

# OUT OF LINE

Tomi Ungerer:  
*Eat*, 1967,  
Vietnam War  
poster, 26½ by 21  
inches. Collection  
Rennert's Gallery,  
New York. ©  
Musées de la Ville  
de Strasbourg/  
Mathieu Bertola.

**The authors explore illustrator  
Tomi Ungerer's beloved children's books, as well as  
the more political and risqué sides of his work.**

**by Brooks Adams and Lisa Liebmann**

IN FEBRUARY OF 1956, a bumptious young man from Alsace arrived in New York with a bunch of drawings and a six-month visa, and found work almost immediately. Those were low-rent days in the city, not to mention that it was the dawning of *that* era in advertising. Within months, Tomi Ungerer was designing a campaign for Burroughs business machines and selling drawings to *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, *Life* and *Harper's Bazaar*. His marriage to a young woman he had met at the American Cultural Center in Strasbourg had the added benefit of resolving his visa problem. (She was the daughter of an Amarillo, Tex., sheriff!) Good luck struck again when Ungerer, ailing and just out of the hospital, somehow made it to an appointment with the legendary children's book editor Ursula Nordstrom (1910-1988).

Nordstrom, who since 1940 had been the director of what was then Harper & Brothers "juvenile" book department, liked to say she published "good books for bad children." She had already delivered *Stuart Little* (1945) and *Charlotte's Web* (1952) to the world, both by E.B. White and Garth Williams, as well as that most enchanting bedtime classic *Goodnight Moon* (1947), by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd. When she released Ungerer's *The Mellops Go Flying* (1957), about a family of pigs and their dachshund, followed by *CriCTOR* (1958), about the relationship between a boa constrictor and an elderly French lady—both of which he wrote as well as illustrated—the response was huge and money poured in. But Nordstrom had also uncorked something of a Rabelaisian genie from his bottle.

Throughout the '60s in New York, Ungerer lived high off the hog, rambunctiously so. He bought a house once belonging to Aaron Burr, in Greenwich Village, and had the bricks painted pink. He worked out of Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld's lavish former offices overlooking Times Square. He drove a beige Bentley. And he continued to produce gleeful, vivid books for children. There were three more Mellops installments in quick succession, as well as other books including *The Three Robbers* (1962), full of gorgeously saturated blacks, blues and reds; *Orlando the Brave Vulture* (1966), with its unlikely hero; the lyrical *Moon Man* (1967); and *Zeralda's Ogre* (1967), a poignant *Shrek* precursor. But Ungerer's pursuits, on and off the page, were various, and he proved a naughty boy himself.

HE WAS MARRIED for the second time in 1959, to a young fashion editor soon to be known as the savvy food writer Miriam Ungerer (*The Too Hot to Cook Book*, 1966), and found himself amid the city's high-profile intelligentsia. Miriam urged him to do more reading in English. She hosted what was essentially a literary salon. He became friendly with Tom Wolfe and George Plimpton and Stanley Kubrick and Philip Roth. He designed a poster for Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). He rented an East Hampton retreat with Roth. He collaborated with Günter Grass, whose first American edition (1961) of *The Tin Drum* includes Ungerer's linear illustrations. He hung out at Otto Preminger's notorious film production office and attended famously wild parties at the director's townhouse, leaving inscribed copies of his books for the presumably sleeping Preminger children.

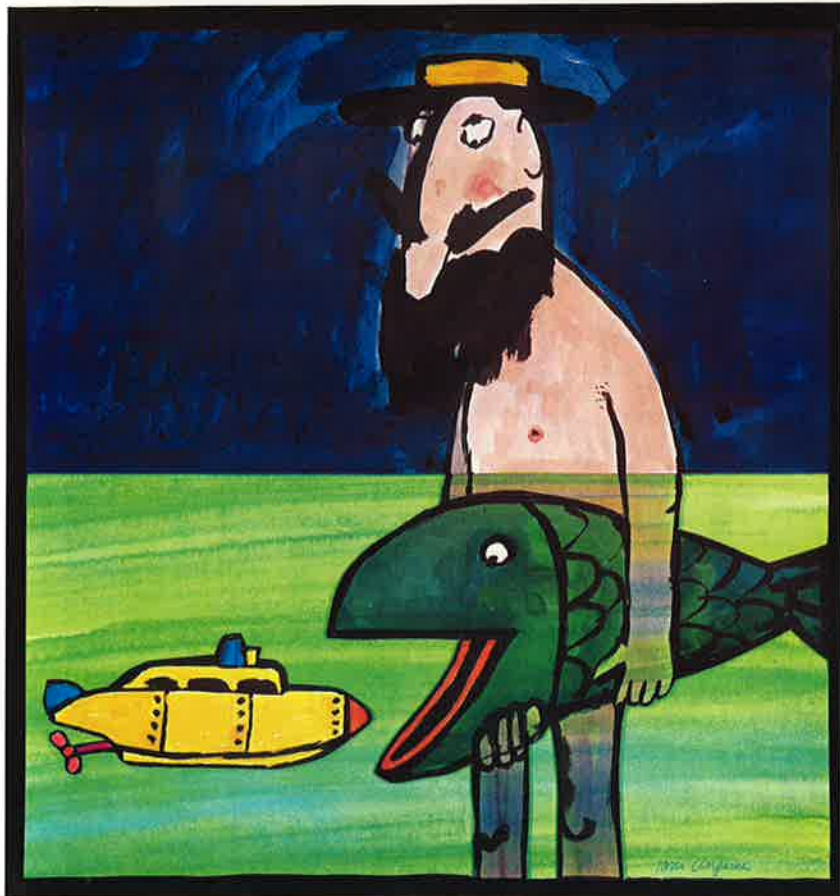
COMING SOON  
"Tomi Ungerer: All  
in One," Drawing  
Center, New York,  
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Contributors page.

EAT



# expect the unexpected



the **VOICE** The Weekly Newspaper of New York. At Newsstands.

Poster for the *Village Voice*, 1968, 44½ by 29½ inches. Collection Rennert's Gallery, New York. © Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg/Mathieu Bertola.

It appears that Ungerer became an obstreperous trickster figure. He broke in to empty weekend houses on Long Island, leaving behind trails of messed sheets and emptied glasses. He ignited a butane tank, which exploded, at one Hamptons backyard party, and stuck pebbles into uncooked meat patties at another—making “plenty of work for New York City dentists that summer,” as he recalled in an interview recently with a certain cheer.

Graphically, too, Ungerer seemed to bite hands that fed him, or at any rate gave him drinks. *The Party* (1966), a book of satirical drawings, imbues a famously liberal, urbane '60s milieu—the “radical chic” scene, shortly avant la lettre—with some of the sulphurous outrage and flair for surreal grotesquerie that we may associate with George Grosz's most scathing World War I and Weimar-era critiques. Only the Manhattan grotesques in Ungerer's books do not really seem to mock any specific people,

or address any specific horror or cause—well, maybe a horror of death itself. There is an air of the *Totentanz* about them.

But they are also representations of stock comic figures, endemic to the modern condition among “privileged classes” pretty much since Molière: there's the praying-mantis-like socialite, the porcine banker, the effeminate roué. The mixture, in these drawings, of abundant talent, an obvious lack of social insight or nuance, and overwrought allegorizing—rats, for instance, seen scrambling into the eye sockets of one portly partygoer—makes for a paradoxically flat viewing experience. Ungerer does not have a satirist's eye for the killer detail—unlike, say, Jessica Craig-Martin, whose rueful, devastating photo-portraits of latter-day benefit-circuit doyennes (those ferocious and bejeweled aging hands!) were taken during recent social seasons-in-hell.

Yet the drawings are indeed as virtuosic as Grosz's, perhaps more so. Ungerer is in a league with such prodigiously gifted and stylistically varied artists of roughly his own generation as Larry Rivers and Jim Dine. As for his penchant for the fantastical and the macabre, one has but to look to the many masters he copied in his youth, luminaries of the Northern Renaissance, including Hans Baldung Grien and Matthias Grünewald, whose Isenheim Altarpiece resides in Colmar, across the street from the bus stop where Ungerer used to wait to be taken to school.

UNGERER, BORN IN 1931 into a rigorously Protestant household, moved with his mother and three siblings from Strasbourg to a small town outside Colmar after his father died, in 1935. Growing up in culturally bifurcated, war-torn Alsace meant witnessing perversity and horrors both physical and psychological on a daily basis, during as well as after the war: whereas the French language was strictly banned by the German occupiers, any evidence of German-ness—long an intrinsic, even dominant aspect of the region's identity—was reviled by the victorious French. Ungerer's enduring outrage is thus rooted in, among other things, the sense of a primal right to one's own culture, which, in the case of Alsace, encompassed three native tongues: French, German and a rich local patois.

Soon after creating the cocktail party critiques, Ungerer produced some of his very best work, most of it geared to mass communication and commerce. There were ad campaigns for both the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. There is a clever and saucy poster for the legendary nightclub Electric Circus that has a delicate style denoting an irreverent nod to Saul Steinberg, another of Ungerer's masters, albeit a contemporary one. There is a charming 1968 poster for Truc, a cult boutique in Cambridge, Mass., wherein a cherubic lady, naked but for a hair ribbon and stockings, is milking a unicorn, with the caption “Truc is stranger than fiction.” (“Truc,” in colloquial French, means “thing” or “stuff,” as in “do your thing” or “bring your stuff.”)

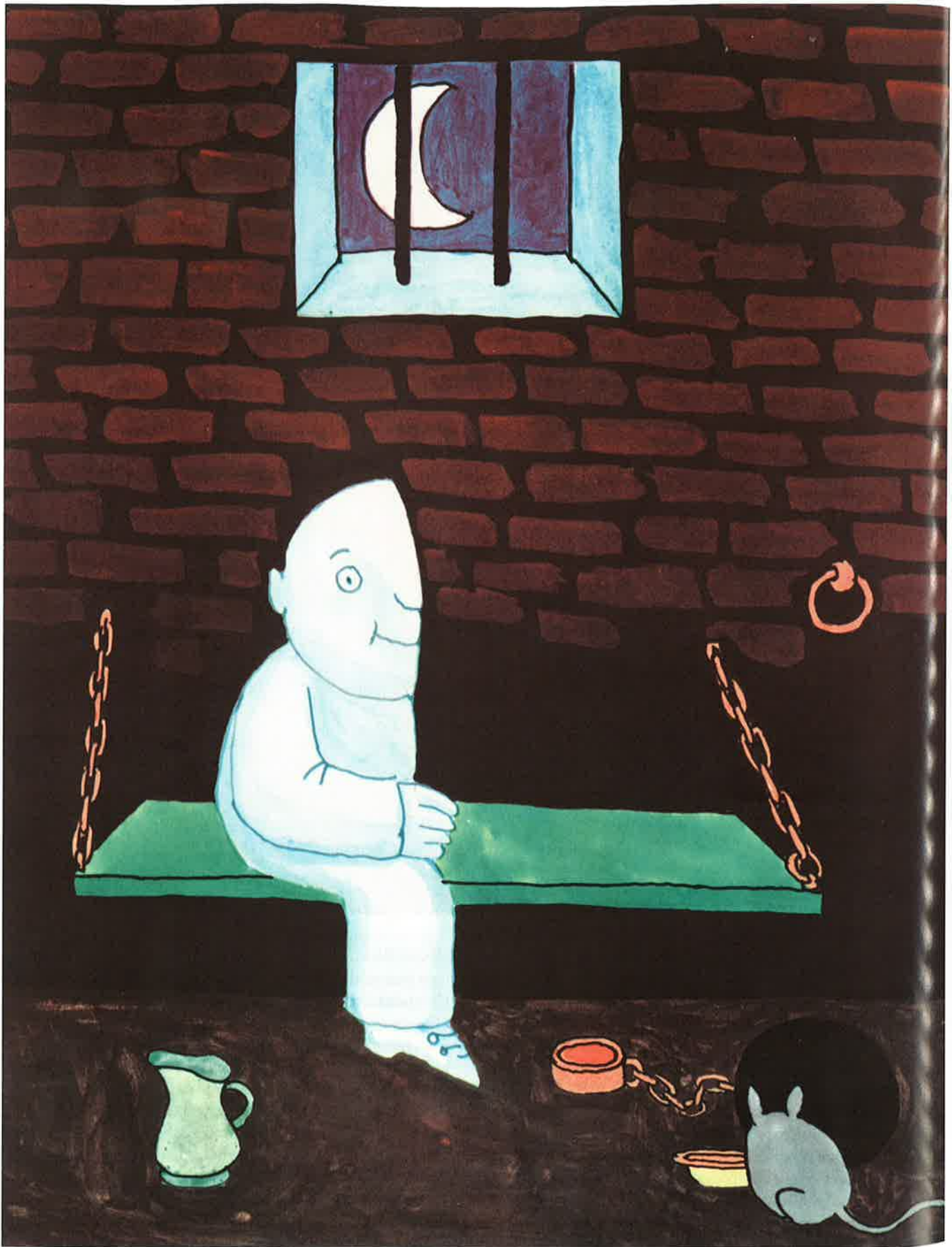
Ungerer's posters for a 1968 ad campaign promoting the *Village Voice*—“Expect the Unexpected” was its exuberant slogan—are period classics to rival Milton Glaser's famous 1967 poster for *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*, an Aubrey Beardsley-esque silhouetted profile of Dylan with multicolored, hyper-stylized hair. Ungerer's graphics are funkier, warmer and more



Untitled, 1966, ink and ink wash on paper, 18 inches square; published in *The Party*. Collection Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration, Strasbourg. © Diogenes Verlag AG, Zürich.

ribald, informed as they are by the ample and gemütlich pictorial tradition of Alsace and the ever-popular Hansi (Jean-Jacques Waltz), his countryman. It's a tradition that leans (heavily) on both picaresque and picturesque conventions—Walt Disney borrowed from it big time, especially for *Pinocchio*. (It also embraces the design and artisanal fabrication of toys and clocks. It must be noted here that Ungerer gave his vast collection of antique mechanical toys to the Musées la Ville de Strasbourg in 1975 and that the Ungerers were a family of clockmakers dating to the 14th century, responsible for the magnificent 19th-century astronomical clock in Strasbourg's renowned Cathedral of Notre Dame. His antique toys were later joined by his donation of most of his own original artwork to form the now seven-year-old museum named after him in Strasbourg.)

UNGERER'S ANGER, too, found apt expression in the later part of the decade. When, in 1967, a consortium of Columbia University teachers and students rejected a series of seven anti-Vietnam-War posters they had commissioned from him ("too virulent" was their verdict), he published them himself, and they found their way into countless dorm rooms nevertheless. Several of these involve images of the Statue of Liberty, a monument created by Frédéric Bartholdi, a Colmar native. In *Eat*, a diminutive Liberty is being rammed down the throat of a crudely rendered Asian figure; in *Kiss for Peace*, our Lady of the Harbor is having her ass licked—frantically—by another Asian figure. A different poster in the series, of U.S. aircraft dropping gift-wrapped "presents" intermingled with "duds," may remind some viewers of Nancy



Untitled, 1968, pen, ink and tempera on paper, 13 by 9 7/8 inches; published in *Moon Man*. Courtesy Children's Literature Research Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.

**Ungerer's linear vignettes of machine-enabled sex acts feature various sensation-producing contraptions that are Rube Goldberg-like in both their complexity and their often comic denouement.**

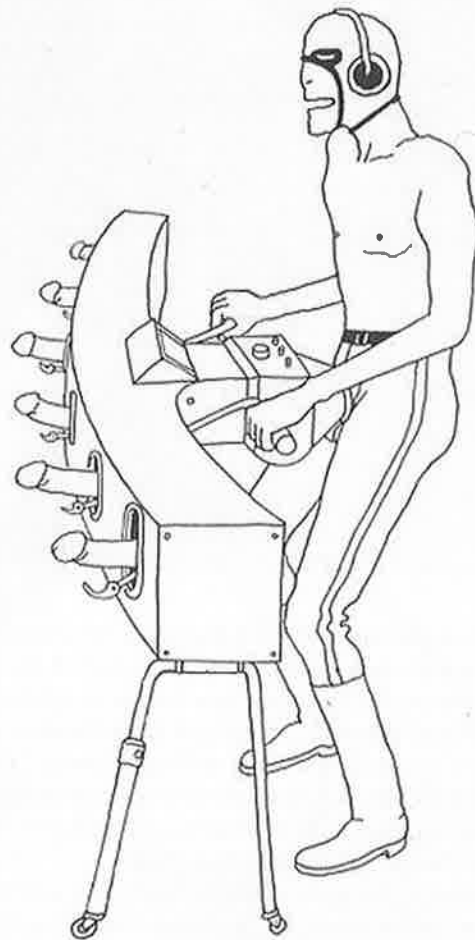
Spero's thematically similar but far more ethereal antiwar imagery. Ungerer also published his own hard-hitting posters on the subject of race relations: *Black Power/White Power*, the best-known of these, shows two emblematic figures in a "69" position, each devouring the other's phallic leg.

As the mood of the '60s darkened, so, too, it seems, did Ungerer's life and work. The Ungerers had a daughter in 1961, but their marriage dissolved before the end of the decade. Ziegfeld's Times Square aerie gave way to redevelopment. Ungerer sold the pink house. (This, interestingly, seems to have occasioned his one direct encounter with Andy Warhol, who came to look at it with his mother. Was the Factory scene too swish for this swashbuckler?) He got himself a *garçonnière* (a bachelor pad), and along with it—truc is stranger than fiction—a volunteer female "sex slave" to live in it with him for a while: Ungerer claims that reading Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1954) "changed my life."

The drawings that comprised "Fornicon," a 1969 gallery show followed by a book the next year, brought the artist's New York idyll to a close. Ungerer's linear vignettes of machine-enabled sex acts present a variety of confusing yet explicit, sensation-producing contraptions that are Rube Goldberg-like in both their complexity and their ineluctable, often comic denouement. Typically, a disembodied penis figure plays a beleaguered puppet role in these proceedings. Not surprisingly, the children's book librarians of America were not amused, and *CriCTOR* et al. were removed from library shelves—the babies were thrown out with the bathwater. By the mid-1970s, the books were out of print.

UNGERER'S LAST BOOK with Ursula Nordstrom was the frankly peeved *No Kiss for Mother* (1973), which was, among other things, a riposte to his friend Maurice Sendak's *A Kiss for Mother* (from Sendak's much earlier "Little Bear" series, with Else Holmelund Minarik). By this time, bummed out by the political climate in the U.S., Ungerer had already long since decamped to rural Nova Scotia with Yvonne Wright, to whom he was married in 1971 and who remains his wife. They bought a farm and had three children. They raised and butchered their own livestock, including pigs. The Mellops became dinner.

During his family's four tough years in a remote, shotgun-toting community that was largely hostile to them, Ungerer was able to channel the kind of creative energy that had defined his children's-book illustrations into an ambitious new project, an anthology of the traditional tunes and nursery rhymes he had loved as a child. His abiding affection for Hansi, and longstanding admiration for the 19th-century German Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge (an influence on Sendak, as well), permeate *Das grosse Liederbuch* (The Big Songbook), which was published in Switzerland in 1975 and became a huge success in German-speaking countries.



Untitled, 1969, ink on tracing paper, 14 by 11 inches; published in *Fornicon*. Collection Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration. © Diogenes Verlag AG.

At the same time, he reclaimed the old masterly techniques he had honed as a boy enthralled by Holbein. He produced beautiful drawings and watercolors of Canada's maritime landscapes, of animals and life on the farm, including meticulously observed depictions of the flaying and butchering of pigs that once again recall Grosz, who made a series of studies on that subject in the 1930s. Ungerer, as you will by now have noticed, has had many influences. Many of the Canadian watercolors may furthermore remind viewers of such homegrown American artists as Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper and the Wyeths (N.C. and Andrew). When the Ungerers left North America definitively in 1976 and bought a property in a rural but welcoming area on the southwest coast of Ireland, these moody, taciturn strains of Romantic naturalism continued to inform a lot of his work.



Untitled, 1999, ink wash and pencil on paper, 11¼ by 8¼ inches; published in *Otto: The Autobiography of a Teddy Bear*.

Untitled (*We want mothers*), 1977-79, black grease pencil on paper, 15¾ by 11¼ inches; published in *Babylon*.

Images this spread collection Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration. © Diogenes Verlag AG.

Between the mid-1970s and the turn of the century, Ungerer and his work alike went unseen in the U.S. In Europe, however, his reputation grew both as an artist and as a self-fashioned statesman. He lobbied for the creation of the European Union and for cultural exchange between Germany and France. He advocated for the preservation of endangered Germanic languages, notably Alsace's patois, which he has likened to Yiddish, as well as Yiddish itself.

Despite the demands of family, farm, civic activities, awards and publications, which also included an antinuclear protest book, Ungerer spent a great deal of time during the mid-1980s living in a Hamburg brothel—research for *SM, Guardian Angels of Hell* (1986), an illustrated book about prostitutes' lives. He became great friends with its madam, Domenica Niehoff, and in 2009 tried in vain to obtain the city's permission to design and install a public funerary monument in her honor. He also argued vigorously for the legalization of prostitution. And as well as designing a cat-shaped kindergarten in Karlsruhe, Germany, in collaboration with architect Ayla-Suzan Yöndel, he designed condoms for Strasbourg's safe-sex campaign.

In 2000, rather marvelously (*pace* all those 1970s librarians), Ungerer was named honorary ambassador for childhood and education by the Council of Europe. And in France, his backlist of children's books, published by the ubiquitous little-kid-lit imprint École des loisirs, was in healthy shape by the time we moved there with our three-year-old daughter, in 2001. We rediscovered Ungerer while perusing our old favorite, *Cricitor*, all together.

By that time the artist had resumed making children's books. *Flix* (1996) was his first such endeavor in over 20 years, and *Cats as Cats Can* (1997) was released without much fanfare in America. It was, however, with the publication on both continents of *Otto* (1999)—the tale of a teddy bear and its two owners, childhood friends, one Jewish and one not—that the current Ungerer revival began to simmer: by 2011, Phaidon had reissued most of the backlist, and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass., presented a show of Ungerer's work that same year.

But it wasn't until we went to Strasbourg in January of 2012 to have a look at the Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration, which had opened in 2007 in an 1890s villa clarified and reconfigured by the Paris-based architects Emmanuel Combarel and Dominique Marrec, under the directorship of the indefatigable Ungerer scholar Thérèse Willer, that we gained a sense of the breadth and scope of Ungerer's oeuvre. The exhibition on view then, "Tomi Ungerer and his Masters: Inspirations and Dialogues," comprised sections on Ungerer and the Rhineland masters, the German Romantics and Hansi, among several other sections. A whole basement room was devoted to "Dark Eroticism," wherein Ungerer's seldom-seen Barbie doll assemblages (ca. 1960), along with examples of his 1970s erotica, were juxtaposed with works by Hans Bellmer, Richard Lindner and Allen Jones, as well as John Willie and Irving Klaw, publishers of 1950s mail-order bondage zines.

Perhaps the most memorable of the influences was a very large, French colored engraving from 1746, *The Anatomical Angel, or Woman from the back dissected from the neck to the sacrum*, a medical illustration by Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, and an astonishing fusion of art and science, as well as a key—or perhaps a peephole—to the artist's anatomical explorations.

The Ungerer revival now in full swing will, we hope, reach critical mass and many new viewers with an upcoming exhibition devoted to the artist, scheduled to open at New York's Drawing Center in January 2015. Though necessarily much smaller in scale than the Strasbourg extravaganza, the show, selected by the center's curator, Claire Gilman, will nevertheless include works on paper from most of the periods mentioned here, including Ungerer's largely unknown Canadian years, and in most of the idioms discussed. It will encompass childhood drawings made during the Nazi occupation of Alsace as well as original watercolors from *Fog Island* (2013), his most recent book for children.

Gilman, who also rediscovered Ungerer through her own young children, spent time in Ireland with the artist and his family in preparing for the show, and has come to consider him a "great person," as she told us, as well as an extraordinary artist. Dear readers, take note: we agree.<sup>1</sup> ○

1. In addition to many of the children's books mentioned, the following scholarly volumes were invaluable in researching this article: *Tomi Ungerer et ses maîtres: Inspirations et dialogues*, ed. Thérèse Willer, Strasbourg, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg and Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration, 2012; *Tomi Ungerer: Graphic Art*, Thérèse Willer, Strasbourg, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg and Musée Tomi Ungerer—Centre international de l'illustration, 2011; and *Un Point c'est tout*, Ungerer and Stephan Müller, Montrouge, Bayard Editions, 2011. See also the film *Far Out Isn't Far Enough: The Tomi Ungerer Story*, dir. Brad Bernstein, 2012.

