



Smithsonian American Art Museum

“Cultivating Dreamfulness”: Fantasy, Longing, and Commodity Culture in the Work of Winsor McCay

Katherine Roeder
Predoctoral Fellow
University of Delaware

Cartoonist Winsor McCay (1867–1934) is celebrated for the skillful draftsmanship and inventive design sense he displayed in the comic strips *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–14) and *The Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904–11). McCay created narratives of anticipation, abundance, and, ultimately, unfulfilled longing. My project will demonstrate that McCay’s interest in dreaming and fantasy was symptomatic of a larger cultural preoccupation with fantasy imagery that served to generate consumer desire in this period.

McCay’s most recognizable character, Little Nemo, continually embarks on epic journeys and encounters wondrous spectacles only to have the magical vision vanish when his mother awakens him in the final frame. I am particularly interested in how *Little Nemo in Slumberland* contributed to the proliferation of fantastic imagery at the turn of the century, and the concurrent rise of consumer culture and mass entertainment. Comic strips were a disposable commodity, one that relied on a lack of narrative closure to induce readers to purchase the next installment. McCay’s use of the comic strip medium managed to reflect upon its status as a commodity and reveal how fantasy and desire were used to advance consumerism. While McCay’s role as a pioneer of early cartoon and comic art has been extensively documented, no study yet exists that situates him in relation to the larger commodity culture of the early twentieth century. I hope to contextualize McCay’s work in relation to children’s literature, advertising, architecture, and film of the period in order to interrogate the commercial use of the fantastic.