## ART OF HAVERHILL *by Patricia J. Bruno*

Greg Moutafis stays between the lines but goes outside the box

Most of us grew up reading comic books. From Casper the Friendly Ghost to Haverhill's own Archie, with a plethora of superheroes in between, the characters in comics have entertained generations. Whether we turned to them to escape reality or simply to have a giggle, these fast-paced little paperbacks were generally a quick read not requiring much commitment or deep thought.

The first comic books, or graphic novels, date to the 19th century, when they were created in Europe as private commissions for the upper class. Very often the topic was a satire on social conventions. Through the ages, the medium transitioned, and American newspaper comicstrips began depicting the lifestyles of new immigrants, appealing to a more varied audience and income level.

The 20th century saw the emergence of the superhero in comics, with Batman and Robin, Superman and Wonder Woman. By mid-century, creators of
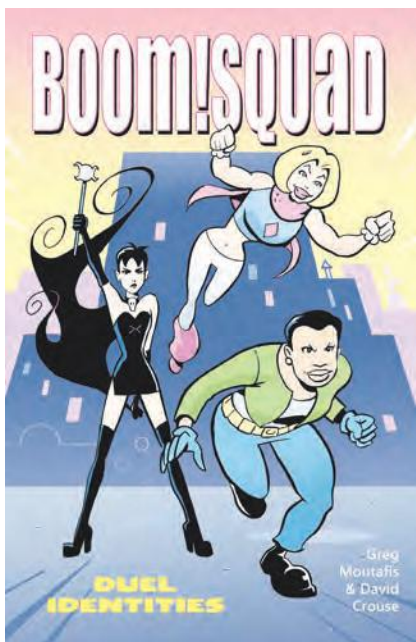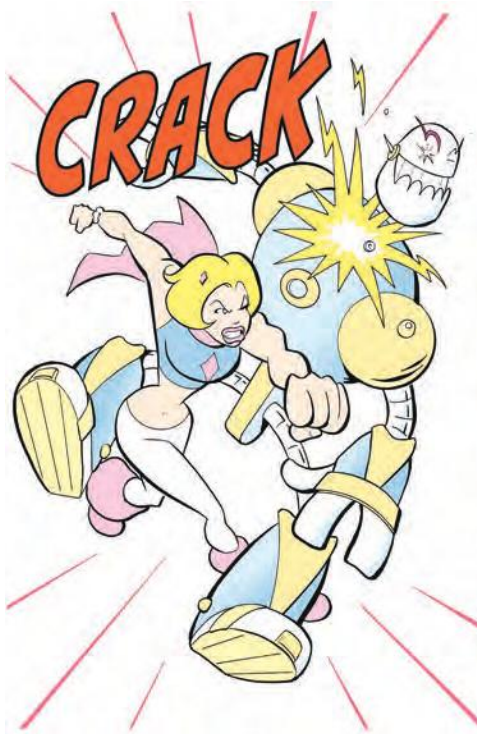
the medium were experimenting with a variety of genres, from shoot 'em up Westerns to intensely graphic crime stories. In 1954, when psychiatrist Fredric Wertham accused the industry of being a source of corruption for impressionable young people in his bestselling book *Seduction of the Innocent*, lawmakers took notice, and the landscape of comics was altered for decades. As a form of self-censorship, the Comics Magazine Association of America created the Comics Code Authority, a strict set of standards and ethics to govern their publications. Seeing the Comics Code Seal of Approval on a book assured parents and lawmakers that the content was all-American, moral, and in good taste; vampires and werewolves were banned, women's physical qualities were not exaggerated, and above all, Good triumphed over Evil. While the rules changed through the years, it wasn't until 2011 that the code and the organization behind it saw its final demise.

These days, comic book creators are allowed to follow their own moral compasses. Zombies and ghouls are once more allowed to roam the pages, and pretty much anything might appear in the panels of a graphic novel. Yet Haverhill artist Greg Moutafis seems to follow his own moral code as he conjures up colorful characters for his comic art. Published in 2017, the graphic novel *Boom!Squad* was a collaboration with his longtime friend and writer David Crouse. It was years in the making and somewhat ahead of its time in its subtext and out-of-the-box character treatment.

Boom!Squad features "a trio of super heroines" who "fight against giant ro-

bots, criminal masterminds, and corporate coffeehouses," according to the back cover. The key word here is "heroines"—three strong female characters dreamed up by Moutafis and Crouse out of their mutual respect for women and their distaste for the general portrayal of women in comics. Although the world of comics has in some ways caught up with their thinking, when Moutafis and Crouse first conceived the idea of *Boom!Squad* in the late 1990s, feminism in comics was still gaining ground. *Boom!Squad*, a witty visual delight, where yes, Good does triumph over Evil, is entertaining and worthy of more than just a quick read. After all, it is 90 pages of artwork.

Moutafis, a graduate of Massachusetts College of Art, often brings his show on the road, sharing his comic art in regional galleries, museums and comic conventions. Locally he was a regular exhibitor at Haverhill's Art Market and has had solo shows at Haverhill Public Library and Buttonwoods Museum. His work currently is displayed at The Switchboard on Washington Street. "I enjoy showing my sequential art in galleries," says Moutafis. "A single page of a comic book in a frame can stand alone as a piece of art."

His exhibits often depict the comic art process, from the initial rough sketches to the final color images that emerge from the computer. The skills required to create comic art are varied and many. Color choices, composition, consistency and attention to detail are all essential components. The artist must set the scene with background details that help tell the story while being careful not to clutter the visuals. After establishing the

"set design" in one panel, he then might follow with several frames or panels featuring simple close-ups of a character. At this stage, Moutafis trusts that the viewer understands the setting and can use his imagination while following the storyline. A staple in comic art, oversized sound effects such as "Ka-Boom!" are placed outside of the dialogue balloons to add emphasis to the scene.

Moutafis appreciates the versatility of comic art and encourages art lovers and readers from all walks of life to take a closer look at the art form. "There is such a variety of stories being told through graphic novels these days, from science fiction to biographies," he says. "There is a comic book out there for almost every age group. I love the immediacy of the medium and the ability to create diverse and complementary characters that are relatable to readers." He is a big fan of the substantial comic book collection at the Haverhill Public Library, which is always growing, and he is a regular at the library's annual Comic Con each May.

Moutafis always keeps his options open for that next art project. Recent painting contributions include the Immigrant and Origin Mural in downtown Haverhill and an entire mural of his own on the former Landmark building along the riverfront boardwalk. An illustrator, cartoonist, painter and graphic artist, Moutafis possesses a variety of skills. But his one true superpower is the ability to create stunning comic art.

Greg Moutafis's comic art exhibit at The Switchboard runs through April 25. To view more of his work, visit greg-moutafis.com.

Patricia J. Bruno is a photographer, writer and downtown-business owner. A New England native, she shares her home in Haverhill with her loving husband and lovable cat.