

# MODESTLY, FOSTER

*Foreword by Dan Nadel*

**A**RN SABA: Do you have a feeling of satisfaction also that you're leaving in the world a great body of very fine work that people for generations are going to look at?

HAL FOSTER: Never thought of that, no.

ARN SABA: You don't think about immortality?

HAL FOSTER: No.

(From Arn Saba's interview with Hal Foster, 1979. *The Definitive Prince Valiant Companion*)

Hal Foster drew *Prince Valiant* while seated by a picture window looking out onto the fields of Redding, Connecticut. On occasion he would take a rifle and, still seated, fire off a couple rounds at some birds. He was known to take canoe trips as well, and for his long walks on the six-acre property. I am attached to the idea of Foster looking out onto the field and seeing in it the possibilities for drawing his medieval stories. He was a quiet, concerned artist, but also a man who, in his youth, bicycled 1000 miles from Winnipeg to Chicago to break into commercial art because he had no other means to get there. Not a bad parallel to his three decades of labor on *Prince Valiant*, the quality of which he was always demur about: "A number of people over the years have told me I am great," he told Arn Saba. "But I know myself better than anybody else does. I have to look at myself in the mirror when I shave, and I ask myself, is this fellow really so great?"

In print, Foster's matter-of-factness could be mistaken for sadness or wistfulness, but it seems to me he was a man with dry sense of humor and a Depression-era reserve with a story to tell, and a vision of that story as a job-in-progress. He went about with tenacity, but without grandiosity. There is a gentility and morality to his earth-bound sensibility. It's part of what makes the strip so appealing: Like its author, *Prince Valiant*, while ambitious, remains modest.

This volume of episodes sees Foster's Prince more or less in a state of adolescence. Not fully mature but not as rash as he was in the initial episodes; he is learning to measure his temper and power. And fittingly, the transition into full adulthood (he turns 18 in these episodes) occurs on a long adventure across what was, in the early

1940s, still called the Orient, and drawn with evident verve. The allegory here is not complicated: The journey is the maturation process, and any hero must complete the quest. For Val, the quest seems endless, and reading these strips one after the other we're treated to nuances of Val's character that otherwise might go unnoticed.

He is, of course, a romantic. But he is also vindictive and vengeful. In episodes 215 through 217 he is first jealous and also a bit of a snob as he realizes the young captain, Hector, is in love with the Princess Melody, who is far above Hector's status. But in a mixture of compassion (and vengeance against an earlier enemy to whom Melody is promised) he helps the young couple escape together. Later, in episode 250, after a villainous crew is set upon and killed by the villagers they had plundered, Foster focuses not on the physical violence but on the horror and anguish Val experiences as he watches the slaughter. Val's conflicting emotions and steep maturation curve seem alive and at the forefront of Foster's work in these early days. Foster achieved this intimacy between himself, Val and the audience in part because of his remarkable skill at staging and expressive body language. Even seemingly small moments are teased out for insight: Gawain and Val's first meeting with Sir Hubert in episode 269. Gawain growls, Val seems to roll his eyes, and Hubert plays the fool. And in episode 25, the reveal of Aleta's luminous face is contrasted with a rough young prince's outstretched hand, creating a lasting tension.

These episode also occasionally show off Foster's more classical "cartoonist" side — as in gags. Like tennis players and musicians, it sometimes seems like a lot of adventure

cartoonists wanted to be gag men, and vice versa (Stan Drake being an example of a man who longed for and did both), and so we get the straightforward comedic interplay of episode 276. Foster's knights are choreographed in a clumsy dance and the rhythm of their bodies is a nice and easy 1,2,3,4, 1,2,3,4, etc. But Foster, being an adventurer at heart, really takes off during action sequences. Foster, like few artists besides him, could expertly choreograph multiple figures in space. I know this sounds pedantic and mundane. But look at episode 273. Think of all the variables involved in that scene: Three walls of castle; archers aiming down in the cul-de-sac; soldiers facing every direction; weapons going every which way; smoke framing the panel and, still distant green hills in the background. And it's pulled together in a single moment, just after Hugh D'Arcy and his men, in vivid close-up, penetrate the castle walls.

In a 1994 interview with Gary Groth, Burne Hogarth, in his stentorian way, summed it up pretty well: "One of the great things [Hal Foster] did was to bring the human figure from the great achievements and virtues of Renaissance art, the whole of the empirical figure, down into that small space of a panel, and he made it live; there are damn few people who could ever do that. ... I began to realize that what I was doing, what [Alex] Raymond was doing; we were developing a whole new syntax of the figure. By that I mean taxonomy — the organization of all actions. No one had ever done it human history, no one! Not even Winsor McCay, because he always had that gravitational feel of the perspective of the great city forms, and the little figures that he did were rooted, again, down onto the bottom line of the panel; they were walking and standing on firm ground, he seldom lifted them up and let them soar, even though he had the chance in *Slumberland* to do that."

This seems like as good a description of the virtues of Foster as any, whatever hyperbole might be in play. What you get with Foster is drawing that is both present and constructed — that is not for a minute stiff — just a quick moment that leads to another moment. It is difficult these days to find the *good* artwork that Foster leads to — the branches he grew in the medium — but Jack Kirby (who was a young man at the time of present episodes) draws very much from what Hogarth describes: dream-like figures

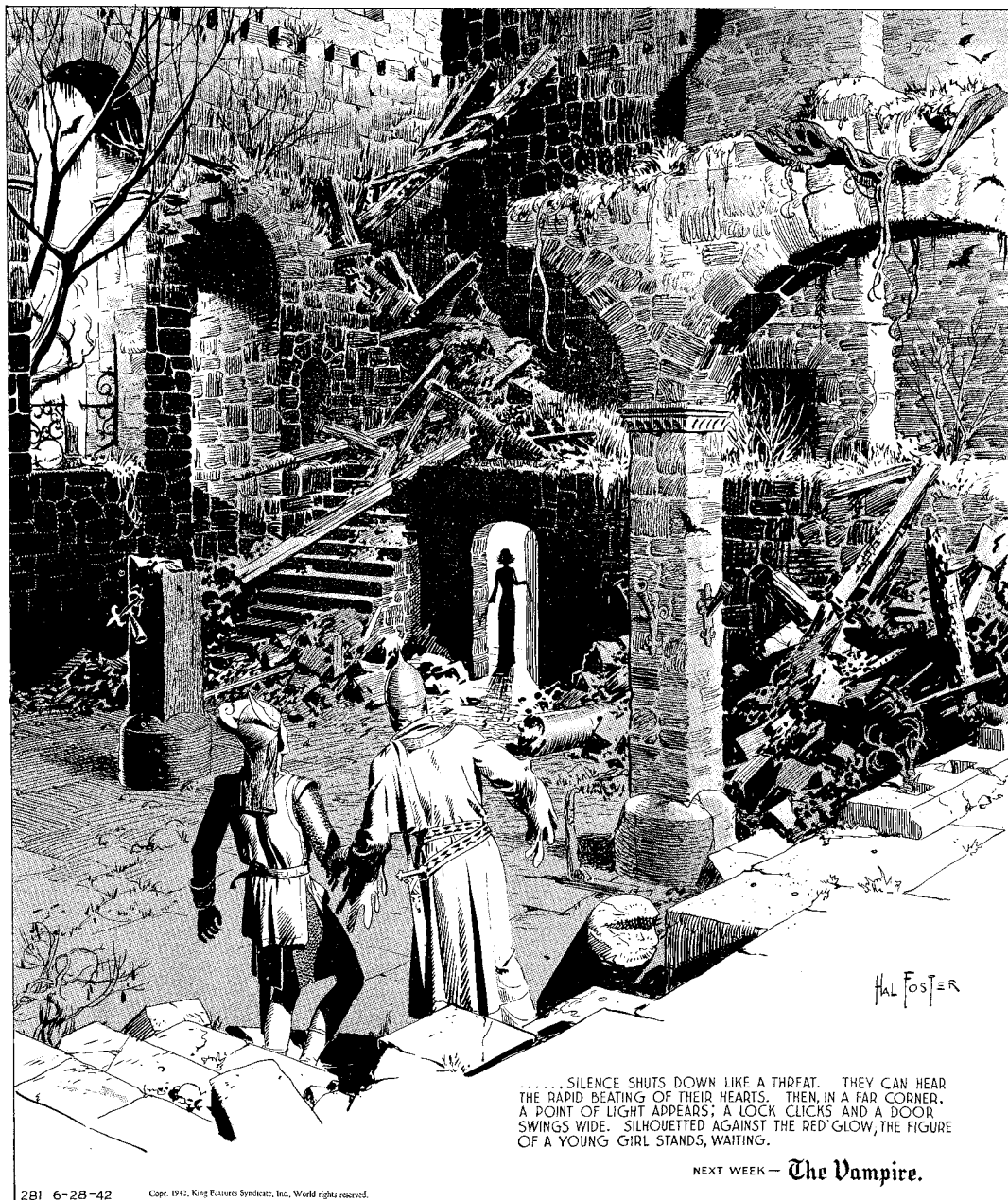
in play, in motion — moments of sublime force on a page. Drawings that act like a good comic strip panel should.

This kind of drawing, though, had roots in N.C. Wyeth: another artist who lived in the country and imagined the medieval action in the plains outside his windows. Wyeth completed his best and most famous work in the 1910s, just as Foster was coming of age. In composing his lavish single-image narratives, Wyeth was following but then surpassing his teacher, Howard Pyle. Wyeth's illustrations showed the action just before the action, everything in focus all at once. As his biographer, David Michaelis describes:

In literature, as in films, time advances, stories develop. No single paragraph or frame can tell the whole story. In painting, however, everything is visible all at once. The act of "seeing everything" in one supreme moment has particular potency in childhood, when it feels possible to experience all of time in that one moment. For a child, as for the onlooker of a painting, each single, present moment is the whole story. Past and future do not exist; and if emotions are keyed high enough, a single picture can be felt as an eternity.

Foster, of course, was doing this with multiple panels. And perhaps as a respite (though it's hard to imagine Foster ever just laying back), he allowed himself to compose romantic landscapes of the sort found in Episodes 222-225: minimal to the point of abstraction and heightened by with wispy lines and subtle color gradients. Color was never far from Foster's thoughts, and he took great care to ensure that his palette was preserved in print. And the prints here are, as is noted elsewhere, shockingly vivid. Foster's prince of lines and color grows up and into a medieval world of boundless possibilities — the kind of imaginary place that can only be dreamed up at a desk by a window, just off the fields. ✱

DAN NADEL is the publisher of *PictureBox*, the co-editor of the comics website *Comics Comics*, and the author of several books about comics, including his invaluable diptych on great eccentric cartoonists, *Art in Time: Unknown Comic Book Adventures, 1940-1980* (2010, Abrams) and *Art out of Time: Unknown Comic Book Adventures, 1900-1969* (2006, Abrams).



..... SILENCE SHUTS DOWN LIKE A THREAT. THEY CAN HEAR THE RAPID BEATING OF THEIR HEARTS. THEN, IN A FAR CORNER, A POINT OF LIGHT APPEARS, A LOCK CLICKS AND A DOOR SWINGS WIDE. SILHOUETTED AGAINST THE RED GLOW, THE FIGURE OF A YOUNG GIRL STANDS, WAITING.

NEXT WEEK — *The Vampire*.

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PRODUCTION NOTES: As regular readers of this series know, we are fortunate enough, for the first time in *Prince Valiant* reprint history, to have been granted access to Hal Foster's personal collection of original full-color syndicate printer's proofs (housed at Syracuse University); this is why the reproduction on these books is so stunning. However, in some cases even Foster's files had some holes in them. For the years reprinted in this volume, pages 236 and 281-285 were available only in black-and-white versions (which themselves are actually quite breathtaking, as you can see from the sample above), while page 249 was missing an inch's worth of art due to a bad trim, rendering it unusable. For these seven pages, we have asked our friends of Bocola Verlag, who have published a beautiful, complete German-language *Prince Valiant* series based on the very best printed newspaper copies, to borrow their scans, which we tweaked and color-corrected to bring them up to the proof standards. But some imperfections as compared to the rest of the book may still be visible and for this we beg your indulgence.