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San Juan Anime

Visual Arts Bookstore in Puerto Rico

By Kat Avila | Web Published 7.1.2004

Dominique Robert is the manager of Visual Arts Bookstore in Puerto Rico. I ran across one of his online stores, Overseas Comics, while I was doing research on Korean comics or manhwa.

KA = Kat Avila

VAB = Dominique Robert for Visual Arts Bookstore

KA: What is the history of the Visual Arts Bookstore?

VAB: It opened in June 1993 as a specialty bookstore with an emphasis on the visual arts (cinema, photography, graphic arts, and comics from around the world – U.S., Japan, and Europe). Over the years, we have become much more of an Asian entertainment store with books, manga, manhwa, posters, DVDs, scrolls, CDs, photography books, toys, etc., from Asia.

I started the store because I wanted to change careers (I used to work in the financial field) and I always loved comics, cinema, and photography. After that, I just listened to customers to find out what they were looking for. So now we have good book and magazine sections on tattoos and piercing, graffiti, gothic culture, illustration, and erotic comics.

KA: The anime and manga market is international, but I was still surprised to discover a store in Puerto Rico.

VAB: Puerto Rico has a well-developed anime and manga culture. In the 1960s and 1970s, local TV stations showed Mazinger, Candy Candy, Cobra, Gatchaman, Astro Boy, and many other classic anime shows. They were very popular and all kids would play with the toys from the programs. These shows disappeared until the 1990s when Dragon Ball, Rurouni Kenshin, and Pokemon appeared both on cable and on the local TV stations.

For the last 10 years, it has been relatively easy to become familiar with Japanese anime and manga. There have been three to four video stores on the island that only rented anime and that carried up to 4000 different anime titles. Since we opened we have always offered a complete stock of all available translated manga.

In other words, the constant exposure for the past 10 years has made Japanese anime culture familiar to the younger generation.

KA: Your Overseas Comics site sells foreign and erotic comics books from all over the world.

VAB: Comic books is just part of our business, probably about 30% of our sales. Asian products (non-comics) represent about 40% and books represent 30%. Many of the other items we sell at the store are available on our other web site:
www.visualartsbookstore.com

KA: What percentage of your Spanish and Latin American comic books are in Spanish? In English?

VAB: Even though Puerto Rico is part of the U.S., the official language is Spanish and the day-to-day language is Spanish.



Web latinola.com



However, the local comic readers are used to reading in English. I would even say they would prefer to read Superman in English than in Spanish. For this reason, most of the Spanish and Latin American comic books that we carry and that appear on our web site are in English.

The local comics made in Puerto Rico are mostly in Spanish. These are works of love as the small market for them definitely doesn't cover their costs. A very good local comic book will sell only 200 copies on the island.

KA: Of your Spanish and Latin American titles, what percentage are "adult" publications?

VAB: More than 60% of the Spanish and Latin American titles that we offer are erotic because they sell the most!

KA: What might a U.S. comic book reader find different about Spanish and Latin American comics?

VAB: There are several major differences. U.S. comics are dominated by superhero characters and editor-owned characters. Outside of the U.S., superheroes represent a miniscule portion of what is produced. Also, characters are usually owned by the comic book artists and comic book readers are much more loyal to the artists than to the characters.

Puerto Rico is again an "in-between zone." Most of the local comic books are in the superhero style. Comic books are published directly in large format. Themes are in general more mature, more politicized, more socially conscious as those are themes constantly being discussed every day and are very normal (much less politically correct language and acts).

KA: You sell over 20 titles by Puerto Rican comic artists. What can you tell me about them? Which are your favorite titles?

VAB: Most of the comics from Puerto Rico are done in very small print runs (200 to 400 copies only). Most of them are in Spanish. Most of them are superheroes and aliens. Most of them are in black and white. The more recent ones have been influenced by manga. The only difference from U.S. comics is the setting of these comics is very often in Puerto Rico.

I am the wrong person to ask which ones I like the most as all these artists are friends and customers of ours.

KA: What are Mexican comic titles that you would recommend?

VAB: In most Latin American countries (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia), foreign comics produced locally represent probably 80 to 90% of the local production and sales. Superman, X-Men, Spawn, Asterix are very well known throughout Latin America.

Comics by local artists sold locally represent a very small portion of the local production. The only exception is probably Argentina. That is the main reason why artists from all those countries look for work outside their own countries.

In answer to your specific question, the only Mexican comics produced by Mexicans that we carry are those by Rius. These are very political and are a combination of text and drawings.

I would also recommend the series in English published by Humanoids, Son of the Gun. This is written by Alexandro Jodorowsky, the famous Mexican director of El Topo, Montana Sagrada, etc., who has been living in France for over 20 years and has been writing many comics. This is the best criticism of Mexican politics under the PRI regime.

KA: Do you attend any U.S. comic conventions as a dealer, such as Comic-Con in San Diego?

VAB: We do not attend any conventions in the U.S. as the cost to

get there is relatively high (remember we have to go by plane!).
There are not many discount flights out of San Juan.

KA: Thank you for your time.

Kat Avila frequently writes on comic culture. She maintains a Chicano and Asian-American arts web site at www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia.

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