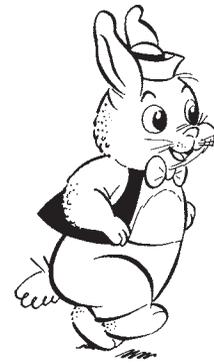
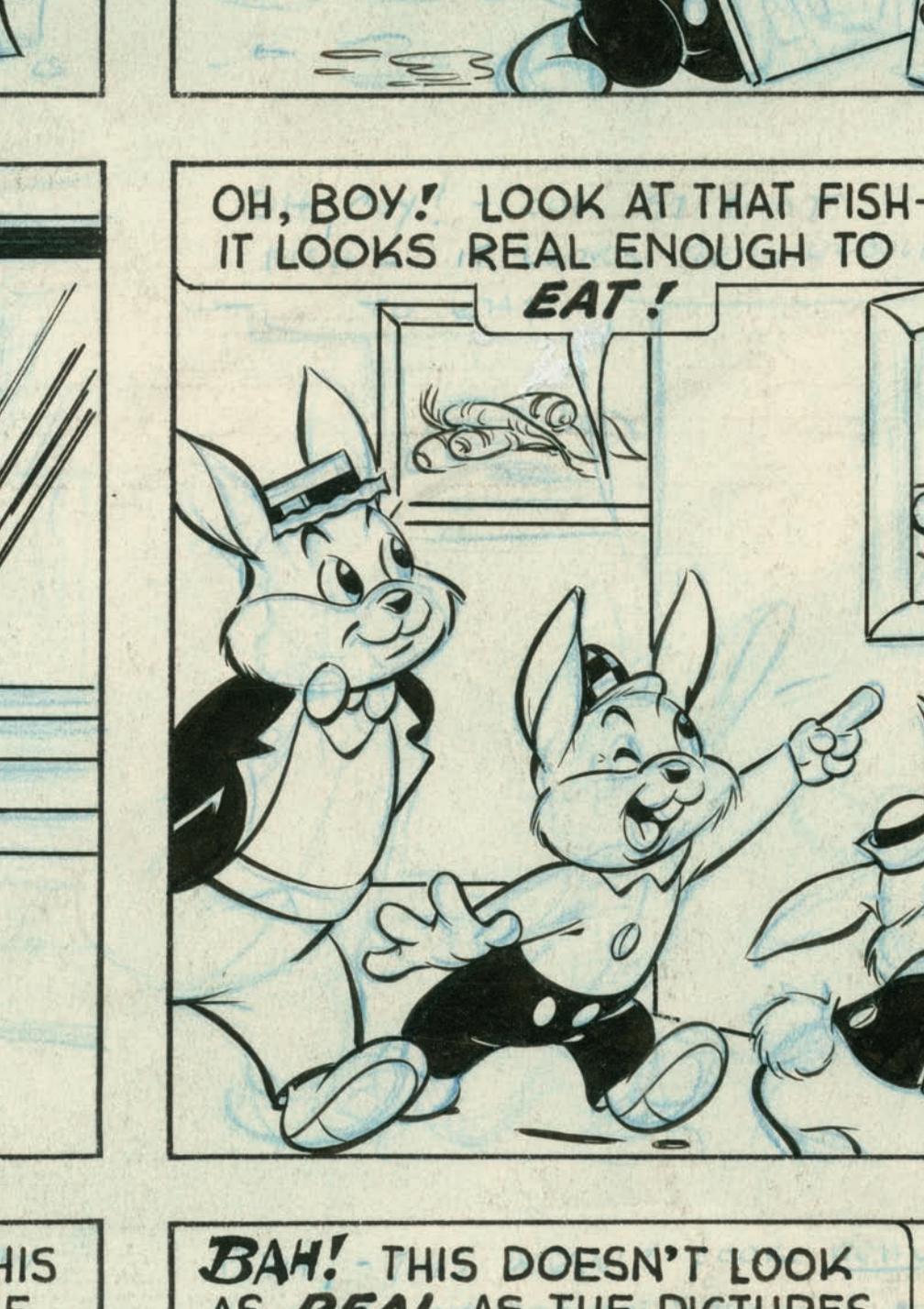




VINCENT  
FAGO

Peter Rabbit



# Peter Rabbit

VINCENT  
FAGO

Vincent Fago was born in the Bronx in 1914. It was the same year Winsor McCay first stood on a stage next to his animated creation, Gertie the Dinosaur. At the age of fourteen, Fago sold his first cartoon. His career would span more than seven decades, encompassing animation, comic books, strips, and more. During frustrating times, Fago was known to exclaim, "I just want to draw a rabbit." In 1948 he was hired to do just that, inheriting the comic strip *Peter Rabbit* when its original author retired. Fago's tenure on the strip not only gives us a glimpse into his individual artistic development, it also exemplifies the shifting tastes of the times.

Fago honed his drawing chops working in a medium that was in its infancy, while he was also in his. He left high school in the Bronx to work as an apprentice at the Jam Handy animation studio in Detroit, moving quickly up the ladder to become an animator for Fleischer Studios in Florida in 1939. During this period he worked on a number of theatrical shorts, including those starring Popeye and Betty Boop, as well as full-length features such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Mr. Bug Goes to Town*.



Animation was in its golden age, and the industry was filled with creative fervor and technical innovation. Of course, the animation studio titan at the time was Disney, which fostered a house style emphasizing realism. Due to Fago's love of funny animals, he was dismayed to see Fleischer Studios emulating Disney in this regard. Disney was also known to be anti-union, which didn't sit well with Fago, having been involved with unions during his time at Fleischer. Seeing the way Disney was taking over animation, Fago began to feel he had no future, or desire, to continue working in that field.

Returning to New York to be closer to his family in the early 1940s, Fago began cartooning for Timely Comics, which would eventually evolve into Marvel Comics. He wasn't involved with the superhero titles of the time, instead using his animator's sense of solid, fluid forms in countless funny animal comics. He soon headed the Timely "Animator Bullpen," which produced original funny animal stories as well as movie tie-ins. He also worked closely with a young editor named Stan Lee. When the draft began, Fago was ineligible for military service due to blindness in one eye from an old snowball accident. When Stan Lee was drafted in 1942, he asked Fago to take over his duties at Timely.

The 1940s were an economic boom for comics but by 1947 the high-pressure life of an editor was wearing on Fago. He was making a good living, but chain-smoked, suffered migraines, and found himself questioning his future once again. Eventually he decided to quit. Shortly thereafter he found out his wife was pregnant.

A few days after quitting his job, Fago received a call from the *Herald Tribune*. Cartoonist Harrison Cady was retiring from

the *Peter Rabbit* Sunday strip, and they wanted to know if Fago would take over. He accepted immediately, as it had always been his dream to have a syndicated comic strip. The next decade was a happy time for Fago; moving to the then-rural world of Rockland County, north of the city, raising children and having his work appear in newspapers all over the world.

Cady had drawn the *Peter Rabbit* strip since 1919, and even drew the character in storybooks with author Thornton W. Burgess as early as 1913. Cady's drawing style was a product of an earlier era. He rendered the characters in stocky forms with wispy lines and a bit of hatching. His style was more closely linked to cartooning's engraving roots; wonderfully idiosyncratic, though a little out of place among the increasingly cleaner styles appearing in the 1940s funny pages.

Fago's work on the strip was a stark contrast from Cady's approach. Fago immediately brought his animator's skill-set to the comic, rendering the now dynamic characters in rich, varied brush lines. The writing also changed as Fago gradually focused less on the domestic comedy of Peter and his family, and more on the perspectives of the younger characters. Fago drew inspiration from his childhood in the Bronx, and also consulted the *Farmer's Almanac* to anticipate how children would react to various seasons, holidays, and weather patterns. This child's perspective became one of the key elements of Fago's take on *Peter Rabbit*. As is always the case with change, Fago's appointment to the strip was met with some resistance from newspaper readers. Not wanting to simply continue the work of his predecessor, Fago explored his own interests.

Fago's work continued to evolve during this time—along with visual culture in



general. In the fine art world, avant-garde artists continued to push back against the realists of the late 19th century. Modernist painters worked with increasing flatness and abstraction. In the animation industry, the 1941 Disney animators' strike led to a number of Disney employees leaving the company

to found a new animation studio, United Productions of America (UPA). Unlike the Disney emphasis on realism, UPA focused on a stylized aesthetic that was flat and abstracted. The studio became best known for their Mr. Magoo cartoons, and had a lasting impact on the cartooning community.

#### Status Quo

I was both amazed and upset to view in NEWSWEEK, Sept. 20 the new Peter Rabbit . . . If the New York Herald Tribune Syndicate is so lacking in perception and sentiment that they cannot let him die a decent death in his own identity, they might at least have the grace to call the new rabbit Peter Rabbit Jr. or the New Peter Rabbit . . . It is unbearable that our earthy, wise, and conservative little rabbit should be made into a disgusting replica of Bugs' Bunny. Is nothing sacred to the publishing world?

ELINOR F. COLE

West Boxford, Mass.

*Newsweek letter, October 4, 1948*

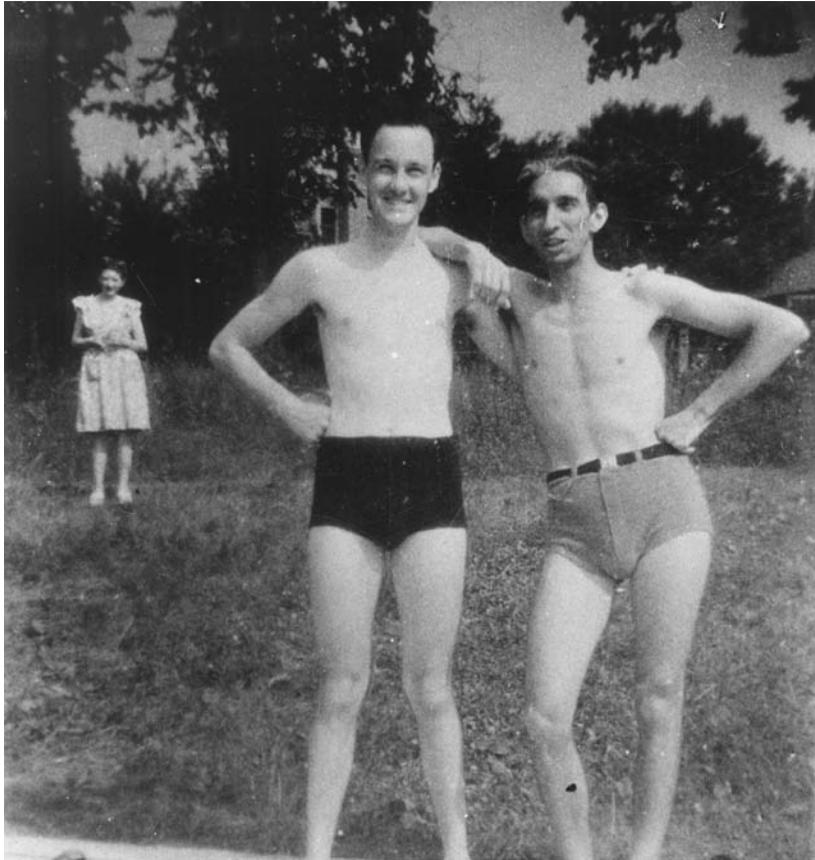
By 1953, Fago's *Peter Rabbit* began to exhibit a shift in style as well. The designs began moving away from the Fleischer and funny animal animation styles of the 1940s, and everything flattened out, similar to the evolution of Schulz's *Peanuts*. Fago rendered his backgrounds with fewer lines, and their depth became shallower. Characters remained solidly rendered, but also exhibited a technical flatness. Everything remained beautifully composed, but Fago had fully digested the influence of Fleischer and Cady. The strips were now pure Fago. It's difficult to tell if the rest of visual culture influenced this stylistic shift, if Fago followed a natural technical impulse, or if he simply began drawing with greater economy to meet the demands of deadlines.

Visuals aside, *Peter Rabbit* became delightfully strange and playful when Fago took the reins. The characters started behaving more and more like real children. The strips became populated with tiny mice, squirrels, and bugs making little side comments. There are also numerous strips in which thought balloons are populated by tiny versions of the characters existing in alternate possible realities(!). Fago paraphrases Zhuangzhi when Peter wonders if he's actually a bird dreaming he's a rabbit. There is also plenty of formalist comics play, as word and thought balloons occupy physical space, freeze to ice, or become balloons within balloons.

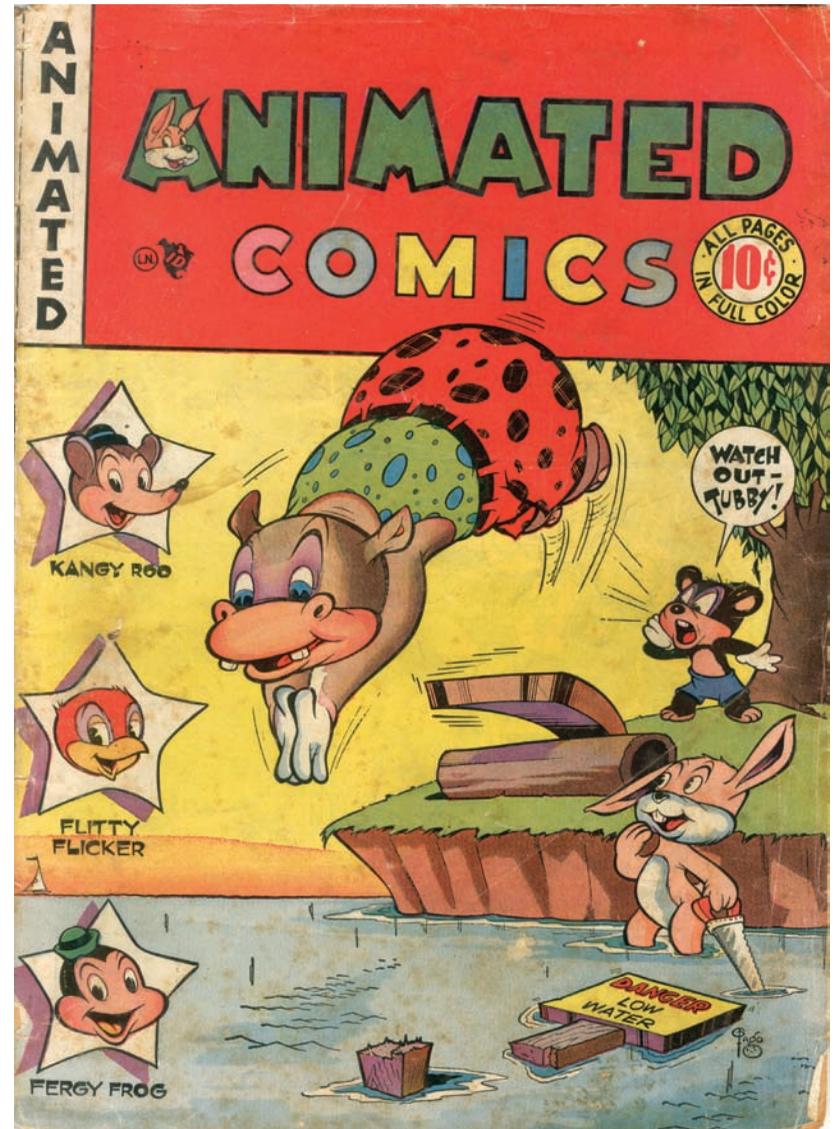
After the *Herald Tribune* folded and *Peter Rabbit* ended, Fago and his family eventually moved to Bethel, Vermont. Some of his later projects included children's books, and a seemingly endless variety of activity-coloring books. His funny animal work would become an influence on underground cartoonists such as Jay Lynch and Robert Crumb. But he is best known for doing what he always wanted to do: drawing rabbits. Near the end of his life, Fago often talked about writing and illustrating one last book that he wanted to call *Hey God, I'm from the Bronx!*

Dakota McFadzean  
The Center for Cartoon Studies  
April 2012

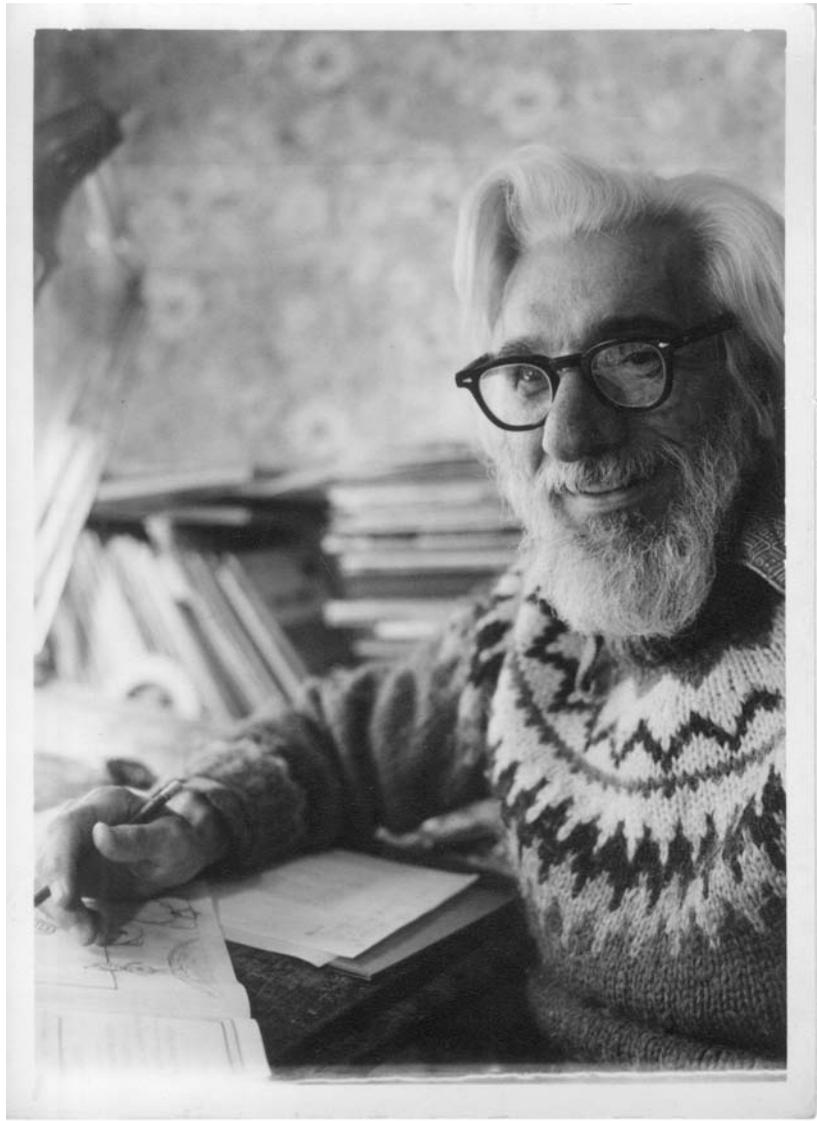




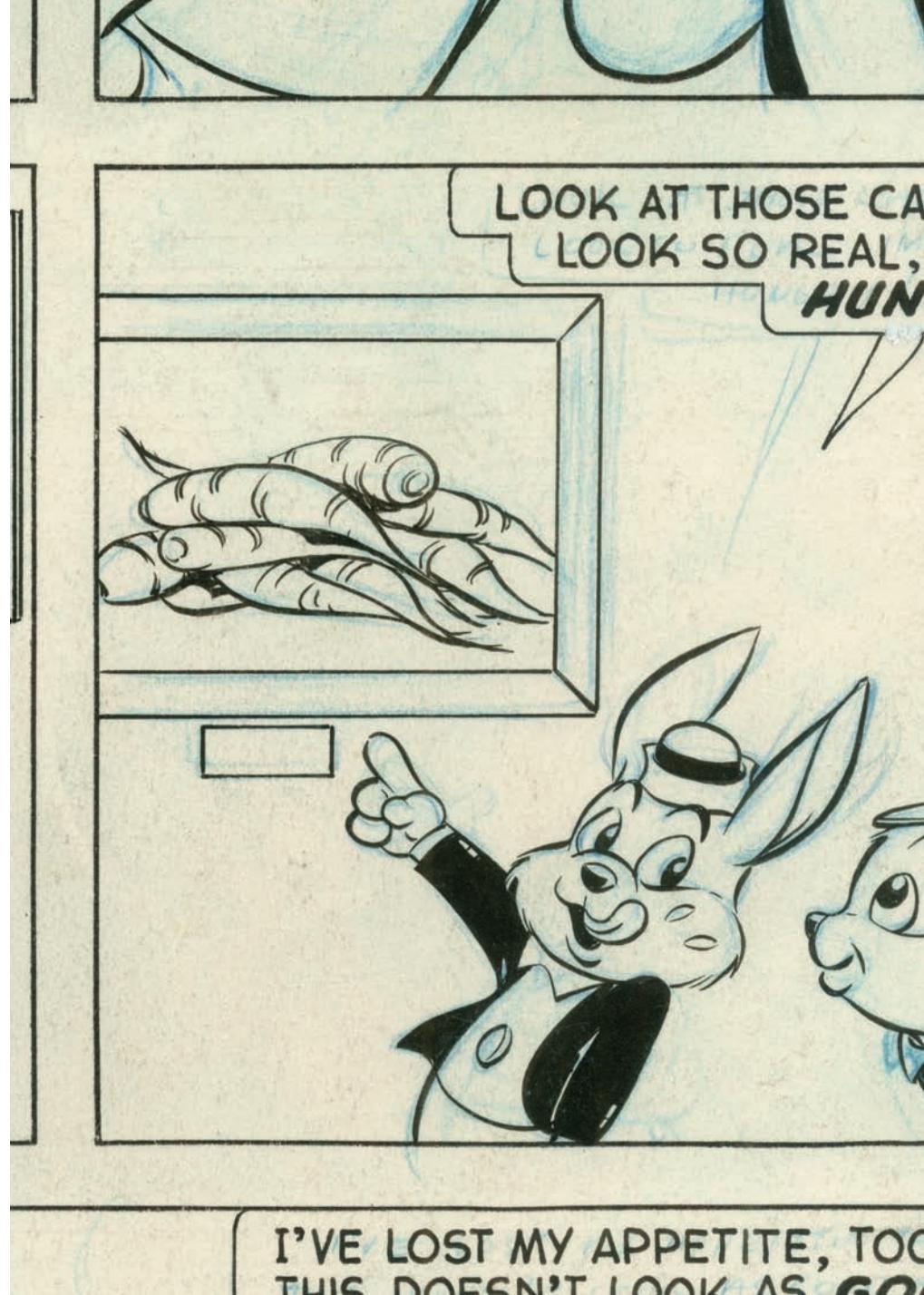
Vincent Fago (right) and Stan Lee ready for a swim, circa 1940



Animated Comics - cover by Vincent Fago, circa 1940



Vincent Fago





Special Thanks to John Fago