

50TH ANNIVERSARY

## LONG LIVE THE SMURFS

### Smurfs became a hit in the 1980s and never really went away

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Ah, to be a middle-aged Smurf.

The little blue creatures may turn 50 on Thursday but they face no mid-life crisis. More than two decades removed from the height of Smurfmania in the United States, they still manage to bring in millions in royalties every year and even have a movie in the works.

Not bad for a race that lives in mushroom houses, stands only three apples tall, and started as a minor character in a Belgian comic.

"You can never predict what is going to grab American audiences," said Andrew Farago, an Ohio native who is curator of the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco.

Despite the fervor with which Americans embraced the happy-go-lucky Smurfs in the 1980s, they were popular abroad long before then. Originally called "Les Schtroumpfs" in French, the Smurfs debuted Oct. 23, 1958, in the Belgian comic *Johan & Pirlouit*, which was set in the Middle Ages and drawn by Pierre Culliford, better known as Peyo. Two years later the forest dwellers were popular enough to have their own series.

It was the animated cartoon series by Hanna-Barbera, though, that most Americans remember. In fact, Farago, 32, still can't get the show's sing-songy tune out of his head.

"It had this incredibly catchy theme song," he said. "It's something that you can immediately sing along with [and] annoy your friends and parents with it."

The museum has a handful of animation cells from the series, which lasted more than eight years and whose first season was released on DVD this year. Farago said he suspects that part of the Smurfs' appeal for kids was the simplicity of their design, which usually involved only a blue body and white pants and hat.

#### PHOTO GALLERY

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"If you give a child a blue crayon, they can get some approximation of a Smurf on a page," he said.

Montana Miller, assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University, remembers being caught up in the Smurf craze as a youngster. She watched the cartoon and sought out the popular figurines. (There were

plenty of other tie-ins over the years, from video games to Smurf-Berry Crunch cereal to Smurfs 'N' Ice Capades shows.)

Looking back, though, Ms. Miller is just as intrigued by some of the more unusual elements of the series. Like how there was only one female Smurf. Like how the creatures inserted the word "smurf" into sentences willy-nilly as a verb or noun. Like how there could even be a political angle to the show, with the communal aspects of the Smurfs' village being seen as a potentially communist utopia.

"They have their own functioning economy and each person has a job that benefits everybody else according to their own skills," she said.

Just like the Seven Dwarfs, Smurfs are identified by their characteristics: Jokey is a prankster. Handy is a jack-of-



all-trades. Smurfette is, well, a girl.

Bob Zirker, Jr., owned them all, or at least it seemed like it. The 70-year-old from Old Orchard amassed a collection of 2,000 pint-sized Smurf figurines at one point and he's never even seen an episode of the cartoon. He found a couple at a garage sale one day and was hooked.

"They covered an entire wall of my family room and a couple of boxes out in the garage that we would bring in every summer so they wouldn't melt," said Mr. Zirker, who has started selling his collection.

The great thing about them for collectors is their endless variety. PVC Smurfs have been made for all kinds of professions and hobbies - there's even a Dracula Smurf and Hip Hop Smurf - and the German-owned company Schleich continues to make new ones every year. (This year's set has a party theme in honor of the big 5-0.)

The figurines continue to be big sellers at WizardKids Toys in Maumee. The store sells a dozen or two every week for a few bucks a piece, even though the cartoon that featured them ended in 1989. (Reruns still can be seen on the Boomerang network.)

"It's one of the top-selling items in the store," said owner Deane Nelson. "A lot of college-age girls buy them, or adults who've seen them before or who had them when they were kids."

Nostalgia is a powerful force in merchandising today, according to Charles Coletta, one of Ms. Miller's pop culture colleagues at BGSU.

"If they're bringing it back, I think that's probably why they're doing it," he said. "You've got all these Transformers and Ninja Turtles and Strawberry Shortcake. All these toys from the '80s are back."

What smurfier way to come back - and celebrate turning 50 - than by making a movie? Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Animation are working on a live-action/animated Smurfs project. (Hopefully, the result will be less disturbing than a 2005 UNICEF Belgium anti-war commercial in which the Smurfs were carpet bombed and a crying baby was left surrounded by bodies.)

Just don't expect Ms. Miller to be first in line, whenever the film is released.

"I'll be interested," she said, "but not enough to spend money on it."

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