

NEWSWATCH

Hal Foster Dead at 89

Tarzan and Prince Valiant Artist Was Comics' Classicist



One of comic art's giant influences, Harold Rudolph Foster, died on July 25, one month short of his 90th birthday. He had been ailing for some time and had long since relinquished the writing of his feature, *Prince Valiant*, as he had done with the drawing in 1971.

Born in Nova Scotia: Born on August 16, 1892, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Foster would in later years relate that he learned to draw fast in cold Canadian winters when hands could not afford to be free of mittens for too long.

In 1906 he moved with his family to Manitoba and at 18 went to work as a freelance artist, a newsboy, a prize fighter, and a gold prospector. In 1921 he rode a bicycle to Chicago (his wife and children followed later) and enrolled successively in the Art Institute, the Academy of Fine Arts, and the National Academy. Entering the field of advertising illustration, he soon became a solid journeyman.

Tarzan: In 1928 he was approached to draw a strip serialization of Burroughs's *Tarzan*, and he illustrated the three-month sequence (captions ran beneath his drawings) beginning the same day, Jan. 7, 1929, as another landmark strip, *Buck Rogers*.

In 1931 he agreed to draw the Sunday page of the United Feature comic. Thus, just short of 40, Foster embarked on a new career, and one that was to secure him a place in comics history.

Foster's style was ever the illustrator's—and the classical type in both thematics and figuration, as opposed to the magazine stylists (the early Raymond), the realist/impres-

sionists (Caniff, Sickles, et al.), or the expressionists (Gray and Gould). Nevertheless his solid, well-researched, anatomically-sound art influenced virtually every serious comics artist of his time. *Tarzan* seemed ever more majestic in Foster's hands, and the grandeur of panoramas and attention to detail both foreshadowed his later work.

The Birth of Valiant: The omnipresent talent-hunter William Randolph Hearst lured Foster to King Features with the promise of quality production, ownership, full writing freedom, and full-page formats. In 1937 Foster introduced his *Prince Valiant* (originally to be called Derek, Son of Thane, according to King publicity from the time) and it immediately became the prestigious comic among its peers.

The research that went into the writing and drawing of *Val* are legendary, and Foster won many awards, including the National Cartoonists Society "Reuben" in 1957. He was the first living artist named to the Museum of Cartoon Art's Hall of Fame.

The End of an Era: In 1971 he turned over the artistic chores over to John Cullen Murphy, who continues to draw *Val*. At first Foster supplied thumbnail sketches to accompany his script; and they survive as masterpieces of design and composition. Foster's dignity and understatement in his work detracted not at all from his ability to convey action, emotion, and action. *Val*, under his tutelage, was also the last major comic strip to be full-page on Sundays; Foster thereby in many ways embodied the ending of an era in comics by his passing. —RICK MARSCHALL—