key period started in the nineties and continued into the following decades. Eric Drooker published his first woodcut-inspired silent graphic novel, *Flood! A Novel in Pictures*, in 1992.

2 I use this term in the sense of a social and symbolic space as defined by Bourdieu and first applied to comics by Boltanski. See also Beaty and Woo.

3 Masereel's *Le Soleil* was reprinted in 1996 by La Triplette infernale and *Mon Livre d'heures* in 2002 by Editions Cent Pages. Both of these reprints remained confidential. IMHO éditions published a first version of Nücker's *Destin* in 2005.

Citing in his foreword one of David Beronä's first articles on woodcut novels ("Silent Narratives"), Will Eisner devoted several pages of his *Graphic Storytelling* book to discuss the works of Frans Masereel, Otto Nückel and Lynd Ward (1996). Articles—for example in *The Comics Journal* 208, November 1998—and books by David Beronä (2008) and George Walker (2007) on woodcut novels were accompanied by reprints, again by Dover. The Library of America published Ward's novels in 2010 in a boxset edited by Art Spiegelman, who later toured the world with *Wordless!* a live performance dedicated to wordless graphic narratives between 2013 and 2018.

Beronä's and Walker's books were translated in French respectively in 2009 and 2010. It was followed by a renewed editorial and critical interest in France. Six "novels in pictures" by Frans Masereel have been reprinted by Martin de Halleux since 2018⁴ and *L'Éclaireur*, one exhaustive slipcase set of all six of Lynd Ward's "novels in woodcuts", was published by Monsieur Toussaint Louverture in 2020 (see list of works cited). But for one exception (in Walker's anthology), this is the first French edition of Ward's woodcut novels and only a few of Masereel's books had been reprinted as individual books in the preceding years by small literary publishers. In 2021, another (leadcut) wordless novel, *Destin* by Otto Nückel, first published in 1926, was also reprinted by a third publisher, Ici bas, with a political and critical catalogue.

On the occasion of these reprints, these bodies of works have been praised by publishers and critics as forerunners of the modern graphic novels—if not as graphic novels in their own right. Both Masereel's and Ward's works were also selected for the Angoulême festival award dedicated to comics' heritage: Masereel's *Idée* was nominated in 2019 and Ward's *L'Éclaireur* won the award in 2021. The place of these works in the history of comics thus seems formally established, as one more milestone in the form's past. Jean Davallon's communication approach to heritage offers a heuristic model to describe this process of (re)insertion of woodcut novels in comics history. It also helps to understand its internal logic as well as its specificity: the retrospective look here is as much one of rediscovery as one of reinvention.

The current recognition of eighty- to a hundred-year-old woodcut novels seems to fit this model of patrimonialization. Brought back to light

4 Martin de Halleux also published a detailed monograph on Masereel (2018) at the same time it published his woodcut novels.

by creators, critics and publishers, these works saw their historical significance recalled and discussed, they were presented in relation to contemporary graphic novels on the basis of a formal analysis of their features and they were reprinted to be introduced to new contemporary readerships. But the process in this case needs to be further specified. Indeed, here, the dynamics of patrimonialization are not only temporal but also contextual: The woodcut novels from the past are considered from the perspective of the present; in addition, these works, which were originally produced in the context of fine arts and artist books are now considered in a comics context, i.e. in relation to contemporary graphic novels. In that sense, the “reconstructed continuity” (“continuité reconstruite,” Davallon 114; English translation by JMM) that the patrimonialization process produces between woodcut novels and contemporary graphic novels is, partly at least, an artefact, an artificial linearity that results from the process itself.

The link that can be established today between the works of Masereel or Ward and comics didn't exist when those works were produced—even though comics were then an already established and widely distributed mass medium. As Art Spiegelman aptly notes about Ward, “[his] roots were not in comics”—which “he hadn't been allowed to read as a child” — (“Reading Pictures” xxiii) and “denied a comic-strip vocabulary, [he] would grow to help define a whole other syntax for visual storytelling” (“Reading Pictures” x). For the scholar M. D. Ball, Ward's graphic narratives stood at an “austere distance from popular print culture” (139). If Masereel's early drawings were published in the (pacifist) press, most of his works were produced at the intersection of fine arts and literature, with art and literary publishers and in relation with high-profile literary authors. The woodcut novels were therefore produced, distributed and discussed outside the realm of comics: in their graphic and narrative styles, in their editorial materiality, in the professional path of their creators, woodcut novels were distant from the comics of their times. This is also true of their reception, as when they were first published these works elicited comparisons with cinema and silent movies more so than with comics.⁵ Thus, for Ward as for Masereel, there was no historical fall

5 This comparison was made, among others, by Thomas Mann (Beronä 10; Van Parys “Frans Masereel” 606; Mann 13, 16). Milt Gross's drawn satire of the woodcut novels, *He Done Her Wrong* (1930), also playfully draws such comparisons between wordless novels and silent melodramatic movies. For a discussion of the proximity of woodcut novels with silent films, also see Willett (128-130).

into oblivion, no break in the continuity between the past of woodcut novels and the present of comics and graphic novels. Both these creators had long careers in fine arts and literary illustration, with recognition (even if of varying intensity⁶) in their fields. Instead of oblivion, there have been reciprocal forms of indifference—or incomprehension—between different spaces of cultural production: “few in the comics community of the day could get the message [sent by Ward and Masereel], their definition of comics, then as now, was simply too narrow to include such work” (McCloud 19). Thus, it’s more a matter of symbolic distance than one of oblivion that excluded these woodcut novels from comics history until their recent reappraisal.

This symbolic and sectoral gap was only bridged when some creators deliberately and strategically tried to redefine comics by shifting their referential framework, looking outside the comics tradition of their time. That’s what Will Eisner did, for example, when, in his introduction to his first “graphic novel” *A Contract With God*, he claimed to be influenced by Lynd Ward and that his work was an attempt “at expansion or extension of Ward’s original premise”.⁷ This is indeed what Pouillon means when he talks about “reverse filiation”: “we choose what we declare ourselves determined by, we present ourselves as the continuators of those we made

6 This is true of their woodcut novels. Some of these books had some real commercial success in their time. For example, *Gods’ Man* sold twenty thousand copies in its first four years (*Prelude to a Million Years – Song Without Words – Vertigo* 670) and the popular editions of Masereel’s early woodcut novels in Germany by Kurt Wolff had a large distribution (Van Parys “Une biographie” 206-207) of several thousand copies, with a peak of one hundred thousand for the German popular edition of *Mon livre d’heures* (Willett 116). But others were printed only in very limited runs destined to bibliophiles and art collectors. Most of these books were reprinted several times but only on an irregular basis, sometimes decades apart. Their international diffusion has also been varied and spread over long periods of time (for example, see Van Parys “Une biographie” 219). Ball states how Ward’s woodcut novels may have fallen into a “critical blind spot” after a while (139). While central steps in the recognition of these creators, the woodcut novels were only one aspect of the long and diverse careers of Masereel and Ward.

7 In this introduction, Eisner mentions only one title by Ward, *Frankenstein* (1934), which is not one of his novels in woodcuts but an illustrated edition of Mary Shelley’s novel. This adds another circumvolution to the path that links woodcut novels and graphic novels. Ward’s *Frankenstein* illustrations had recently been reprinted in the self-selected monograph *Storyteller Without Words: The Wood Engravings of Lynd Ward* (Harry N. Abrams) in 1974, accompanied by a New York exhibition. This book also featured other selected illustrations, next to his six wordless novels. Only two of these had been reprinted—separately—previously, in 1966 (*Gods’ Man*) and 1967 (*Wild Pilgrimage*), by World Publishing.

our predecessors.”⁸ The patrimonialization of the “forgotten” woodcut creators as pioneer graphic novelists is thus based on an indistinction between *chosen* references or inspirations and *direct* and *historical* continuity. The chosen artistic (non-linear) referential framework is transformed into a (linear) historical narrative that tells of an evolution towards the modern graphic novel.⁹ The “missing link” metaphor, used by Scott McCloud (19) as well as Monsieur Toussaint Louverture (in its promotional material for the Ward box set), is a direct expression of this linear reconstruction. This retrospective rewriting of comics history can be likened to the retconning process, common in long-term serial narratives.

Through retcon (retroactive continuity), new elements are added to an already-told narrative, tweaking inconsequential details or more largely changing its general (past and/or future) perspective. In that sense, the new “finding” of woodcut novels and their reinsertion into the past of comics indeed modifies the graphic novel lineage. In his discussion of retroactive continuity, Andrew J. Friedenthal highlights the proximity between retcon and the way history is written. He argues that “history is not a body of facts but rather the ongoing recreation of a contextualized narrative,” and adds that “the past [is] constantly rewritten through new information and interpretations” (Friedenthal 6). Like in Davallon’s model, the past is (re)defined by the present and scientific (historical) knowledge is central in the validation of this redefinition. Historical “findings” change history. In fiction, however, retcon is not so much a matter of historical correction as it is one of invention, due to poetic license and/or commercial incentives. In the case of the patrimonialization of woodcut novels as comics, the line between historical adjustments or corrections and reinvention appears very thin. If the historical existence of the woodcut novels and their later role in comics history, as influences claimed by creators, are documented, their retrospective qualification as

8 “Nous choisissons ce par quoi nous nous déclarons déterminés, nous nous présentons comme les continuateurs de ceux dont nous avons fait nos prédécesseurs” (quoted in Davallon 97; English translation by JMM).

9 Such a perspective is consistent with the coming-of-age narrative which is pervasive for comics (Pizzino 21-45), and that sees comics history as a constant progress from pulp origins to artistic and literary maturity. The inclusion of woodcut novels in this narrative makes it somewhat more complicated, but retains its implicit idea of progress.

“missing links” or as “graphic novels” is more rooted in contemporary representations and stakes.¹⁰

What are the rationales for a retcon in comics? It’s often an easy way of giving (at least a semblance of) density and depth to a new story development by relating it to the longer storyline. Retcon can also be, of course, a creative means of reinvigorating the narrative and to allow for new directions that the former continuity forbade. Both of these rationales (symbolic and creative) can be found in the retconning patrimonialization of woodcut novels. On a symbolic level, the reference to woodcut novels offers several distinction benefits to their promoters and to comics in general. These are prestigious forerunners or ancestors that help to justify the artistic legitimacy comics creators and publishers claim for themselves. Within the comics field, these references similarly help their re-publishers to distinguish themselves from more commercial and/or more traditional productions. Referring to this alternative past for comics can be seen as a position-taking (or position-making) strategy. This may be particularly useful for relative newcomers such as the two publishing houses involved in the reprinting of works by Masereel and Ward, that only recently started their comics-publishing activities.¹¹ On a creative level, woodcut novels offer another model of graphic narrative that can fit into an enlarged definition of the contemporary graphic novel as well as form the basis for different formal experiments. The creation by Martin de Halleux of a specific series dedicated to such experiments is a direct illustration of the creative effects of this retconning patrimonialization. In the *25 images* series started in 2020, contemporary comics creators follow Masereel’s *25 images de la passion d’un homme* example to create new ambitious black and white, wordless narratives in the restricted format of 25 full-page images. The past “literally provides visual archives to draw from” (Crucifix 24): past works offer aesthetic references and patterns for new creations.

The “symbolic annexation” (“annexion symbolique,” Davallon 84; English translation by JMM) of woodcut novels by comics thus produces

10 Thierry Smolderen (2011) points out the methodological risks of reversing the arrow of time when studying comics’ past. Anachronisms and present-informed retrospective re-qualifications bias our understanding of complex historical evolutions.

11 Monsieur Toussaint Louverture is a small publishing house created in 2004, the catalogue of which mixes novels and only a few comics, but which got the French publishing rights for Emil Ferris’ bestselling *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*; Éditions Martin de Halleux is an even more recent publishing house, created in 2018, that publishes only a few books a year, specializing in books dedicated to images and narration.

effects on the present state of the comics field. This directly echoes another remark made by Pouillon about “reverse filiation”: “it is the sons who beget their fathers to justify the actual changes that they bring to the existing system.”¹² The way the present looks at the past is determined by present issues.

The patrimonialization of woodcut novels as comics heritage is based on a double movement: a temporal shift—from the present to the past—and a contextual one—from one field of cultural production (comics) to another (fine arts). The first operator of this patrimonializing process are the reprints of the woodcut works and their paratextual components.

3. The Paratextual Apparatus of Patrimonialization

Reprinting these woodcut novels, and distributing them in bookshops and comic shops, is a first bridging of the temporal and sectoral gaps but the paratext (Genette) of these reprints is also an essential aspect of this process. The paratext helps establish the double continuity between past woodcut novels and contemporary comics, creating a double “suture” (Davallon 114), between periods and between fields. As we’ll see, it also makes the suture seamless, thus naturalizing the result of the process.

According to Jean Davallon, what stitches the past and the present together is not only the patrimonial object itself (which is the material presence of the past in the present), but also the historical discourse on this object (114). This discourse, produced in the present, authenticates the origins of the object and details its original context. The Martin de Halleux edition of Masereel’s woodcut works offer such historiographical paratexts. Each book includes a historical presentation of the reprinted work as well as a general chronological biography of its creator. When possible, historical documents such as related illustrations or photographs of the original woodblocks are included as appendices. These peritextual elements are written by an art historian, Samuel Dégardin, a specialist of Masereel’s body of work. Dégardin also contributed to the monograph released by this publisher in 2018, which constitutes another (epitextual) part of this historical accompaniment of the republished woodcut

12 “ce sont les fils qui engendrent leurs pères pour justifier les changements réels qu’ils apportent au système existant” (“Plus” 208; English translation by JMM).

works.¹³ In Monsieur Toussaint Louverture's Ward box set, a postface by Art Spiegelman, both as an influential creator and as an active historian of the form, similarly provides historical elements.

For Masereel's works, the temporal suture also takes another form. The publisher further asserts the contemporary presence of these works by giving them new developments through a parallel imprint dedicated to original works by current creators. The *25 images* collection was launched in 2020. According to its own definition (reproduced in the endpaper of the books), "the aim for the authors is to create a short work in 25 images—one per page, in black and white, without text—following the format defined by Frans Masereel in 1918 for his book *25 images de la passion d'un homme*, the first modern wordless novel."¹⁴ The past creation is reactivated by its present continuators. The relation between the past and the present is thus both historiographical and creative.

The second suture operated by the paratext unites Masereel's fine arts field and today's comics field. The paratextual tools used by the publisher, Martin de Halleux, organize both a dialogue and an indistinction between these fields. The *25 images* collection contributes to this second operation. Indeed, the two books in this imprint are works made by creators active in (but not restricted to) comics: Thomas Ott, well known for his scratchboard drawing style; and Joe Pinelli, recognized for his expressive style of comics. Furthermore, all of Masereel's woodcut novels (as well as the monograph dedicated to him) come with an original preface. Except for *Idée*, prefaced by the writer Lola Lafon, all these texts are written by creators strongly associated with comics: Charles Berberian, Eric Drooker, Loustal, Tardi, Blexbolex and the aforementioned Thomas Ott. Modern comics creators enter a dialogue there with Masereel's narrative techniques, style and themes. The relation between the fields is made even more fluid by the versatile (Méon)—or "polymorphic" (Menu 149)—

13 For Genette (11), the paratext of a work includes the peritext, which is directly present within the material edition of this work, and the epitext, which encompasses all the contents related to the work but located outside of its material support. Thus, here, I include in the paratext those works whose co-presence within the publisher's catalogue qualifies them as epitextual elements. At the very least, these productions contribute to the publisher's identity, which frames the perception of the considered Masereel works. More directly, in the discussed example, they explicitly relate to Masereel's woodcut novels, such as the Masereel monograph.

14 "Il s'agit pour les auteurs de créer un format court en 25 images—une par page, en noir et blanc, sans textes— tel qu'il a été défini en 1918 par Frans Masereel pour son livre *25 images de la passion d'un homme*" (English translation by JMM).

careers of these creators, who combine comics with illustration, serigraphy or painting. The Ward box set published by Monsieur Toussaint Louverture similarly uses this cross-referencing: the postface to Ward's novels is written by Art Spiegelman, the wrap-around band of the box set features a quote by Will Eisner and the promotional material cites Alan Moore.

The materiality of the Martin de Halleux books contributes to the seamlessness of this suture. They all share a similar format: hardcover, more or less A4-sized, similar materials for covers and pages, and a minimalist color scheme (black and white with one added color). This homogeneity creates a strong visual identity for the publisher's production; it also establishes a form of indistinction between fields, creators and works within that collection. Masereel's woodcut novels, Ott's and Pinelli's graphic novellas, Youssef Daoudi's graphic novel (on Thelonius Monk), Loustal's illustrations for Henry Levet's poems, José Guadalupe Posada's *calaveras* and Félix Vallotton's engravings all blend into one indistinct ensemble of figurative and narrative black and white drawings.¹⁵ Reversing the process Bart Beaty described regarding Crumb's exhibitions in art museums, which primarily situate the cartoonist's works in a satirical and fine art tradition (204-206), Masereel and comics (as well as Posada and Vallotton) are (re)framed within different contexts.¹⁶ Masereel's work can be seen as comics, while comics can belong to a larger graphic ensemble that encompasses diverse traditions of engraving and drawing.

Peritext is a common place for generic definitions of a work (Genette 98-106) and the woodcut novels reprints indeed use labels stating the nature of these works. The reference to the "graphic novel" is central here as the open and fluid nature of this label (Baetens & al.) allows for variations and adjustments in its definition. Moreover, the contemporary "graphic novel" (or at least one of its currents) relies on "a reflexive relationship

15 In a similar move, a book covering Posada's career and works was also published the same year (2019) by the French comics publishing house, L'Association (Bianchi).

16 The homogenising effects of juxtaposition can be observed in other recent examples. Masereel's drawings were recently featured next to contemporary comics and illustration works in the 2021 *Big City Life* exhibition, presented by the Cartoonmuseum of Basel. In 2019, the Belgian *Blow Book* imprint published a woodcut narrative (Carl Mefert's *Nuit sur l'Allemagne, 1937-1938*) next to a 1942 detective comics (Maz's *Dick Bos*) and two new creations (Dimitri Piot's *Salaryman* and Manuel's "Au Travail"), all in the same small format, creating formal echoes between these diverse works. More generally, the Angoulême "heritage award" (Prix du patrimoine) similarly embeds in comics' past works produced out of comics tradition (such as Gustave Doré's *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, for example, which was included in the 2019 selection).

to its own historicity, concretized in the uses and appropriations of older comics that the graphic novel has lent to” (Crucifix 19). Referring to this ‘graphic novel’ label makes it possible to consider together works created in different times and in different artistic contexts. The limits or the ambiguities of the comics patrimonialization of woodcut novels are thus attenuated and the results of the process (woodcut novels as comics heritage) is naturalized.

The “roman graphique” (graphic novel) label has sometimes been slapped on woodcut novels quite squarely. The French editions of George Walker’s anthology (2010 [2007]) and David Beronä’s historical book (2009 [2008]) both kept the reference to “graphic novels” in their titles.¹⁷ The 2015 edition of Masereel’s *Le Soleil*, by the small publisher Editions du Ravin Bleu, presented it directly as a “graphic novel” on its cover, also using the term in a Stefan Zweig quote on one of the cover flaps.¹⁸ But the more recent woodcut reprints referred to this label with more nuances, or precautions. The direct and indirect paratextual qualifications of Masereel’s and Ward’s books are characterized by an important terminological indecision, also resulting in different presentations of the nature of the link between woodcut books and contemporary ‘graphic novels.’

For example, looking at the peritext of Martin de Halleux’s edition of *25 images de la passion d’un homme*, four different formulations can be found: “wordless novel” (“roman sans paroles”), “wordless novel in pictures” (“roman en images sans parole”), “modern wordless novel” (“roman sans paroles moderne”), and “modern wordless graphic novel” (“roman graphique sans paroles moderne”; English translations are mine). Monsieur Toussaint Louverture’s Ward box set uses the general label of “engraved narratives” (“récits gravés”) but also sports a Will Eisner quote mentioning “graphic novel” (“roman graphique”). The publisher

17 The French edition of Beronä’s book is a good illustration of how translation increases the terminological ambiguities in qualifying the woodcut novels. Its default translation of “woodcut novel” or “wordless novel” as “roman graphique” [graphic novel] blurs the distinction between these expressions and often makes the nuances in Beronä’s historical point disappear. This argumentative simplification is present in the translation of the title itself: *Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels* becomes *Le Roman graphique, des origines aux années 1950* [The Graphic Novel – From its Origins to the Fifties]. Similarly, George Walker’s *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels* became *Gravures rebelles: 4 romans graphiques* [Rebel engravings: 4 graphic novels].

18 In the original German version, Stefan Zweig used “bildnerische Romane” to describe the woodcut books, a direct translation of Masereel’s choice of “roman in beldeen” [novel in pictures].

also used “woodcut narratives” (“*récits en gravure sur bois*”) and “wordless novels” (“*romans sans paroles*”; English translations are mine). All these variations bear the traces of different historical contexts, they echo how these works have been qualified through the decades and what they’ve been compared to, including the contemporary *graphic novel* label.

These variations highlight different constitutive features of these works. Are they defined by their engraved style? Or by their “graphic” nature and their visual form of narration? By their non-use of words? Or by their “modern” approach of older forms? All of these criteria can be considered of course, but highlighting one instead of another puts the works in different perspectives and different ensembles. Graphic novels are *one* of these ensembles, but the exact articulation between woodcut books and graphic novels is also subject to variations when considering the paratextual presentations of these works and their creators. Three forms of articulation can be identified. Woodcut books appear as ancestors and pre-figurations of the contemporary graphic novels: Ward as the “forerunner of the graphic novel”¹⁹ or as its *pathfinder* (“*éclaireur*”; title of the box set). They also are presented as the direct originators of the new form: Masereel as “inventor of the modern wordless graphic novel,”²⁰ *25 images de la passion d’un homme* as the “first modern wordless novel.”²¹ Finally, they’re seen as a “previously missing link in the ninth art history”²² (Ward’s books according to Monsieur Toussaint Louverture in its promotional leaflet), uniting different art forms of different periods.

The “circular circulation” (Bourdieu 22) of paratextual qualifications partly resolves these unstable or contradictory statements.²³ On its website, the publisher Martin de Halleux displays excerpts of press reviews of the Masereel books. On the *25 images de la passion d’un homme* page, one of the quoted reviews comes from a French magazine dedicated to comics and visual arts, *Les Arts dessinés*, stating that this book is “considered as the

19 “précurseur du roman graphique” (Eisner quoted by the *L’Éclaireur* box set; English translation by JMM).

20 “inventeur du roman graphique sans paroles moderne” (English translation by JMM).

21 “premier roman sans paroles moderne” (English translation by JMM).

22 “chaînon jusque-là manquant du neuvième art” (English translation by JMM).

23 I borrow the expression from Pierre Bourdieu, who used “circular circulation” to describe how media that quote each other in a seemingly circular fashion homogenise the news.

first modern graphic novel.”²⁴ What was presented as a “wordless novel” or a “(modern) wordless graphic novel” in the peritext is requalified as a “modern graphic novel” in its media reception and then can be presented as such in the promotional editorial epitext: the paratextual qualification process comes full circle and the nuanced or ambiguous original qualifiers are replaced with the more conventional label of “graphic novel.” The symbolic annexation of woodcut books by comics and graphic novels, brought about through the patrimonialization process, is thus naturalized.²⁵

These paratextual operations touch upon the status of comics and of their creators and publishers. Annexing woodcut novels offers symbolic benefits to a form characterized by its hybrid nature, by its intermediate situation between more legitimate artistic domains.

4. Turning an *Entre-deux* Situation into a Third Position

The terminological instability in designing Masereel’s and Ward’s books in their current paratext—and the ambivalences it produces— can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, this instability reflects the processual nature of this patrimonialization, consisting in the collective production of an equivalence between woodcut books, and graphic novels and comics. The equivalence is initiated by the publishers, reinforced by its critical reception and then re-appropriated by the publishers. On the other hand, the instability also reflects the symbolic tensions that the editorial paratext tries to manage and to overcome. According to these paratextual indications, the woodcut books are to be seen as comics without being comics, as graphic novels without being ordinary graphic novels, as “wordless novels” but not only, as past works but “modern”

24 “considéré comme le premier roman graphique moderne” (“25 images”; English translation by JMM).

25 This circular process could be similarly seen in the case of Monsieur Toussaint Louverture’s Ward box set, for which the 2021 Angoulême heritage award even more strongly validates the transition from one field to another. For Nüchel’s *Destin*, the observation is the same: the paratextual precaution (the back cover presents the work as a “roman graphique sans paroles” [wordless graphic novel]) is partially lost in its review by *Le Monde*, published under the “roman graphique” [graphic novel] section of the newspaper’s literary supplement (25 June 2021).

and, as such, still relevant. What is at stake here is distinction—within or without the comics field.

Patrimonialization is a process that redefines the past and requalifies products and practices from a present perspective, but it also has effects on present representations (“it is the sons who beget their fathers to justify the actual changes that they bring to the existing system” wrote Jean Pouillon (“Plus” 208)).²⁶ The use of the label “graphic novel” in reference to woodcut novels has an effect on its definition. It marks a partial departure from or a broadening of the definition of the “graphic novel” as it has evolved over the past decades, which associates a genre and a format, and forms “a specific, and independent, kind of comics” (Baetens et al. 8-9). This play on definitions offers the publishers distinction from their competitors in the field and on the market; it creates a new position they can occupy.

Physically, Monsieur Toussaint Louverture’s Ward books stick to the dominant model of the literary graphic novel: these small dust-jacketed volumes blend in with the rest of the literary production of the publisher. Martin de Halleux’s books partly diverge from the standard book format: Masereel’s titles are hardcover volumes a little larger than the most common format, with a page count that varies from long-length narratives (224 pages for *Mon livre d’heures*) to much shorter ones (64 pages for *25 images de la passion d’un homme*). The Masereel-inspired books published in the *25 images* collection drift a little further. These larger hardcover volumes, with only 32 pages, reintroduce something very akin to the classic album format that the graphic novel tried to distance itself from. Formally, the differences with the graphic novel model are stronger. The wordless nature of these works prevents the presence of “freer and more sophisticated” words and writing (Baetens et al. 10).²⁷ The one-image-per-page narration breaks with the dominant layout of panels (or moments) juxtaposition. It also gives a strong primacy to the graphic dimension of these (nevertheless narrative) works, that thus partly resist the “strong

26 “ce sont les fils qui engendrent leurs pères pour justifier les changements réels qu’ils apportent au système existant” (English translation by JMM).

27 It should not be inferred from my remark that graphic novels have to include text—contemporary examples of long-length wordless narratives are numerous in the genre (Postema). Yet contemporary graphic novels often do use text, echoing the literary tropism that marks the genre (Baetens et al. 10), and a total absence of text is the exception.

gravitational pull” exerted by “the literary current” on graphic novels (Baetens et al. 11).

These are indeed black and white graphic narratives for adult readers but slightly at odds with what has become the graphic novel genre. In this context, the “graphic novel” appears in a more open manner, as a space of graphic expression. It’s such an approach that Monsieur Toussaint Louverture explicitly puts forward in the promotional epitext of the *L’Éclaireur* box set:

Whether the graphic novel is a marketing ploy or the expression of an artistic will, this term often defines a territory of original works, neither comics, nor experimentations nor novels, but all of this at once. This expression emphasizes the creative gesture, eager to liberate itself from genres, norms and borders.²⁸

As any field, the comics field is a social and symbolic space of struggles, where competing regimes of value are promoted by different actors trying to impose their own definitions of the field’s central issue (comics and their value, in this case) and thus trying to reinforce their own position within the field; some of these strategies borrow references and criteria from other more established and prestigious social spaces, such as the art and the literary fields, thus paradoxically founding the comics field’s autonomy on heteronomous regimes of value (Beaty and Woo 138-139).²⁹ This paradox is apparent in the current comics patrimonialization of woodcut novels.

The editorial efforts of the publishing houses that recently reprinted Ward’s and Masereel’s works indeed take place in this paradoxical field context. The symbolic benefits for these actors directly come from the way their actions combine the legitimizing values from different fields. As already mentioned, their reprinting of Ward and Masereel is in relation with comics as much as it is with art history (Vallotton or Posada

28 “Que le roman graphique soit une trouvaille marketing ou une volonté artistique, ce terme définit souvent un territoire d’œuvres uniques, ni bandes dessinées, ni romans, et tout cela à la fois. Il souligne le geste créatif désirant s’affranchir des genres, des normes et des frontières” (English translation by JMM).

29 Beaty and Woo’s analysis is about the US comic book field. I consider that their idea of a paradoxical autonomy that relies on heteronomous values and criteria can be applied to the French comics field—even though Beaty and Woo rightly note that some autonomous critical apparatuses have developed for this national field since the Seventies. Indeed, the reliance on external institutions (national non-comics museums, literary publishers, the Ministry of Culture) is important for the French field, for its organisation, for the production of its cultural legitimacy. This produces similar heteronomous effects for the field.

published by Martin de Halleux) or literature (the literary catalogue of Monsieur Toussaint Louverture). For these publishers, multipositionality brings symbolic capital. For comics, these efforts increase cultural legitimacy.

But in this legitimizing process, woodcut novels also offer an opportunity to claim symbolic and artistic autonomy for comics—or more precisely “graphic novels,” as redefined in the paratext of these reprints. The prefaces in Martin de Halleux’s Masereel books illustrate what this autonomy affirming strategy can be. As already mentioned, these prefaces are, but for one exception, written by creators involved in comics (Charles Berberian, Loustal, Thomas Ott, Blexbolex, Tardi).³⁰ Yet, they make no explicit references to comics. They instead deal with larger artistic issues: composition and style (Ott draws the attention to the absence of superfluous lines; Loustal notes how, for Masereel, light precedes line; Blexbolex observes the importance of graphic contrasts) or the experience of artistic creation (Blexbolex). The wordless nature of these works brings forth references to cinema and silent movies, contemporary to Masereel’s works (Blexbolex, Tardi). But narration, and especially narration through images, is probably the central theme (Ott, Loustal, Tardi). According to Ott, Masereel uses “the reduction of effects, at once in the construction of the narrative and in his clear-cut style” (Ott 6³¹); Loustal praises Masereel’s ability to tell “the entire life of a giant in sixty drawings” (Loustal 5³²); Tardi stresses out how “the images, distributed in a rigorous narrative succession, [...], are self-sufficient” (Tardi 5³³). Issues common to different art forms are put forward and the specific contributions of woodcut novels—and implicitly comics—are highlighted. These prefaces show how comics and comics creators can engage in a dialogue between equals with other art forms and creators.

The equivalence between woodcut novels and comics redefined as “graphic novels” allows for a double emancipation. It’s an emancipation from the literary tropism that characterizes graphic novels: the absence of

30 *Idée* is prefaced by the writer Lola Lafon. The monograph about Masereel (de Halleux) features an introduction by Eric Drooker, known for his illustrations and his wordless graphic novels.

31 “la réduction des effets, à la fois dans la conduit du récit, mais aussi dans son style tranché” (English translation by JMM).

32 “toute une vie de géant en soixante dessins” (English translation by JMM).

33 “les images “distribuées avec précision dans une rigoureuse succession narrative [...] se suffisent à elles-mêmes” (English translation by JMM).

words in the woodcut novels shifts definitional issues towards a form of graphic narration distinct from literary concerns. It's also an emancipation from the institutional and practical framework of fine arts: questions of graphic style and composition are taken out of museum rooms and walls and explored in books. Like Töpffers without words, artists having chosen books to express their visual art, Masereel and Ward can be presented as embodiments of the artistic autonomy that comics or "graphic novels" claim for themselves.³⁴ "Looking for clues as to where [his] "Low" Art and the High Arts intersected", Art Spiegelman found Masereel's stories and was amazed at how "Masereel's books seem to have found a loophole, allowing them to escape Lessing's law"—and its disqualifying effects for comics ("A Sigh" 5).³⁵ He stated that "each single pregnant image, untainted by words and formally complete in itself, just happens to give rise to another moment that happens to lie overleaf and forms...a narrative!" ("A Sigh" 5). Seized upon by patrimonialization and all its paratextual tools Masereel's and Ward's works can thus function as real philosophers' stones, turning an *entre-deux* situation with limited recognition into an autonomous third position, with greater potential for cultural legitimacy.

5. Conclusion

The reference to woodcut novels can be artistically invigorating and fruitful for comics, as demonstrated by works such as those of Eisner, Drooker or Ott, which draw their inspiration from these older creations. But it must be used with more caution when it comes to establishing comics history. The differences in their historical and sectoral contexts of production

34 Ward considered "the book [as] a unique form of expression... For the artist, the turning of the page is the thing he has that no other worker in the visual arts has: the power to control a succession of images in time" (quoted in Spiegelman "Reading Pictures" 667). Spiegelman sums up this point of view: "Lynd Ward made books. He had an abiding reverence for the book as an object. He understood its anatomy, respected every aspect of its production, intimately knew its history, and loved its potential to engage with an audience" ("Reading Pictures" ix). In a similar vein, in a letter to the artist Henry Van de Velde, Masereel wrote: "since before the war I wanted to write by drawing. It took me some time to find what now seems so simple and logical: a book of woodcuts, a novel of pictures" (Masereel quoted in Van Parys 416).

35 Spiegelman refers to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Paintings and Poetry* (1766) and the separation it establishes between painting, concerned with arranging colours and forms in space, and poetry, arranging words in time and narrative.

invite a reconsideration of the articulation between woodcut novels and contemporary graphic novels. If woodcut novels are to be reintroduced in comics history timeline, it's probably more heuristic to place them at the point at which they were chosen as outside references by some comics creators (from the 1970s onward, with a new vogue in the 2000s) than at the point at which they were originally produced (between the 1910s and the 1950s). Otherwise one runs “the risk of reducing the complexity and historicity as well as aesthetic value of such [woodcut novels] by recasting them as ‘mere’ predecessors in a forward-moving history” (Crucifix 22). A too direct reinsertion obscures the historical diversity of graphic narratives, which exceeds comics. There is also a risk of blurring the history of comics, whose evolutions, even though they followed polygraphic influences (Smolderen *Origins*), nevertheless took place in specific economic and editorial contexts.

In that sense, the current comics patrimonialization of woodcut novels is not so much a matter of rediscovering a forgotten past (or rather previously ignored elements of another past). “Enlist[ing] the past and the symbolic efficacy of the [patrimonial] object to justify present representations” (Davallon 199³⁶), it is a reconstruction of genealogy that offers a basis in the present for new legitimacy and distinction claims and new creative endeavors. When considered with Davallon’s patrimonialization process, the current comics approach to woodcut novels tells us more about the present than it does about the past.

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