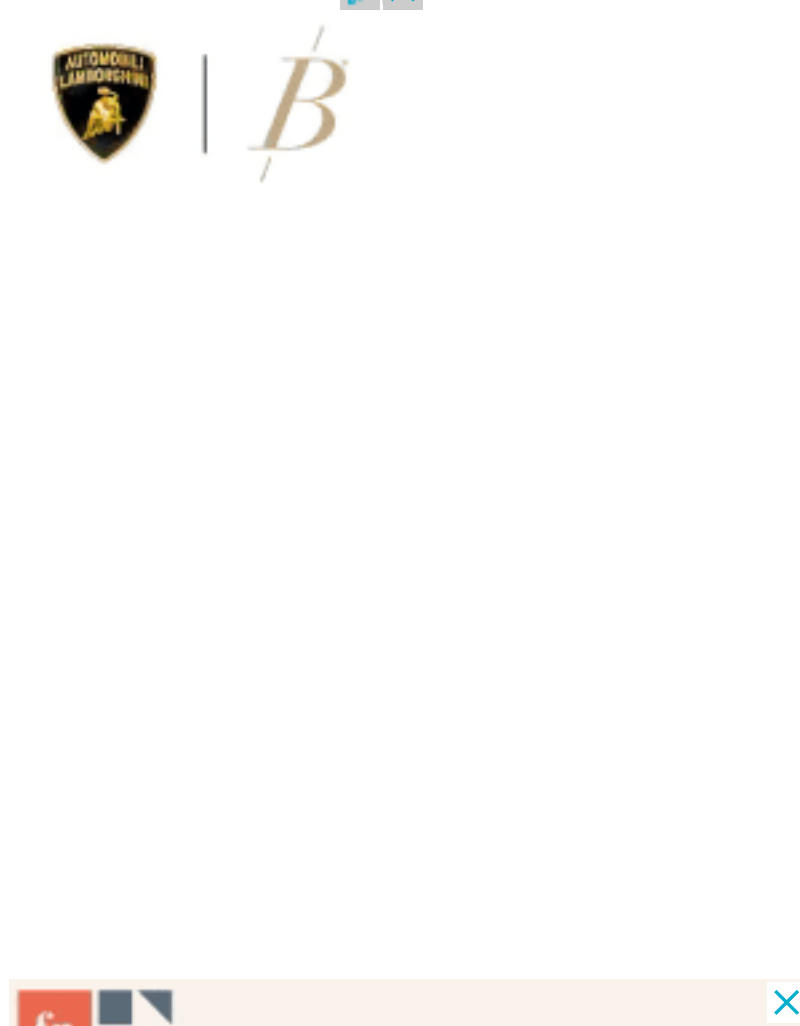




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## Outside the Lines

A vivid carouser in Café Society, Arno mocked bejeweled battle-axes and sugar daddies.

By Edward Kosner

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SAVE PRINT TEXT

The New Yorker cartoon has been an artifact of American popular culture for more than 90 years, but today's scraggly iterations have little of the flair, joy and hilarity of the magazine's classics. Times have evolved, of course. Still, the shrunken dimensions, minimalist draftsmanship and pinched irony of the dozen-odd cartoons that appear in each issue of the New Yorker provide a glum glimpse of the American mood in the new century.

Not everything is diminished. There's the quirky charm of Roz Chast, a perennial talent. But only Barry Blitt's brilliant satiric covers deliver the old sass with style and conviction.

The New Yorker's onetime master of the sable brush, Peter Arno, has little in common with Mr. Blitt's fastidiously spidery line. Yet all these years after Arno joined the magazine in its first year—and nearly a half-century since his death—his bold artistry still resonates.



PHOTO: ESTATE OF PETER ARNO

Tall, sturdy and handsome, with luxuriant slicked-back hair and a Hotchkiss and (briefly) Yale education, Arno would have been the perfect guest at one of Jay Gatsby's glittery Jazz Age parties in West Egg, where he might have sat in with the band on banjo. He was a vivid carouser in the Café Society he lampooned so exquisitely with his cavalcade of leering sugar daddies, shimmying chorus girls, bejeweled battle-axes, tempted ministers and vexed married couples. In his 43 years with the magazine, Arno produced more than 50 covers and 750 cartoons and spot illustrations.

Now he has been resurrected by another New Yorker cartoonist, Michael Maslin, in "Peter Arno: The Mad, Mad World of the New Yorker's Greatest Cartoonist," a slender biography that recapitulates the artist's career as "America's guilty pleasure" without much of his subject's

verve or sardonic wit.

Unlike the provincial Harold Ross and many of his other colleagues, Arno was actually a New Yorker. Born Curtis Arnoux Peters Jr. in 1904 in West Harlem, then a comfortable, white middle-class residential neighborhood, he was the son of an English immigrant and a young lawyer who eventually became a State Supreme Court judge. By the age of 12, he was such an accomplished artist that knew he wanted to be a cartoonist and tried peddling his drawings to the old Life and Judge humor magazines.

He spent so much time sketching at Hotchkiss and paid so little attention to his studies that the headmaster complained to his father. But soon his very sophisticated artwork began filling full pages in the student magazine. At Yale, where his classmates included Rudy Vallee, John Hay Whitney and John Ringling North (later the circus impresario), he drew for the undergraduate magazine and led his own dance band.

**PETER ARNO**  
By Michael Maslin  
Regan Arts, 287 pages, \$26.95

But he argued with his father over his career and left Yale after a year, eventually settling in Greenwich Village, playing music and working as an illustrator for a silent-movie producer. In 1925, on a lark, he took some drawings signed "Arno" to a struggling new smart-set magazine called the New Yorker. Two days later, the

magazine called and bought one—and Peter Arno's real life began.

He still lived in the Village but spent every night uptown immersed in a world, as Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr. described it, of "snobs and climbers, debutantes and dowagers, fortune-hunters and title aspirants, land poor aristocrats and gold-laden grocers, provincials and ambassadors—all of them playing . . . for all it is worth, the game called Society."

Arno professed to despise it. "I would see fatuous, ridiculous people in public places, in night clubs . . .," he once told the writer Joseph Mitchell, "I had a really hot impulse to go and exaggerate their ridiculous aspects. That anger . . . gave my stuff punch and made it live."

Punch he had, and punch he did. Over the years, the gossip columns would report on Arno's fistfights in nightclubs from coast to coast. In the midst of the Depression, he battled over a girl at an L.A. boîte with a Philadelphia blue blood named Drexel Biddle Steele. A few years later, at a Midtown Manhattan "rhumba club" called La Conga, he slugged Bruce Cabot, the actor who saved Fay Wray from King Kong, when Cabot dared to chat up Arno's date, the 18-year-old "deb of the year" Brenda Frazier. The fight was broken up by Hoot Gibson, the old cowboy movie star. A decade after that, he was arrested for pulling a .38 on an unfortunate doorman at the Drake Hotel on Park Avenue.

These incidents were exclamation points in a tumultuous life. Arno was married twice, first to Lois Long, the archetypal flapper, who as "Lipstick" wrote the New Yorker's nightlife column. They divorced after just four years, with Long complaining that she "lived in abject terror" of Arno. In 1935, he married Mary Livingston Lansing, a society beauty who was being romanced by Howard Hughes. That marriage lasted barely three years.

All the while, Arno was dabbling in Broadway—his comedy "Here Goes the Bride" flopped in 1931—and in Hollywood, where he had a cameo in Jack Benny's "Artists and Models" and did three "surrealist paintings" for an Otto Preminger film. He even designed a sleek roadster called the Albatross 137K, of which only the prototype was ever built.

He lived in a series of posh but disheveled Manhattan bachelor flats, the floors covered with discarded drawings. As a photographer for Look magazine, the young Stanley Kubrick snapped 300 shots of Arno at one of his apartments, many of the photos showing the artist discussing his work with a beautiful naked model.

Whatever the distractions, Arno was devoted to his work. He revered the caricaturist Honoré Daumier, and the bold outlines of his drawings and paintings reminded of some people of the Fauvist Georges Rouault. His work was regularly displayed at Manhattan fine-art galleries and praised extravagantly by critics. After taking in one big show, Lewis Mumford wrote: "No one has dramatized so effectively the elementary battle of black and white, in a fashion that makes a face leap out of the picture like a jack-in-the-box, knocking one in the eye at the same time that the idea of the joke enters one's mind."

For decades, Arno and the New Yorker were gripped in a fraught dance of mutual dependency. Ross and his colleagues knew that Arno's advent had kept the magazine from stillbirth and that for many readers and advertisers he was the New Yorker. Mr. Maslin's book is full of letters from Ross to Arno begging for more drawings and memos to the business side about how to satisfy his unquenchable demands for more money.

In his prime, Arno made the equivalent of \$180,000 a year from the magazine. He also did lucrative advertising work, especially for Pepsi-Cola, and published frequent anthologies of his New Yorker work that sold tens of thousands of copies. Even so, every year Arno tortured Ross and his whispery successor, William Shawn. He would head west or to Mexico on long breaks, and he essentially went on strike for nearly two years during World War II, although he did posters for the war effort. He insisted on signing only one-year contracts, then haggled relentlessly over renewals.

However exasperating or demanding, Arno was worth it. His classic cartoons became part of the American vernacular, especially the drawing of the taut engineer walking away from the test crash of a new warplane captioned, "Well, back to the old drawing board." All these years later, his cartoon of the near-naked chorus girl, rear extended, telling the tuxedoed nightclub patron, "Valerie won't be around for several days. She backed into a sizzling platter," still brings a laugh. Unfortunately, the book reproduces only a dozen or so of Arno's greatest hits, and it's padded out with a long afterword on the culture of New Yorker cartooning and not very illuminating observations by scores of the magazine's artists on the impact of Arno's work on their careers.

Arno was such a commanding talent that his run at the New Yorker long outlasted the era—and the sensibility—that made his fame. In his late 40s, he abandoned Manhattan and took up life as a country squire of sorts in two stone cottages on 81/2 acres in Port Chester, N.Y. He began keeping company with a woman named Charlotte Markell, the wife of his doctor, whom she ultimately divorced. She and Arno never married, but they rusticated together for the rest of his life.

In his last years, Arno described himself as "drinking, depressed, no goal, no point in working." Still, he published 32 covers and 277 cartoons in his late New Yorker period. He died of emphysema in 1968 at the age of 64. His last New Yorker cartoon appeared just a few days before. It shows a prancing Pan tootling his pipes before a busty, unimpressed young maiden, who looks up and tells him: "Oh, grow up!"

Arno really never did—his gift to generations of readers.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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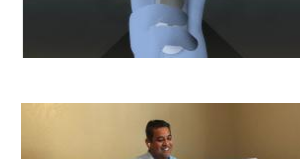
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