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A taste of the comic Popular arts convention draws 36,000 enthusiasts

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LOCAL

BAM! KAPOW! POP!

Watch out for "Action Girl," the new generation of comic book whose protagonist stops female gang members in the act of robbing a department store because they think the store overcharges for makeup.

Or "Too Much Coffee Man," who accomplishes nothing in his mundane life, fights with his lawyer and wrestles with his dirty dishes.

Or "Milk and Cheese," the story of dairy products gone bad.

These new independent comics joined thousands of old and established publications in the bigger-than-life Comic-Con International at the San Diego Convention Center, a four-day event billed as the largest popular arts convention in the United States.

More than 36,000 artists, publishers, collectors and the simply curious zapped through miles of aisles, ogling monster displays of movies and Batmobiles, exclaiming their enthusiasm with words like "ARRRGH," "EEEEECH" and "YIKES."

"The general level of geekiness is extremely high, and I like that," said a grinning computer programmer and comic hobbyist Tom McMillan, whose intrigue with the newer generation of comic productions prompted him and his wife, Doyle Shimamura, to devote their entire Saturday to the event.

Many of today's comic publications are of much higher quality than the "bad science-fiction movies and comic strips" produced 30 years ago, when he was a boy, McMillan said. "It's not really an escape. It's graphic storytelling," said the Rancho Penasquitos resident.

Many of those attending noted the proliferation of independent comic book productions. Bill Oakley, a 10-year veteran comic letterer from upstate New York said, "People are a little burned out on the superhero, the X-man character clones."

Now, he said, the hottest stuff is about "just normal guys and their boring routines that get them through life."

Like "Too Much Coffee Man," whose rapid and recent success is attributed by his creator Shannon Wheeler to its "addictive" properties. "I call it the anti-superhero syndrome," he said.

Many in the crowd yesterday noted that there are many more illustrators and story writers publishing for a young female audience this year. Sarah Dyer's increasingly popular "Action Girl" attempts to convey teen-age girls in a "pro-girl, empowering" way, she said.

Megan Kelso has turned a hobby into a break-even business with her "Girlhero" series of comics, featuring themes that emphasize real-life relationships between friends and job situations rather than space adventure and violence.

"It's much more of a multimedia event," said David Glanzer, director of marketing and public relations for the convention. Next to row upon row of antique and yesteryear comic book collectibles were posters, T-shirts, coffee mugs, jewelry, games, books, cards, masks, Web site ads and movie promotions featuring comic characters.

"Superman will always be with us, but these days there's a lot more diversity," said Denis Kitchen, publisher of 28-year-old Kitchen Sink Press, which produced one of the most famous alternative comics by R. Crumb in the late 1960s.

"Now there's women, gays, politics -- anyone who used to be excluded from the comics industry now has a forum," he said.

Of course, the traditional comic book characters were ever-present. Wandering through the aisles were myriad familiar, such as Wolverine and Klingon, and a half-dozen scantily clad female avengers.

Many of those attending the convention said they were comic book publisher wannabes, like "Shane," a Marine Corps enlisted man who said he's published 13 titles on his own -- "mostly superheroes blowing stuff up, heaven and hell and the triumph of good over evil."

Actually, he said almost as an afterthought, he came to the convention in an effort to find a job in the comic industry "because I really don't like the Marine Corps all that much."

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