

# The Ten Treasures

## Structuring a Course Using Ten Primary Sources from Special Collections

**S**an Diego State University (SDSU) has become a vibrant hub for comics scholarship, thanks to the transformative role of its Special Collections & University Archives' Comic Arts Collection. What began as a modest assortment of comic books evolved into one of the largest academic comics collections in the United States, fueling innovative teaching, interdisciplinary research, and international collaboration. The collection not only inspired new curricula but also united librarians, historians, artists, and scholars around a shared commitment to exploring comics as powerful tools of cultural expression and historical inquiry. In fall 2025, this spirit of collaboration culminated in an experimental course on comics history structured around “Ten Treasures” from the collection.

### A Collection Drives Change

When SDSU first began collecting comics, our holdings numbered just more than 3,000 single issues and graphic novels. Recognizing the region's deep connection to popular culture and the scholarly potential of comics, the university committed to building a major academic comics collection. Today, SDSU's Comic Arts Collection comprises more than 120,000 published comics, along with rare ephemera, zines, and archival materials.

University curricula often drive library collections. Librarians work to ensure collections map to curricular needs of students and research needs of faculty. In a rare twist, SDSU's Comic Arts Collection itself became the catalyst that inspired new courses, research initiatives, and collaborations across campus. Through outreach by librarians and early partnerships with faculty, the collection sparked a grassroots movement to integrate comics into teaching and scholarship. What began as informal conversations around a conference table evolved into a recognized Center for Comics Studies, bringing together more than forty-five faculty members from five academic colleges. This interdisciplinary group of humanists, educators, scientists, artists, and librarians has developed nearly twenty comics-focused courses in thirteen academic departments, demonstrating how a library collection can reshape an institution's intellectual landscape.

### Visiting International Professors

In fall 2025, the Center for Comics Studies launched its inaugural Comics-Scholar-in-Residence and Comic-Artist-in-Residence programs. The initiative is designed to connect SDSU with leading voices in comics scholarship and creation. The first residents were Laurence Grove, director of the Stirling Maxwell Centre for the Study of Text/Image Cultures at the University of Glasgow, and artist Vin Deighan (known professionally as Frank

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Quitely), the award-winning Scottish comic book artist celebrated for his work on *All-Star Superman* and *We3*.

Together, Grove and Deighan team-taught a special section of History 157: Comics and History, a course exploring how stories told through sequential art illuminate cultural realities and aesthetics across time. As SDSU's Comic Arts Librarian, the visiting professors worked closely with me to design a semester long syllabus structured around ten key "treasures" from the SDSU Library's Comic Arts Collection. Each treasure served as the foundation for a week's study, connecting primary sources directly to classroom inquiry.

To accommodate both the scope of the materials and the realities of access, the course blended in-person and virtual components. While two sessions brought students into Special Collections to examine items firsthand, the remaining sessions featured digital surrogates and live virtual presentations. This hybrid approach allowed students to engage deeply with rare materials while maintaining the momentum of an interactive classroom experience.



Scottish comic artist Vin Deighan (aka Frank Quitely) discusses the form and style of his art with attendees.

The result was a dynamic, research-driven course that showcased how librarians, scholars, and artists can collaboratively design curriculum grounded in primary sources. The Ten Treasures model not only illuminated the evolution of comics as an art form but also demonstrated the educational value of SDSU's expanding Comic Arts Collection and the global partnerships it continues to inspire.

## Grounding the Curriculum with Ten Treasures

Ahead of their arrival in the United States, the visiting professors outlined ten units for their course and shared their plans with me. I explored the primary source collection to identify materials that aligned with each unit's learning goals. Once the visitors reached campus, we met to review the options and select a treasure for each unit. This process created a deeply collaborative partnership that placed the library and its collections at the heart of the course. Further embedding the library in the curriculum, Treasure One was "The Collection Itself," emphasizing the intellectual and artistic goldmine available to students.

Considering the status of popular culture and the ongoing debate between high-brow and low-brow art, Treasure Two examined the works of Frank Quitely, most notably *All-Star Superman*. Quitely's work is significant not simply for its distinctive visual approach but also for how it demonstrates the narrative and artistic sophistication achievable within mainstream comics. His work challenges assumptions about the limitations of commercial superhero art by revealing how complex visual storytelling, thematic nuance, and formal experimentation can emerge from a so-called low-brow medium. Studying Quitely underscored for students how comics occupy a fluid space between mass entertainment and fine art, complicating rigid cultural hierarchies.



Treasure Three: Illuminated manuscript leaves on display at the Ten Treasures capstone event in fall 2025.

Treasure Three looked to illuminated manuscript leaves from the vault to examine the roots of sequential art. Examples from *St. Matthew's Gospel* (1400), a breviary (1430), the *French Book of Hours* (1470), and the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493) were studied to demonstrate early print production. Similarities to comics were seen in scribes using pencil lines to map out the page and then hand letter the text. They left room for illuminators to add illustrations and color. In later works, woodcuts were used to successfully integrate images into text.

The birth of the modern comic section was tackled using the oldest comic in the collection for Treasure Four: *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* (1849) by 19th-century Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer. America's first serialized newspaper comic, *Obadiah Oldbuck*, was later collected into book form, becoming the first American comic book and a major inspiration for the genre. Students studied this early example of the medium and its innovative blend of image and text.

Treasure Five used illustrated children's books to explore how comics fit within the broader landscape of children's literature. The class considered this medium as both a precursor to and a parallel track alongside comic book production. *The Seven Lady Godivas* (1939) by Dr. Seuss offered students a recognizable author but a story few students had encountered. The work opened space for discussions about how illustrated books evolved alongside comics and where their forms overlap or diverge.

We settled on “Girls’ Magazines” for Treasure Six to discuss the economics of comics production and how marketing became key to sales. Comic book tie-ins, crossovers, incentives, licensing franchises (like Disney), and target audiences have all driven what content is created by the US comic book industry. For example, in the 1940s, US comics began marketing specifically to girls. *Miss America* (1944) started as a bona fide comic and was changed to magazine format to entice girls with romance, fashion, and food, and comics such as *Nellie the Nurse* (1948) supported the post–World War II idea of women having careers—but only acceptable “pink collar” jobs that aligned with traditional femininity.

Treasure Seven was a first edition of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). In it, he warned that comic books were harming children and leading to juvenile delinquency. Despite his conclusions being deeply flawed, his opinions sparked a culture war that led to censorship in comics for decades. Shown alongside this first edition was a sampling of EC horror comics, which both Wertham and the US Congress targeted for censorship. This treasure allowed the class to consider the historical ramifications of censorship on comic book production and readership, as well as contemporary parallels to modern-day book-banning efforts.

To examine how underground comics and punk aesthetics represented alternative cultures, a full run of *RAW* magazine was selected as Treasure Eight. The Pulitzer Prize–winning comic *Maus* was originally published here in serialized format. *RAW* underscores the importance of alternative and underground comics through the humble origins of *Maus*, which first appeared not in a mainstream venue but rather serialized within the magazine’s experimental pages. Its emergence from this independent, artist-driven context demonstrated how the underground comix tradition fostered groundbreaking work that might otherwise have been excluded from commercial publishing, ultimately proving that transformative literary art could grow from the margins.



Student views the first installment of the original serialized publication of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize–winning comic *Maus* in *RAW* magazine.

Graphic Memoir is a genre of comics that has grown exponentially since the 1970s. At the same time, creators often incorporate autobiographical elements into works of fiction. For this section, the class looked at examples of both fiction and memoir, with Treasure Nine settling on Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012). An unconventional comic, *Building Stories* is a boxed set of fourteen separate printed objects, challenging traditional ideas of what constitutes a "book" by allowing the reader to assemble the story in any order. Although not strictly autobiographical in a literal sense, *Building Stories* draws heavily on Ware's personal experiences, and the modular structure of the comic mirrors the fragmented, nonlinear nature of memory, giving the work a unique narrative depth and positioning it as one of the most innovative experiments in contemporary comics.

For Treasure Ten, we asked the students, "What is your favorite comics-related item from Special Collections? It can be something you saw on your visit, in the exhibit, or another item of which you're aware of in the collection. Give as much info as you can to help Pam, your librarian, find your treasure." Their selections included a "treasure chest" of primary sources too numerous to list here, but they demonstrated deep and thoughtful engagement with both the course content and the Comic Arts Collection.

## Class Visits

While parts of the Ten Treasures course unfolded through digital access and virtual discussions, two in-person visits to SDSU's Special Collections & University Archives provided students with essential hands-on experiences. The first visit served as an introduction to the breadth and depth of the Comic Arts Collection. Materials were organized around the ten thematic sections of the course, offering students a comprehensive view of the collection's scope and helping them identify potential research materials for individual projects. This session encouraged students to see beyond the selected "treasures" and appreciate the expansive context from which they were drawn.

The second visit functioned as both a capstone experience and a public showcase. Open to the campus community, the public, and donors, the event displayed each of the Ten Treasures. Grove and Deighan delivered a public lecture, reflecting on the design and intent of the course and the pedagogical value of using primary sources in comics education. The session not only highlighted student engagement and faculty collaboration but also underscored the collection's role in advancing research, teaching, and outreach.

Through these visits, students gained a tangible understanding of the materiality of comics and the scholarly significance of archives. The experience demonstrated how direct interaction with primary sources can deepen learning, foster curiosity, and connect academic study to a broader cultural community.

## Conclusion

The Ten Treasures course exemplified how a university collection can spark innovation, collaboration, and global engagement. What began as a small, specialized archive has become a dynamic force for curricular and cultural transformation at SDSU. By uniting librarians, faculty, artists, and students around the shared study of comics, SDSU has created a model for interdisciplinary teaching grounded in primary sources and creative inquiry.

The success of the Ten Treasures initiative lies not only in its imaginative structure but also in its outcomes, including enhanced student engagement, international collaboration, and

deeper appreciation for comics as historical and artistic texts. The program demonstrated how hybrid pedagogy—combining digital access with hands-on archival encounters—can make rare materials central to classroom learning.

Today the Comic Arts Collection and the Center for Comics Studies stand as hallmarks of SDSU's commitment to scholarly innovation and community engagement. The Ten Treasures course has proven that when librarians and faculty collaborate around shared resources and vision, a collection can do more than support research—it can inspire it. *~*