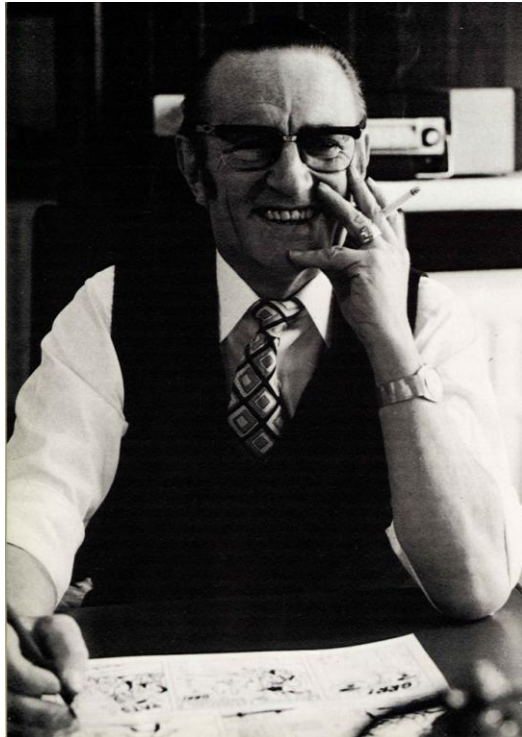


**From 12 March until 1 September 2013**  
**At the Belgian Comic Strip Center**

## **Willy Vandersteen, the storyteller**



Willy Vandersteen, the creator of Spike and Suzy and many other popular series which he drew himself for some years before entrusting them to his studio, was born in Antwerp on 15 February 1913, in the Seefhoek area, a paradise for artists and storytellers. Who could have guessed then that this son of a wood sculptor would one day become the equal of Hendrik Conscience, the most popular Flemish writer of his day? As a child Vandersteen dreamed of Buffalo Bill and Nick Carter, of Jules Verne and his first book *Five Weeks in a Balloon*. Later, through his comic strips from *De Rode Ridder* (The Red Knight) to the duo Robert en Bertrand, inspired by another favourite book from his childhood, Willy Vandersteen developed a graphic style which left ample room for narration. His stories, directly inspired by popular literature and serialised novels, are full of action and intrigue, while his humour is totally fearless of nonsensicality and the general context of his tales is one of social openness. With Willy

Vandersteen, the comic strip is more than ever a literary genre.

Curator: Daniel Couvreur

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# Introduction of the exhibition

## Willy Vandersteen, the storyteller



Willy Vandersteen was born in 1913 in Seefhoek, a picturesque old part of Antwerp famous for its cheap beer, Seef. Vandersteen was so fragile at birth that he fitted into a cigar box. He was no great shakes at spitting cherry stones at his school run by the Samaritan Brethren but a champion at drawing in chalks, and the best storyteller. The little show-off was

always ready with a good story about haunted castles or valiant knights. His best marks were for art and creative writing. It was impossible to keep a straight face when he was around.

At the age of thirteen, Willy took evening classes in art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. He learned to observe nature while in the scouts, where he first discovered the adventures of *Totor* drawn by Hergé in *Le Boy-Scout belge*. He took to drawing new Totor adventures for his own amusement. He began working as a wood sculptor but the crisis of the 1920s forced him to apply for a position as a window designer for the big department store Innovation. In his spare time he devoured the exploits of *Tintin* and *Prince Vaillant*. He soon managed to get his first comic strip *Kitty Inno*, about the exploits of a blonde sales assistant, published in the Innovation staff magazine. In 1941 he learned that *Wonderland*, the children's supplement of the newspaper *De Dag*, was looking for artists to draw comic strips to replace the *Mickey* and *Krazy Kat* cartoons banned by the German Occupation. Vandersteen came up with the prehistoric character *Tor de holbewoner*, who was quickly followed by *Pudifar* the cat, a cousin of *Krazy Kat*. Soon he quit his job as a window dresser to concentrate on drawing, publishing first the exploits of the little caveman *Tori* in the magazine *Bravo* followed by *Simbat*, a tubby pirate who prefigured the character Lambik. A friend then challenged him to draw his first album in seven days and seven nights. Fortified by strong coffee he sat down and produced *Piwo*, the tale of a little wooden horse who is brought to life by the magic of the Bonga Indians. His style pleased the publishing house Standaard, which commissioned him to produce four *Zoo* albums. These adventures of a small boy and his little sister already heralded the creation of the famous *Spike and Suzy*...

Meanwhile Vandersteen also began the stories of *Floche et Flache*, two hare-brained Resistance fighters, for *Franc-Jeu*. He was also writing tales of *Bill et Sam aux Philippines* about the Pacific War and amusing detective stories about the inspector *Briket*. The magazine *Perce-Neige* then commissioned him to draw comic strips about the trapper *Bill Bing* and the gaffes of *Peggy*, a little Scottish terrier. On 30 March 1945, *De Nieuwe Standaard* unveiled *Rikki en Wiske*. The readers received this tale of espionage in Cocoslavia very enthusiastically. In the second episode, Rikki disappears in favour of another brave young boy, Suske (Spike), whom Wiske (Suzy) meets on *An Island called Hoboken* where the Fats and the Thins are fighting for power. With *Spike and Suzy* Vandersteen had hit upon the perfect recipe for popular heroes. Their adventures attracted 25,000 new readers to *De Standaard* so from 1948 the magazine *Tintin* also began publishing the series to increase its readership.

This exemplary success persuaded even the Catholic Church to revise its position on comic strips. The priests had accused the paper heroes of encouraging laziness and stupidity. Yet here were Vandersteen's characters radiating courage and solidarity! It was enough to drive *Kerkelijk Leven* to publish *De nieuwe avonturen van Lambik*, in which Spike and Suzy strive to set their friend on the path of righteousness. The author demonstrated that the comic strip is a proper drawn form of literature: *"I have always felt myself to be a storyteller before an artist. I like to tell a story first orally or in writing before I draw it."* The triumph of *Suske en Wiske* was soon followed by the successful *De Familie Snoek*, *Bessy*, *De Rode Ridder* and *Robert en Bertrand*. By the time of his death in 1990 at the age of 77, Vandersteen and his studio had produced over 1,800 albums. If all his drawings were placed end to end they would make a comic strip nearly 100 kilometres long!

*Daniel Couvreur,  
Curator of the exhibition*



W. Vandersteen

1913-2013

## Willy Vandersteen, the storyteller

**An exhibition by the Belgian Comic Strip Center**

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*In collaboration with Peter Janda, the family of Willy Vandersteen and Standaard Publishers  
With the support of the Brussels Capital Region*

Het Belgisch Stripcentrum wishes to thank Edith Andriesse, Fred Butaye , Roger Decadt, Johan De Smedt, Paul Geerts, Luc Goossens, Karoline Hofmans, Peter Janda, Eefje Marijt, Dirk Mertens, Ilona Nieboer, Nathalie Siereveld, Helena Vandersteen, Michel Van Beneden, Nikoline Van der Werf, Ellen Van Schaik and Helene Visser.





## THE SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

### 1. Willy Vandersteen through his stories

1941:

- **Pudifar.** This cute little tabby cat influenced by *Krazy Kat* first flexes his claws in the children's supplement *Wonderland* of the newspaper *De Dag*. He changes his name eight weeks later to become *Barabijtje*.
- **Tor.** The silent gags about this Robinson Crusoe caricature appear in the same supplement.



1943:

- **Piwo.** This little wooden horse is the hero of Willy Vandersteen's first album, drawn in seven days and seven nights. He is commissioned to write it thanks to his scouting friend Maurice Lambrechts, who works for the **Sorgloos**. The character is a petit bourgeois victim of rationing under the Occupation whose misadventures entertain the readers of *De Illustratie*.
- **Lancelot.** The exploits of this young knight appear in *Bravo* following the Liberation. His fantasy adventures continue until 1946 and some of the events befalling Lancelot are repeated in the first *Suske and Wiske* album, *het Eiland Amoras (An Island called Hoboken)*.

1945:

- **Bill et Sam.** These two heroes fight in the Pacific War in *Franc Jeu*, an illustrated children's weekly.
- **Simbat.** This podgy buccaneer wields his sabre in the comic *Bravo* and prefigures the Lambique character.
- **ZOO.** The main characters in these four illustrated children's books are a young boy and his sister, the drawings of whom prefigure *Suske en Wiske*.
- **Tori.** The adventures of this caveman born 60,000 years BC are published in *Bravo*.



- **Rikki en Wiske.** Willy Vandersteen creates these new characters for a serial. The hero is meant to be called Suske but the editor of the *Nieuwe Standaard* rechristens him Rikki, against the author's advice. The first story is set in Chocovakia, where Rikki defies the boxer Bukovin. Rikki and Wiske epitomise Flemish cheekiness and Belgian humour. They are an immediate hit.
- **Suske en Wiske (Spike and Suzy).** Willy Vandersteen's star characters begin their lengthy career on 19 December 1945, barely four days after the first *Rikki en Wiske* adventure. Willy Vandersteen sends Rikki off to buy shoes; he is never seen again, and it is Suske who teams up with Wiske on *An island called Hoboken* in the pages of *Nieuwe Standaard*.
- **Ridder Gloriant.** The valiant knight brandishes his sword in *Ons Volkske*.

- **De Familie Snoek.** In a style close to the American cartoon, *De familie Snoek* is a social satire about a bourgeois Flemish family set in the 1950s. It meets with tremendous success in the *Nieuwe Standaard* and 23 albums are eventually published.



1946:

- **Tops.** The guard dog

- **Poppy et Maggy.** These wild cousins of *Suske en Wiske* take their first steps in the children's magazine *Le Petit Monde*. Their career is to end in 1947, after two fantasy voyages.

- **Le Fantôme du château.** This story in *Le Petit Monde* features a character who heralds Prince Riri in the *Tintin* magazine.

- **Wippy.** The ancestor of Yakari, this little Indian is one of Vandersteen's many endearing creations for *Le Petit Monde*.



- **Het Rode Masker.** With this story in *Ons Volkske* Willy Vandersteen tries his hand at realistic drawing...

- **De heldentocht der Bataven.** In *Ons Volkske* the author tells the illustrated story of the Batavians opposing Julius Caesar's Roman legions in the Gallic War.

- **De zwarte panter.** The story of the arrival of the first Dutch colonies in South Africa, published in *Ons Volkske*.

- **Marscommandos op aarde.** Willy Vandersteen finally gives in to the space-opera craze for *Ons Volkske*.

- **De vrolijke bengels.** This band of urchins wreak havoc in two albums. publisher *Ons Volk*. Two further

volumes are to follow: *Piwo et les voleurs de chevaux* and *Piwo chez les Zoulous*.

1944:

- **Bert de lustige trekker.** This scout hero is created for the weekly magazine *De Rakker*.

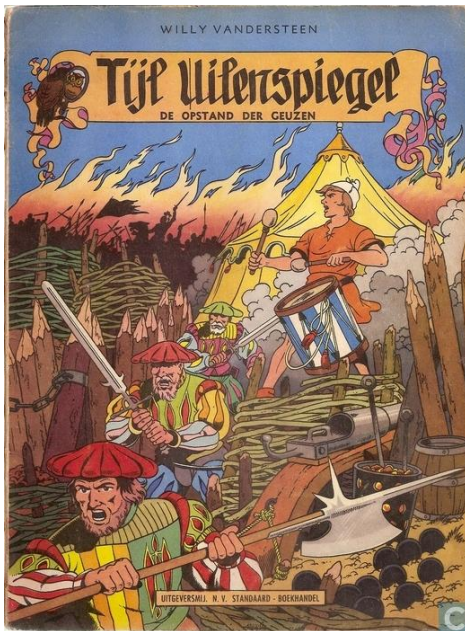
- **Peerke**

1947:

- **Riri et Miette.** These other two cousins of *Suske en Wiske* soon fall victim to the closure of *Le Petit Monde*, but the storyline of their interrupted adventure is later reused by Vandersteen for *Suske en Wiske* in *Le Singe volant*.

- **Bert de lustige trekker.** This series of travel gags is created for the magazine *Le Touriste* published by the Flemish Tourist Board.

- **Het veenspook.** A horror detective story for adults published in *Ons Volk*.
- **De blauwe kreeft.** A realist tale published in *Ons Volk*.
- **De eerste maanraket.** In this new science-fiction tale published in *Ons Volk*, a mad scientist jeopardises the future of the human race.



- **De staalblauwe Boeddha.** A detective story in an aesthetic similar to Milton Caniff for *Ons Volk*.
- **De weerwolf.** Interpretation of the myth by Vandersteen in a style very close to that of *Suske en Wiske* for *Ons Volk*.
- **Het gouden masker.** A treasure hunt through the African jungle, published in *Ons Volk*.
- **Tanjar de viking.** Published in *Ons Volk*, Tanjar is the first outline of Klein Jerom.
- **Wilhelm Tell.** The life of the hero of Swiss independence told in *Ons Volk*.
- **Thyl Ulenspiegel.** The legend of the Flemish Resistance fighter during the Spanish Occupation of the Low Countries under Charles V, a monument of Belgian literature by Charles De Coster which Willy Vandersteen turns into a treasure of graphic art for *Ons Volk*, *Kuifje* and *Tintin*.
- **Het verzonken rijk.** A realist tale inspired by the

novel *l'Atlantide* in *Ons Volk*.

- **Tussen water en vuur.** Willy Vandersteen examines the heroes of prehistory before Timur, Tunga and Rahan in *Ons Volk*, *Ons Volkske* and *Kuifje*.
- **De wolvenval.** Gags

1948:

- **De Jonge Brigand.** This is a patriotic tale about the battle of the Flemish heroes of 1798 against the French invaders who oppose God, liberty and the motherland and set about closing down the churches.
- **Dr Jeckyll & Mr Hyde.** An adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novel for *Ons Volk*.
- **De avonturen van Lambik.** The solo adventures of the plumber detective from the Spike and Suzy stories first appear in the church magazine *Kerkelijk Leven* in October of this year and continue in *Ons Volk*. Seven albums are published by Standaard.

1949:

- **De Pantoscaaf.** A scout-inspired adventure for the monthly student publication *De Knape*, in a style similar to Hergé's, in which Willy Vandersteen invents the Pantoscaph, a machine which can fly, sail under the sea and travel beneath the ground. It is the prototype for Professor Barabas's *Terranef* in *Le Castel de Cognedur*, the 27th episode in the *Suske en Wiske* adventures.

1952:

- **Judi.** The tale of this hero inspired by the Old Testament and the most spectacular pages in the holy Scriptures was written with Karel Verschuere. His voyage of religious initiation through Mesopotamia is told in five episodes: *De zondvloed*, *Het wrekende vuur*, *De onderkoning*, *De zwervers* and *Het beloofde land*, which Karl Verschuere wrote on his own.



- **Bessy.** An homage to Lassie, the famous Hollywood dog, Bessy has the markings of Willy Vandersteen's collie whose name she



bears. With her master Andy she sets out to conquer the Wild West. The series, launched on 24 December in *La Libre Belgique* at a rate of two strips a day, finds phenomenal success in Germany. The Bessy Studio is to produce 164 albums in Flemish, 151 in French and nearly 1000 in German!

1953:

- **'t Prinske.** This paladin of Belgian surrealist humour reigns over the principality of Marmeladie in the *Tintin* magazine, starring in 300 stories.
- **Fort Amsterdam.** The invented continuation of the adventures of Thyl Ulenspiegel. This second episode has no connection with the original novel by Charles De Coster. Willy Vandersteen sends Thyl off to conquer the Americas alongside the Dutch, with the help of his first assistant Karel Verschuere, Bob De Moor from Studios Hergé and Tibet, the future creator of Chick Bill and Ric Hochet.

1958:

- **Het plezante circus.** With Gus the clown, Dodu the acrobat, Carlo the magician... this comedy circus is the fantasy continuation of *Les Joyeux Lurons*. 188 stories about the circus are published in *Junior* and *Ons Volkske* before being compiled in three albums.
- **De lustige trekkers.** Drawn for *Junior* and *Ons Volkske*, Job and Bob, the defenders of the oppressed, prefigure *Robert en Bertrand*.
- **De gags van Wiske.** *Belofte*, the women's section of the Catholic monthly for working class women, makes Wiske (Suzy) a solitary heroine.

1959:

- **De Rode Ridder.** Johan, the defender of widows and orphans, is always ready to rush in headlong to save the world. He was born of the pen of novelist Leopold Vermeiren. Willy Vandersteen adapts him into comic strip form and pads out his adventures from the legends of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, one of his favourite bedside books. Johan begins his comic strip career in *Nieuwsblad* and lives through over 200 adventures with the Vandersteen Studio.



1960:

- **Jerom.** Introduced in the Spike and Suzy episode *The Merry Musketeer*, Jerom (Jethro) initially shocks readers with his coarse language and scant clothing. Willy Vandersteen carefully reclothes him and teaches him to express himself more politely before emancipating him in this spin-off. In 1967 he dons a new costume as the superhero *De gouden stuntman* and bestrides a flying motor scooter. After more than 150 adventures in Germany, Jerom later sets out on a series of 13 fantastic voyages in 1982.



1963:

- **Karl May.** The works of the greatest German writer of adventure stories and Westerns, creator of the hero Old Shatterhand and the Apache Winnetou, are adapted into comic strip form by the Vandersteen studios. Over 85 albums are published.

1965:

- **Biggles.** The pilot adventurer from the English novels by Captain W.E. Johns finds new life in the comic strip, adapted by the Vandersteen Studio. The series fills 20 albums.

1970:

- **Safari.** The adventures of big game hunter Sam Burton, drawn in a realist style with lavish backgrounds full of wild animals in a homage to the TV serial *Daktari*. The Vandersteen Studio produces 24 albums.

1973:

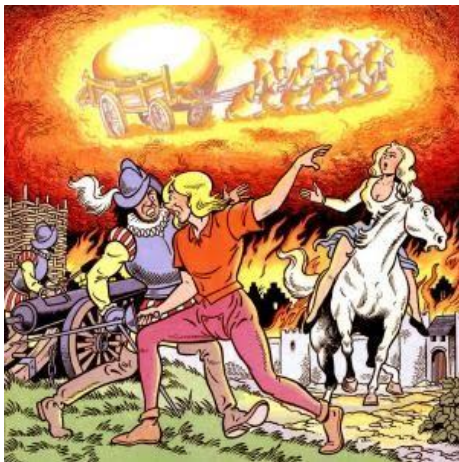


- **Robert en Bertrand.** In the same graphic style as *Spike and Suzy* Willy Vandersteen draws the adventures of these two smooth-talking, rebellious vagabonds who remind him of his own youth. He had earlier seen the two characters on stage as the heroes of the melodrama *L'Auberge des Adrets* and had read the serialized story of their exploits revisited by the Flemish writer Ralf Verhulst. 98 Bohemian albums about Robert and Bertrand are produced over the next 20 years. One of these, *De stakingbrekers*, wins the Alfred award for the best script at the Angoulême International Festival in 1977.

1978:

- **Pats & Tits.** Willy Vandersteen turns one of the puppets from *Suske en Wiske's* puppet theatre of the 1950s into a comic strip character for *Stipkrant*. Due to rights issues the character is rechristened Tits a few years later. In total, 35 albums are published.

1985:



- **De Geuzen.** Sketched out in 1972 and begun in 1985, the De Geuzen project is the apotheosis of Willy Vandersteen's rich artistic career. This historical satire is set in the Spanish-occupied Low Countries in the 16th century, a period much loved by the author. The connection with Thyl Ulenspiegel is obvious. In 1947 Thyl had already joined the army of William of Orange to free Flanders from the invader. Thirty years later, the hero of De Geuzen, Hannes, is also engaged in the fight against the Spanish forces occupying the Low Countries. His quest for freedom is to fill ten albums.

1986:

- **Schanulleke.** In this *Suske en Wiske* spin-off, Schanulleke (Muffin), Wiske's doll, plays the heroine for the very young. Three albums are published.

## 2. The Vandersteen Studio

Willy Vandersteen never stopped dreaming up new characters. In 1945 the growing success of his new heroes, *Spike and Suzy*, did not stop him from spending his evenings drawing the comical exploits of *Bert de lustige Trekker* or the printing press worker *Peerke Sorgloos*. He also wrote and drew realist knight tales of *Ridder Gloriant*, the *Masque Rouge* revolt against Spanish oppression, *De Heldentocht der Bataven* about the Gallic War... His sparkling imagination also gave rise to *De Vrolijke Bengels*, a surrealist rabble of practical jokers. The indefatigable creator also wrote stories for adults: *Marscommando's op aarde*, the detective story *Het Veenspook*, the tale *Het verzonken rijk*, the heroine of which closely resembles the American actress Veronica Lake; *De eerste maanraket*, with its mad scientist; *De staalblauwe Boeddha*, *De weerwolf*, the hunt for the *golden mask* in the heart of the African jungle; *Wilhelm Tell* and the forebear of Jethro, *Tanjar de Viking*...

In 1949 Vandersteen took on his first assistant, François Joseph Hermon, who assumed the tasks of finishing and inking *Spike and Suzy*. Hermon was quickly joined by a second assistant, Karl Boumans, responsible for the lettering of the speech bubbles and the backgrounds. These reinforcements allowed Vandersteen to continue writing new series such as the exploits of *'t Prinske*, *Het Plezante Circus* and the *Familie Spaarpot* and also to take time out to go off in search of inspiration. Vandersteen soon found it in the avant-garde Antwerp tavern of Herman Denkens, in the nightclub at Antwerp station, where the *Bal de l'humour* was held, and at the cafe of the painter Vic van Berckelaar, which witnessed the creation of Jerom the strongman on a beer mat! He also hunted for ideas in novels, fables and fairytales. *A Fool's Gold* revisits the legend of Buffalo Bill, while *The Merry Musketeers* recalls the heroes of Alexandre Dumas's novel. *Lambiorix* has read *De bello gallico*. *De straatridder* is a new *Don Quixote* and *De ringelingschat* has the tones of the *Nibelungen*...

Sometimes Vandersteen also borrowed from cinema. His collie *Bessy* of 1952 was a tribute to Hollywood's famous dog *Lassie*. Her success fired the imagination of readers of the German weekly *Felix*, which soon demanded one story a week. The author then created the Bessy Studio alongside the Vandersteen Studio to meet this workload, forming a team of scriptwriters and artists around Karl Verschuere. *Bessy* became as popular as *Mickey* in Germany, with the series running to a total of nearly 1,000 episodes. Vandersteen relaunched the character in 1985 with *Bessy Naturkommando*.

Meanwhile in 1959 Vandersteen added *De Rode Ridder* to his panoply of heroes. Inspired by the novels of Leopold Vermeiren, the character was to wield his sword in over 200 albums. The Germans demanded other characters from him. Vandersteen made the Herculean Jethro from *Spike and Suzy* into a new secret weapon. Jethro began his solo career in *Het geheim van Brokkelsteen* in 1960 before donning the yellow cape of the superhero *De gouden stuntman* for more than 170 adventures. In the 1980s the character added a globe-trotter's boots to his wardrobe in the 36 albums of the *Wonderful travels of Jethro*. In 1962, Vandersteen and his assistants began adapting the novels of Karl May. No fewer than 87 albums were drawn from these, including the famous *Winnetou*. Three years later he made the pilot adventurer *Biggles* from the novels of Captain W.E. Johns into the hero of a series in 20 volumes. In 1969, riding on the success of the TV serial *Daktari* he launched *Safari*, writing 24 adventures for its hero Sam Burton, a big-game hunter. In 1973 Vandersteen adapted *Pats*, the most popular character in the *Spike and Suzy* puppet theatre, into a comic strip. *Pats* changed his name to *Tits* in 1977 and ended his career in 1986 after 35 albums. On the death of the master in 1990 the Vandersteen studios had sold 200 million comic strips worldwide, and the adventure continues today.



## 2.1 The men in Willy Vandersteen's shadow

### François-Joseph Herman

An artist from Molenbeek born in 1931, François-Joseph Herman studied graphic arts at the Institut Saint-Luc in Brussels. As the first assistant taken on by Vandersteen he began work on the Spike and Suzy story *De mottenvanger* in 1949. He continued the finishing of the drawings and inking of the artwork for Bessy and Spike and Suzy until his early death in 1963 at the age of 31.

### Karel Verschuere

A pillar of the Vandersteen Studios in the 1950s and '60s, Karel Verschuere wrote the first *Bessy* stories with Willy Vandersteen under the pseudonym Wirel (a contraction of Willy and Karel). Born in 1924, he worked on the second Thyl Ulenspiegel volume, *Fort Amsterdam*, with Tibet and Bob De Moor. His signature is also found on many episodes of *De Rode Ridder*, *Karl May* and *Biggles*. After leaving the Vandersteen studio he published a number of Western comic strips and detective stories. He died in 1980.

### Karel Boumans

Born in 1931, Karel Boumans was responsible for completing the lettering, speech bubbles and backgrounds for *Spike and Suzy* from 1952 onwards. He began working for Willy Vandersteen on the album *De lachende wolf*. He also helped to create the Lambik stories. Vandersteen entrusted him with the inking of the plates for *Spike and Suzy* and the colouring of the famous blue collection of episodes created for the *Tintin* magazine until 1959. Karel Boumans then left the studio to draw his own characters *Olivier*, *Tom Berry* and *De 4 Ka's*. He also worked with Jef Nys on the backgrounds for the cult Flemish series *Jommeke* at the start of the 1970s. Karel Boumans died in 2003.



## **Eduard De Rop**

Edward De Rop joined the Vandersteen Studio in 1959. He had a real gift for scriptwriting, drawing and inking. Born in 1928, he got his hand in working on the Ambrose stories and *The Flying Bed* episode of Spike and Suzy. Thereafter he concentrated on inking the plates of the Spike and Suzy adventures for Willy Vandersteen, and later for Paul Geerts, until 1983. He then worked on the series *De wonderbare reizen van Jerom*. Edward De Rop died in 2007.

## **Eugène Goossens**

An assistant at the Bessy Studio from 1965, Eugène Goossens was born in 1942. He worked on the Bessy and Jerom (Jethro) albums produced for the German market. Willy Vandersteen also entrusted him with the inking of several episodes of De Familie Snoek and the Karl May series. When Paul Geerts took over Spike and Suzy in the 1970s, Eugène Goossens took on the inking of the series with Edward De Rop. At the height of his art he had the honour of inking the plates for Vandersteen's masterpiece De Geuzen, from the fourth album onwards. Eugène Goossens ended his career following the death of Willy Vandersteen in 1990.

## **Karel Biddeloo**

Born in 1943 and trained at the Institute of Decorative Arts in Antwerp, Karel Biddeloo began his career as a graphic artist in advertising. He started working at the Bessy Studio in Kalmthout at the age of 23. He was involved in the inking of the plates for the series *Bessy*, *Karl May*, *Biggles* and *Safari*, but it is his work on *De Rode Ridder* which established his reputation. He took over the series in 1969, both drawing and writing the scripts while his Swedish wife coloured the images. He gave the *Rode Ridder* stories a cinematographic dimension with touches of space-opera, fantasy heroism and witchcraft. A serial writer at heart, he produced up to six adventures a year and wrote a total of 163 episodes of *De Rode Ridder*. The last, *Gog en Magog*, was published a few months after his death in 2004.

## **Paul Geerts**

Paul Geerts, a painter from Turnhout, was born in 1937. The apprentice artist inked his first plates for the Spike and Suzy series with *De charmante koffiepote* in 1969, before taking over the series in 1972 with *De gekke gokker*, writing the storyline and finishing all the artwork himself with the enthusiastic approval of Willy Vandersteen. He was responsible for gems such as *De raap van Rubens*, *Paniek op de Amsterdam* and *The Jewel in the Lotus*. With Vandersteen's blessing Geerts continued the adventures of Spike and Suzy after the master's death in 1990. Paul Geerts retired in 2002, leaving Marc Verhaegen to take over the drawing. He had drawn over one hundred Spike and Suzy titles during his 33-year career.

## **Jef Broeckx**

After publishing various works in the Flemish magazine *Ohee*, this Antwerp artist born in 1943 took over the management of the Bessy Studio in 1970. Six years later, Vandersteen entrusted him with the inking of the *Robert en Bertrand* artwork in addition to his work on *Bessy*. In 1984 he launched the new series *Bessy Naturkommando* with the scriptwriter

Marck Meul and 23 more Bessy stories were published in albums. From 2002, he took care of the *Klein Suske en Wiske* spin-off created after Willy Vandersteen's death.

## Marck Meul

Marck Meul was born in 1955. A journalist and scriptwriter with a degree in German philology, Meul began collaborating with the Vandersteen studio in 1985. He took over the *Robert en Bertrand* stories and also devised many episodes of *Bessy* and *Suske en Wiske*. He also created *De wonderbare reizen van Jerom* with Edward De Rop.

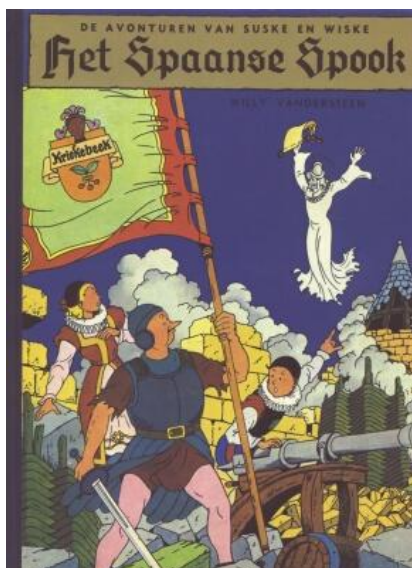
## 3. Suske en Wiske

### 3.1 Rikki en Wiske



In 1945, Willy Vandersteen dreamed up the characters of Suske, a lively young boy, and Wiske, a little girl in a white dress carrying a doll. Suske en Wiske were accompanied by Professor Barabas, Aunt Sidonia and Pukkel, a walking disaster who bore many similarities to the future Lambik (Ambrose in the English translation). At the newspaper *De Standaard*, the director Maurits de Meyer sought advice on publishing the series from Marcel Neels, the political caricaturist who later adopted the pseudonym Marc Sleen to create the Nero comic strips. Neels was impressed with the quality of the scripts but thought that Rikki looked too much like Tintin in his plus fours. The project was shelved.

On 30 March 1945, the war was over and *De Nieuwe Standaard* decided to publish the adventures of Suske en Wiske, changing Suske's name to Rikki against the author's advice. In the second episode on 19 December, Rikki disappeared to make way for Suske (Spike), another young boy encountered by Wiske (Suzy) on the island of Hoboken. The young Hobokener Suske is fighting for good and justice in a kingdom divided by the war between the Fat and the Thin.

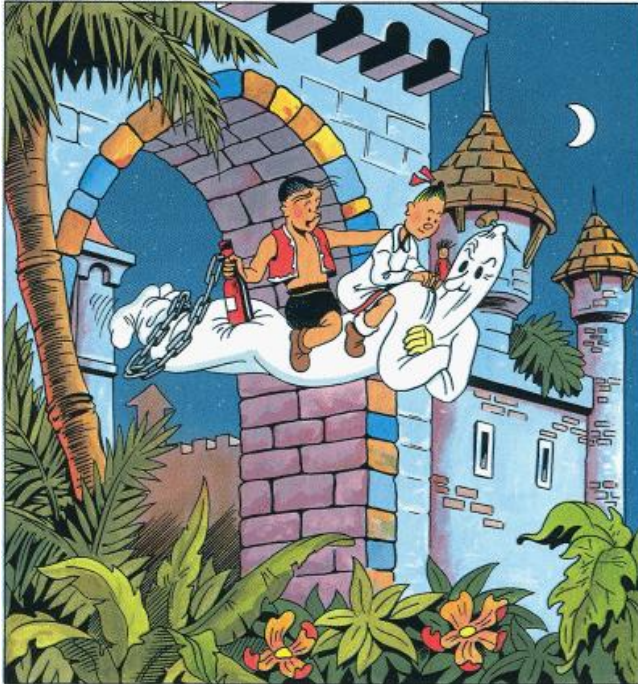


### 3.2 Suske en Wiske in Tintin

On 16 September 1948, the magazine *Tintin* turned to Suske en Wiske to boost sales of its Flemish publication, *Kuifje*. Hergé, the creator of the Tintin character and the artistic director for the weekly magazine, persuaded Willy Vandersteen to change Suzy's dyed blond haircut and abandon her rag doll Schanulleke, who was not deemed sufficiently upmarket. In the first adventure drawn for *Kuifje*, *Het Spaanse Spook*, Willy Vandersteen also did away with Aunt Sidonia, while Ambrose was slimmed right down. He also grew wiser and lost his arrogance. As for Spike, he became much more confident and started dressing in very dapper fashion!

Through contact with *Tintin* magazine's three musketeers Hergé, Laudy (*Hassan et Kaddour*) and Jacobs (*Blake et Mortimer*), Vandersteen discovered the importance of documentation and cultivated his aesthetics. Hergé initially found his stories too implausible but later described him as "*the Brueghel of the comic strip*". Eight stories were published in *Tintin*, characterised by elegant backgrounds, a brilliant sense of composition and perfectly mastered characters.

### 3.3 Suske en Wiske



Wiske is the key character in Willy Vandersteen's most famous series. She is an independent little girl, still very attached to her doll Schanulleke (Muffin in the English translation) but able to stand up to adults and tell them what she really thinks. Her aunt Sidonia is a very free spirited woman. She allows Wiske to take risks in life that no mother would tolerate. Sidonia's unprepossessing, tomboyish appearance conceals a steely character and a repressed love for the arrogant Lambik, who is sometimes rather slow of intelligence and understanding but has a heart of gold. Professor Barabas is a scientist whose discoveries often lead to amazing adventures. Right from the first *Suske en Wiske* album, *het Eiland Amoras* (*An Island called Hoboken*), he allows Wiske

to travel through time and space. The last character in the family is a strapping great fellow who can always be relied upon to get himself out of a tight spot. His name is Jerom and he first appears in *De dulle musketeers* (*The Merry Musketeers*), the 25th album in the series.



During Willy Vandersteen's career stretching over nearly 70 years, none of his heroes age at all. They have now outlived their creator and still continue their exploits in the newspaper *De Standaard* every day. This curious little reconstituted family united in the fight against adversity was considerably ahead of its time. Faithful to the lines drawn by Willy



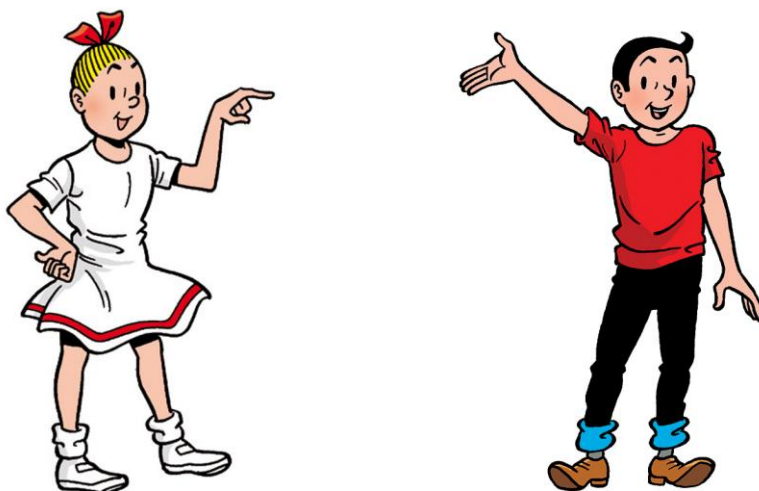
Vandersteen, they continue to make readers smile at the absurdity of humanity and society in their own inimitable style consisting of jokes, exaggerations, puns and wordplays. Translated into French from 1951, German from 1953 and Italian from 1955, the series is now published in Portugal, Chili, South Africa, the United States, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Indonesia, Tibet, the United Kingdom, Iceland, Austria, the Middle East, China.....

### 3.4 Suske en Wiske in the studio

When the *Suske en Wiske* series first started, Willy Vandersteen's first wife Paula assisted him by inking the plates for him. In 1949, the success of his heroes drove Vandersteen to take on his first assistant, François Joseph Hermon, who took over the inking from Paula. Karel Boumans soon joined the team to do the lettering in the speech bubbles and draw in the backgrounds.

During the 1960s, Willy Vandersteen gradually limited himself to writing the storylines and sketching out the drawings. The inking was taken on by Edward De Rop. From 1967 onwards the new episodes of *Suske en Wiske* were printed in colour. This new series began with the title *De poenschepper*, published in a laminated cover with the number 67. The old titles were redrawn and coloured, and then republished with a new number. That is why there are two versions for example of *De sprietatoom* (*The Zincshrinker*), the first numbered 33 and the second 107...

In 1969 Paul Geerts succeeded Edward De Rop, and later himself wrote *De gekke gokker*. Vandersteen admired this piece, and delegated the scripts and pencil drawings to Geerts from 1972. Paul Geerts succeeded in capturing the personalities and values of *Suske en Wiske*, developing them in some remarkable stories such as *Paniek op de Amsterdam* and *The Jewel in the Lotus*. Assisted by Liliane Govers, Marc Verhaegen and Erik De Rop, Geerts continued their stories at a rate of four albums a year after his master's death in 1990. Marc Verhaegen succeeded him in 2001 with the album *De blote Belg*. Since 2005 Peter Van Gucht has produced the scripts and Luc Morjaeu the drawings.



## 4. De Familie Snoek

In 1945, the author published the first stories about De Familie Snoek in the newspaper *De Standaard*. Through these new characters Willy Vandersteen paints an ironic portrait of Belgian society in the post-war period. The Snoek family are not adventurous. They do not travel the world. Leonard, the father, has a multitude of odd jobs before becoming Secretary of State of Enlightenment. This promotion allows the family to improve their standing and move to a better neighbourhood but they will never shake off the Krab family, their clinging and malicious neighbours. In this sarcastic series the Snoeks' beautiful daughter Gaby marries Stan, a romantic male lead, and Aunt Sidonia from the *Spike and Suzy* series becomes godmother to their two infants, the twins Pietje and Mietje! Lambik also makes several appearances in the Familie Snoek stories, in minor roles such as museum attendant or theatre prompter.



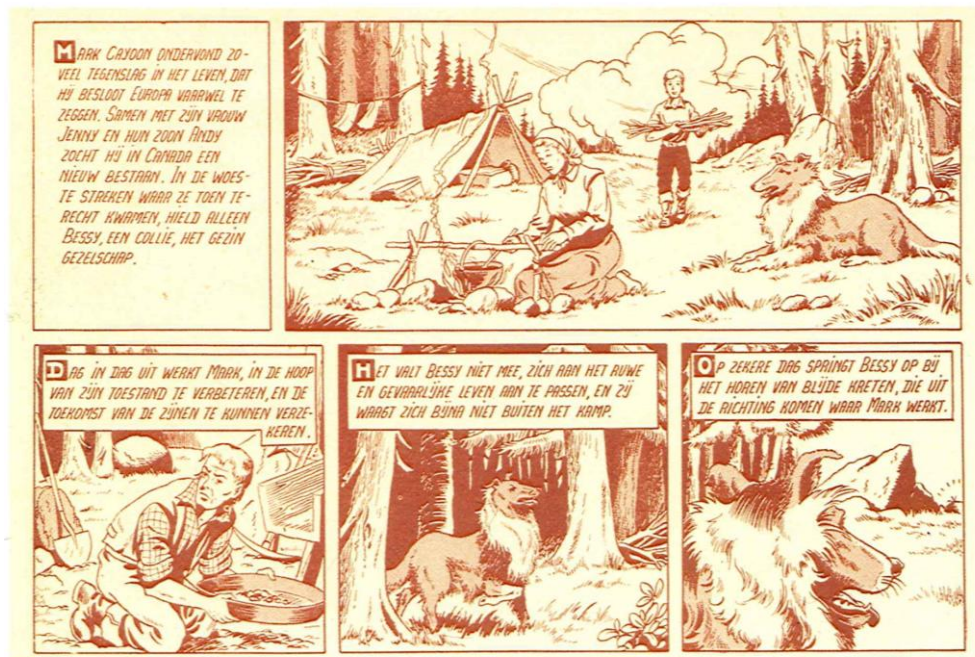
## 5. Jerom

Jerom (Jethro) began his solo career in the weekly children's magazine *Ons Volkske* in 1960 with *Het geheim van Brokkelsteen*. Willy Vandersteen wrote the first scripts and entrusted the drawings to his assistant Edward De Rop. The appealing strongman soon found a following and became a publishing success for the Vandersteen Studio. He was accompanied by Professor Barabas and Aunt Sidonia in this series, which has all the fantasy of the *Spike and Suzy* albums. In 1967 Willy Vandersteen had Jerom don a new costume and become the superhero *De Gouden Stuntman*, who rides a jet bike and works for a secret organisation to battle injustice in the world. The author also gave him a young sidekick Odilon, who is as clumsy and conceited as Lambik... In Germany, *De Gouden Stuntman* was the hero of over 150 albums. From 1982, under the impetus of Edward De Rop and the Vandersteen Studio, Jerom was transformed into a globe-trotter in *Het Belang van Limburg*, *De Stipkrant* and *Ons Volkske*. These *Wonderful travels of Jerom* around the planet were told in 36 albums up until 1991.

## 6. Bessy

In 1952, Willy Vandersteen emerged from the cinema dazzled by the exploits of Lassie, the famous Metro Goldwyn Mayer dog. The Belgian author wanted to turn her into a comic strip heroine. The American producers were in agreement provided that the storylines of the existing films were respected. Since there were not enough Lassie stories for a whole series, Vandersteen eventually chose to invent his own character, Bessy, who sets out with her master, Andy, to conquer America.

The project did not immediately appeal to the Flemish publishers so Vandersteen turned to the French-language daily *La Libre Belgique*. The grandchildren of the editor-in-chief, Paul Jourdain, adored Bessy. The series made its debut in the newspaper on 24 December 1952, at a rate of two strips a day. One year later, *Ons Volk* decided to publish the series in Flemish. In the meantime Willy Vandersteen self-published the first Bessy albums. On 1 April 1954 he decided to end the Bessy series by having her disappear in Xapiti Canyon, but the episode caused tremendous indignation among the readers. The series was immediately resumed and thereafter came to invade the pages of *Chez Nous*, *Het Belang van Limburg* and *Gazet van Antwerpen*.

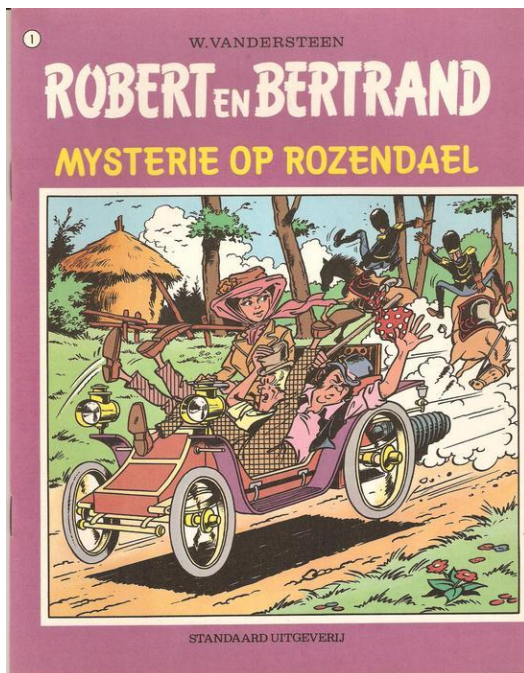


In the years between 1952 and 1966, some 60 Bessy episodes were published in French. Outside Belgium, the German weekly *Felix* also expressed interest in the series. Its management asked for one new story a month. The studios were hardly able to sustain this pace. Willy Vandersteen limited himself to setting the storyline and the outline of the drawings while his assistant Karel Verschuere finalised them, taking at least ten weeks for each episode. Rather than refuse the contract Vandersteen decided to set up the Bessy Studio, taking on ten assistants to create the capacity to produce up to one episode a week, as demanded by the German readers, who were completely smitten with Bessy. The studio produced more than 900 albums in 30 years. Willy Vandersteen later relaunched the character in the adventures of *Bessy Naturkommando*, publishing a further 23 albums between 1985 and 1992.



## 7. Robert en Bertrand

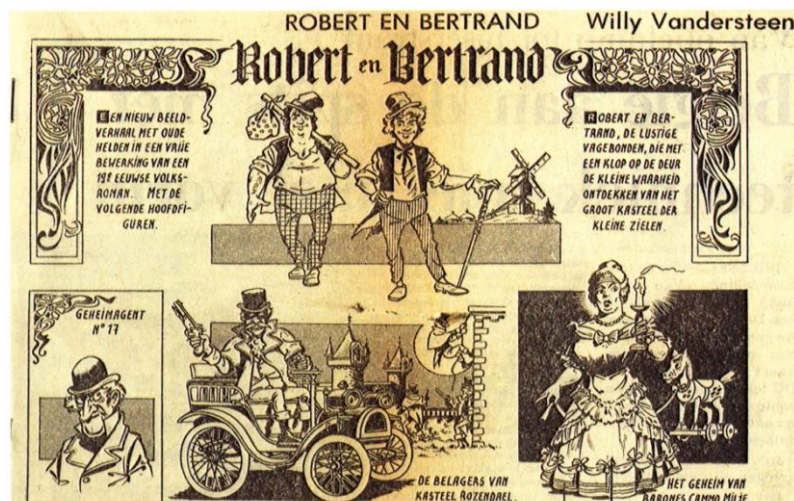
In 1972, having spent twenty-five years drawing comic strips, Willy Vandersteen was looking for new inspiration. He was to find it in his childhood memories. The author had seen a stage play at the Antwerp Hippodrome in the 1920s about two rascals, Robert and Bertrand, who tricked the rich, and it had made a great impression on him. Koen Ravenstein, alias Raf Verhulst, had borrowed these two characters from *l'Auberge des Adrets*, a 19th century play by French dramatist Benjamin Antier, and made them heroes of popular Flemish literature. Robert Marcel and Rene Bertal, two stars of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg in Antwerp, played Robert and Bertrand in the mid 1950's; a later stage adaptation by Romain De Coninck, performed at the Minardschouwburg in Ghent, was a triumphant success.



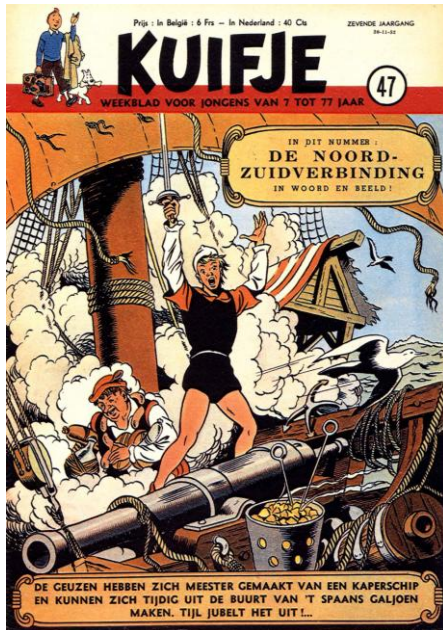
When Vandersteen decided to take over these two characters, he in turn put his own stamp on them. The pair were no longer outlaws but instead eccentric figures with a love of freedom. In the comic strips Robert and Bertrand now scrape a living doing odd jobs and finding time to enjoy the good things in life. They are constantly pursued by Agent 17, while the little Prince Joeki of Moldavia trails around after them. His Royal Highness is none other than a caricature of Willy Vandersteen as a child. He speaks his mind freely, smilingly exposing the meanness and the injustices of the good 19th century bourgeoisie...

The first episode in the Robert en Bertrand series, *Mysterie op Rozendaal*, appeared on 30 November 1972 in *De Standaard*. In this humorous thriller exposing social issues, Willy Vandersteen plays all the strings of human comedy with great finesse. Vandersteen lost interest in the two vagabonds in

1985 and thereafter entrusted the scripts to Mark Meul, the drawings to Ronald Van Riet and the inking to Anna De Velde. Meul relocated the characters in Montmartre, in the entourage of Toulouse-Lautrec, and gave the series new life in the historical context of the Belle Epoque. It ended in 1993 after 98 albums.



## 8. Thyl Ulenspiegel & De Geuzen



### 8.1 Thyl Ulenspiegel

Thyl Ulenspiegel, created by the Belgian author Charles De Coster, was born in Damme, Flanders, during the reign of Charles V. His father Claes was sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition following a slanderous denunciation. His mother was tortured by the Spanish and died in appalling suffering. To avenge them, Thyl swears to free Flanders from the invaders with the help of his friend Lamme Goedzak and the beggars in the army of William of Orange. Willy Vandersteen dusted off this historical 19th century novel and put it superbly into images in 1947 for *Kuifje* and *Tintin* magazine, with a keen sense of humour and magnificent irony. Two Thyl Ulenspiegel albums were published: *De opstand der Geuzen* and *Fort Amsterdam*. The second is a free interpretation of the character for whom Willy Vandersteen wrote an adventure set in America among the Dutch colonies which does not exist in the original work by Charles De Coster.

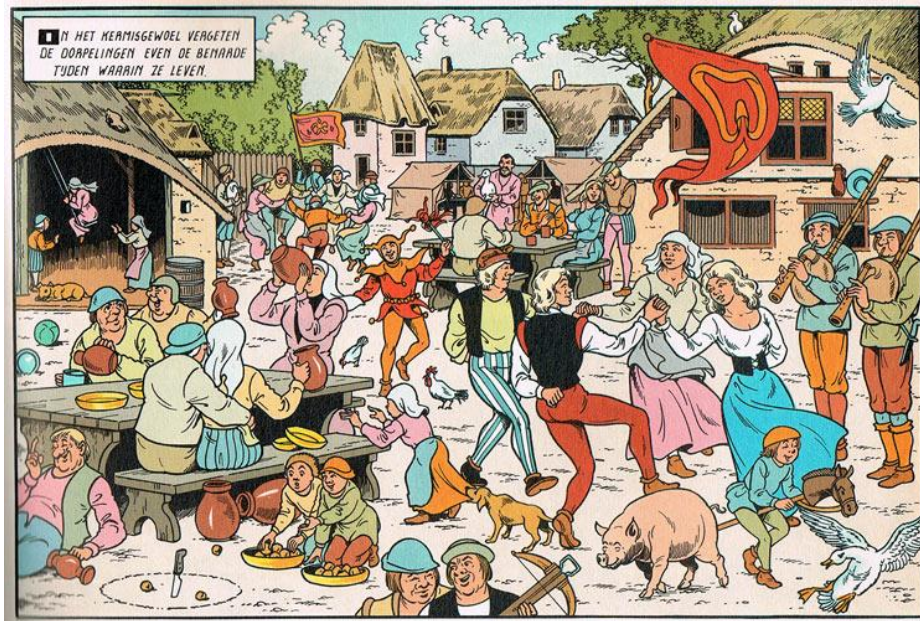
### 8.2 De Geuzen

Begun in 1972, the *De Geuzen* project is the apotheosis of Willy Vandersteen's rich artistic career. The first sketches for the project tell of a historical satire with the action situated in the 16th century, in the Spanish-held Low Countries. The author dreamed up a gallery of characters with obvious similarities to the Thyl Ulenspiegel epic but the sketches were to lie dormant in a drawer for many years.

In 1985, at the age of 72, Willy Vandersteen was still dreaming of the paintings of Brueghel and the Flemish Renaissance. He decided to revive the beggars from Thyl in a series of their own. The hero, Hannes, is involved in the fight against the occupying Spanish. His fiancée, the young farmer's daughter Veerle, is the mirror image of Nele, Thyl's faithful companion, and Tamme has the hearty appetite of Ulenspiegel's best friend Lamme Goedzak...

The trio symbolize the quest for liberty which the author cherishes, and the struggle against selfishness and greed. The magus Dostranamus adds a touch of esotericism to the tale and manipulates the homunculus Knullus, a facetious little creature with supernatural powers. *De Geuzen* depicts a gallery of extraordinary characters such as the magician's wife whose curvaceous charms defy the laws of time; the seven dwarves with crow's beaks who personify the seven deadly sins; and Dulle Griet, whose sword falls across the paths of men who are too greedy... Ten *De Geuzen* albums were published; the pencil sketches by the master are truly precious works.





## 9. De Rode Ridder

The first comic strips featuring *Johan de Rode Ridder* appeared in *Het Nieuwsblad* on 5 November 1959. The character is inspired by the short stories of the Antwerp author Leopold Vermeiren, which were published in *De Kleine Zondagsvriend* from 1946 and then in book compilations from 1954. Willy Vandersteen makes Johan the defender of widows and orphans. The intelligent, generous and fair-minded knight is always ready to rush in headlong to save the world, like Wiske and Bessy. Johan also borrows his fiery spirit from King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, one of Willy Vandersteen's favourite bedside books. After setting the scene with nuggets such as *Het Veenspook*, *Storm over Damme* and *De Vuurgeest*, Willy Vandersteen entrusted the continuation of the series to Karel Verschuere.



In 1963 the torch passed to Frank Sels, who had earned his spurs at the Bessy Studio. Sels made Johan a friend of Sir Lancelot and a new member of the famous Round Table... Willy Vandersteen tired of the series by the end of the 1960s, and tried to do away with Johan in *De laatste droom*, but the readers demanded his return with such insistence that the master entrusted Karel Biddeloo with the task of continuing the scripts and drawings. Biddeloo



introduced new elements of sorcery and fantasy into the series, creating the characters of the fairy seductress Galaxa, a sensual incarnation of Good, and Bahaal, master of the dark forces, to torment Johan's mind. On Biddeloo's death in 1990, scriptwriter Martin Lodewijk and artist Claus Scholz took the knight back to his origins, writing new tales of chivalry with no fantasy dimension. Over 235 albums have been published to date.

## 10. Karl May

At the beginning of the 1960s the adaptation rights to the novels of German author Karl May were released. The Standaard publishing house bought them and immediately asked Willy Vandersteen to adapt these works into comic strip form. The author discussed the request with his colleague Karel Verschuere, who was all in favour. Willy Vandersteen drew some superb pencil sketches for the first episode of this realist Western, its main protagonists being the famous Old Shatterhand and his blood brother, the Apache Winnetou. Thereafter he limited himself to the synopses and a few preparatory sketches. The stories appeared in *Pats*, the Standaard group's new weekly children's supplement, and were then published in albums. The series later passed into the hands of Eugène Goossens and then Karel Biddeloo, who was able to give free rein to his passion for the Wild West in the stories. The last title was published in 1969.

## 11. Biggles

When the novels of the author Captain W.E. Johns became public domain, the Standaard publishing house asked Willy Vandersteen and Karel Verschuere to adapt the adventures of the British fighter pilot and spy Biggles into comic strip form. Vandersteen had little enthusiasm for the project, but agreed to write the first storylines. He sketched a few boxes in pencil before delegating the rest to his studio. On 12 April 1965 Major Biggles accomplished his first mission in the newspapers of the De Standaard group under the title *Biggles en Extrême-Orient*. In 1967 Karel Biddeloo took over Biggles with the story *Objectif Boomerang*, continuing the series until *Le dernier convoi* in 1970. A total of 20 Biggles albums were published by the Vandersteen Studio.



# The **BELGIAN COMIC STRIP CENTER**

The Belgian Comic Strip Center? In the land of Smurfs and Tintin, visitors can discover a range of permanent exhibitions, illustrated with original comic strip drawings and unique objects. Simultaneously, there are also several temporary exhibitions on display.

The Belgian Comic Strip Center is also the former Waucquez Warehouse, a gem of Art Nouveau by grand master Victor Horta (1906).



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