Arts

SMALLS, BIG CHIN!

Exhibition showcases unique art of pulp novels' covers

BY AMY Griffin
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

The term "pulp fiction" might bring to mind Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film, but when his title references a genre of popular novels in the 1920s to '40s with garish, eye-catching covers. The original paintings for these covers are now the subject of "Pulp Fiction Painting: Selections from the Robert Lesser Collection," now on view at Union College's Mandeville Gallery. The mass-produced pulp novels got their name from the paper on which they were printed. 'Before it was rag paper, and rag paper is much more expensive. Wood pulp is cheap, and this allowed them to create these dime novels, as they called them,' says Marie Costello, director of the Mandeville Gallery.

Writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and H.G. Wells put out their start with dime novels. The stories were filled with all kinds of action, and adventure, hard-boiled detectives and glamorous dames in distress, strange new worlds and science gone wrong. As these tales rose in popularity, so did the competition. To catch the eye of a prospective reader, publishers needed compelling covers. The art combined sensational imagery with garish color. "The publishers actually tested out colors in their offices with their uffice. Red and yellow proved to be the colors men were quickest to pick up," says Costello.

Lesser first collected space toys, inspired by 1950s space movies like "Forbidden Planet," but changed his focus in the 1970s to pulp art after discovering that each cover first existed as an oil painting. The images seem uniquely American, and that's part of the reason Lesser loves these paintings, says Costello. "He loves America. He's said that, here in America, art can be anything you want. We are the masses. The popular is accepted."

Although done novels for women existed — mostly romantic — the covers Lesser collects are from novels aimed at male audiences. The images on the covers are meant to encapsulate the story without giving too much away — usually raising more questions than answers.

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On Exhibit

*PULP FICTION PAINTINGS: SELECTIONS FROM THE ROBERT LESHER COLLECTION*
- Where: Through Sept. 27, hours: Monday through Sunday, 10 to 6 p.m.
- Where: Mandeville Gallery, North Memorial, Union College Campus
- Admission: Free
- Info: 508-279-7393

MOVIE MARATHONS
- In the Reamer Center's Auditorium
- Film Noir: 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday Sept. 15
- Science Fiction: 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Thursday Sept. 22

LECTURE
- "Pulp Fiction and the Modern Reader," reception and lecture with Sladmore professor Janet Casey. Thursday Sept. 15, 7:30 to 8 p.m. North Memorial

ACTION!

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At Costello points out, "That's that touch of, 'What's going on here?' which is classic for pulp fiction covers. "They exploit all kinds of stereotypes. There are sexy painted ladies in nightgowns, always having some sort of danger though, it's 50 or 60 today, they're wearied or excited."

"There are scheming Asians, ruthless Arabs and always a strapping white man who saves the day." Relics of a particular era in America, the novels and their artwork left a lasting impression on pop culture, influencing art, film and literature. Originally, the paintings weren't valued beyond their use as cover art and were often discarded. The artists themselves didn't even like them — this was commercial work, not their "true" art. Fewer than 1,000 still exist, and Lesser has amassed one of the largest collections of them. Out of 200 paintings in his collection, 17 by 12 artists are displayed at the Mandeville. Lesser has permanently loaned the collection to the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut.

Costello, who was previously gallery director at Robert Lehman Art Center in Massachusetts, where the paintings were shown before this exhibit, thought the show would be perfect for a college gallery. Included in the exhibit is an informative documentary film, "Pulp Fiction Art: Cheap Thrills and Painted Nightmares," which gives the public an in-depth look into the genre.

On Sept. 15, Janet Casey, Sladmore professor of English and American studies will give a talk, "Pulp Fiction and the Modern Reader." Two movie marathons are also planned for September — film noir and science fiction. 

"DEATH AND THE SPIDER." - Helmut Dullo
"THE SHADOW: VENGEANCE BAY." - George Rozier