

Willy and Wanda, « An Island called Hoboken »,

Willy Vandersteen, 1946

In the Dutch-speaking part of the country, Spike and Suzy are, for most readers, at least as important as the adventures of Tintin created by Hergé. For them, Willy Vandersteen is the father of Flemish comics as we know them today: printed in a newspaper, with a family in the lead role recognisable to all, popular with the young and the old.

During a walk along the water, Suzy and Aunt Sidonia discover a mysterious vase containing a letter of an Antwerp explorer from the 16th century. With the help of a time travelling machine and a Gyronef, inventions of Professor Barabas, our heroes go in search of the unknown explorer on the Pacific island of Hoboken.

In his stories, Vandersteen often deals with current issues. The war years had just ended and food supplies resumed at a slow pace. Vandersteen's family is hungry, the people are hungry. Similarly on Hoboken, we see a divided society between Lean and Fat. When the Lean take control after a popular uprising, Suzy is crowned queen. On the strip we see Jacquot Lenfle (Jef Blaaskop), Chief Fat, in retreat, while Queen Suzy receives a minister in his bath.



For many reasons, "The Island of Hoboken" is a key album for Vandersteen and for the evolution of the Flemish comics. After the release of the first album in 1945, entitled "Rikki en Wiske in Chocowakije" Rikki, the big brother of Suzy, was largely criticised: he was too much like Tintin and also led his little sister in dangerous adventures. That's why Vandersteen removed Rikki from the series and gave the name he always intended to to his new hero. According Vandersteen, Spike, who is the same age as Suzy, will be a better partner. He was right.

The original drawings from 1946 are exceptional witnesses of the sparkling wit of the first adventures of Spike and Suzy, but they also bear the marks of later adaptations. We can clearly see Vandersteen's traditional method, working at the kitchen table on small sheets of paper which he later assembled. We can also note that the boards were subsequently much reworked, while new texts were pasted into the phylacteries for the Dutch edition of 1959. The original plates were not considered works of art that could be sold, but merely as an intermediate stage of the production process of an album.

If you now buy a copy of "The Island of Hoboken", it is a completely redesigned version from 1967 which, from a stylistic point of view, barely resembles the original we see here. The line is sleeker, more modern. Spike and Suzy have become young teenagers. The popular language was refined and the Flemish character had to give way to Dutch references so the album could be sold on the Dutch market. The original plates are therefore an essential part of the history of comics and are exceptional testimonies of the era in which they were born.