

RO ON THE SCREEN AGAIN!



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FLASH GORDON: HERO OF MONGO

On January 7, 1934, man first “slipped the surly bonds of earth,” and rocketed to the stars.
What, you don’t remember it that way?

That was the date *Flash Gordon* first appeared in the comics section of newspapers across the country. Written by Don Moore and illustrated by Alex Raymond, and intended to compete with the incredibly popular *Buck Rogers* strip that debuted in 1930, the initial story told the tale of world-famous polo star Flash Gordon, who parachuted to earth when a meteor hit his plane. Fortunately, he managed to grab the beautiful Dale Arden on his way out of the aircraft and, even more fortunately, they managed to land on the property of Dr. Hans Zarkov, who was building a rocket ship in his back yard in order to save the world from an impending collision with the Planet Mongo. Blasting off to save the day, Flash managed to earn the enmity of Mongo’s emperor, the aptly named Ming the Merciless, gain the love of Ming’s daughter, the beautiful Aura, and become the hero of Mongo.

Not bad for a day’s work.

Beautifully rendered by artist Alex Raymond, the strip was an instant hit, soon eclipsing *Buck Rogers* in terms of both popularity and influence due, to a great extent, to Raymond’s lush artwork that was light-years ahead of anything else being published at the time. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Raymond must have been one of the most flattered men in the history of comics. His detailed, highly-realistic style is studied and even copied to this day by students of visual arts.

Flash was more than just a newspaper strip, however. April 27, 1935 saw the debut of Flash’s own radio adventure show, *The Amazing Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*, starring, appropriately enough, Gale Gordon (best known for his later role as Mr. Mooney, the comic foil for Lucille

(opposite page)
Detail from *Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars*
(Universal, 1938)
Color Stock One Sheet (27” X 41”)



Big Little Book #1166
Flash Gordon and the Monsters of Mongo
(Whitman, 1935)

Ball), which, although short-lived - only 26 episodes were produced - was great fun. The show ran 15-minute episodes Monday through Friday, which made it, of necessity, extremely fast-paced and exciting. A second series, *The Further Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*, starring James Meighan, ran from October 28, 1935 until February 6, 1936. That marked the end of Flash's radio career.

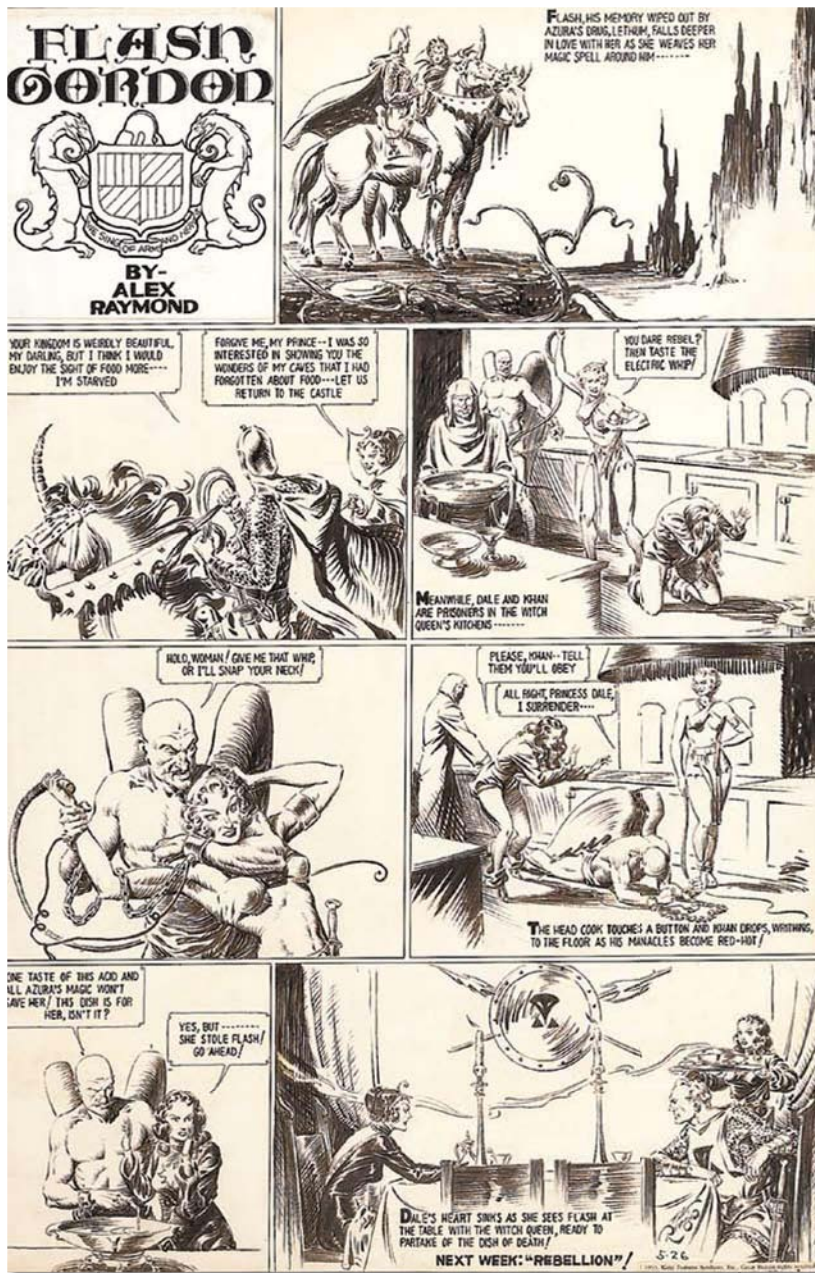
More significant that year was the release of the first of the Flash Gordon serials from Universal, the 13-chapter self-titled, *Flash Gordon*. It was an ambitious undertaking because Universal budgeted an enormous amount for its production. In a day when the typical Republic serial cost in the

neighborhood of \$150,000 - \$175,000 to make, depending on who you talk to, the amount budgeted for *Flash Gordon* was anywhere from \$350,000 to \$1,000,000. The serial was amazingly faithful to Raymond's designs, with some sets looking as if they had been literally lifted off the comics page. The budget is easily seen in every shot of this production. Remember, this was the era in which Universal was producing such immortal classics as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1930), and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). The same care was obviously lavished on *Flash Gordon* (1936), as the expert lighting and cinematography, not to mention the costumes and the elaborate sets, make this look like a feature film.

The special effects appear dated by today's standards, but there's no denying the fact that this is a rip-roaring adventure yarn, jam-packed with nonstop thrills and excitement. The serial has had a lasting and measurable effect on several generations of fans, most notably George Lucas, who acknowledges it as one of his inspirations for *Star Wars* (1977).

The cast was a remarkable assemblage of talent. Charles Middleton, whose film career began in 1920 and continued un-

Alex Raymond - *Flash Gordon* Sunday
Comic Strip Original Art, dated 5-26-35
(King Features Syndicate, 1935)



abated until his death in 1949, played the villainous Ming to perfection. A veteran of serials and B-movie programmers, Middleton scowled and snarled his way through 13 chapters with evil aplomb.

The lovely Jean Rogers, who began her career as a national beauty contest winner in 1933, played Dale Arden. Her career pretty much came to an end in 1943 when she walked off MGM's Culver City lot after the despotic Louis B. Mayer forbade her to get married. She retired in 1951 to raise a family.

Of course, the most memorable role in the serial was that of Flash himself, played by Larry "Buster" Crabbe. No stranger to chapter plays, Crabbe was to become one of the most successful serial stars of the era, with Flash Gordon proving one of his most memorable roles.

In spite of the big budget allocated for *Flash Gordon* (1936), Universal wasn't above cutting corners wherever possible. Remember the spooky gothic tower in which a monster was brought to life in Universal's landmark *Frankenstein* (1931)? That appears on Mongo. An Egyptian statue from *The Mummy* (1932) is astonishingly transformed into The Great God Tao, and Flash's own rocket ship was borrowed from an early 1930s musical! Various pieces of stock footage, most notoriously, a clip from the 1927 film *The Midnight Sun* of scantily clad women erotically writhing around a strange idol, were used at various points in the film. The music heard throughout was also lifted from a number of sources, either earlier Universal films or public domain classical tunes. Hey, no sense in wasting money, right? In order to recoup even more of the budget, the serial version was later re-edited into a feature version, and re-released in theaters.

Born CLARENCE LINDEN CRABBE (February 17, 1907 – April 23, 1983) in Oakland, California, the athletic young man first came to national attention when he won a Gold Medal in swimming in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics.



His first work in Hollywood was as a stunt double for such stars as Joel McCrea, but he was soon signed to a contract of his own by Paramount in 1933. His athletic build stood him in good stead in his first starring role, the title character of Kaspas, the Lion Man in *King of the Jungle* (1933), and followed that with the lead role in *Tarzan the Fearless* (1933). He worked steadily throughout 1935 and 1936, when he won the role of Flash Gordon, a role that made him famous. Several sequels followed, as well as a role as Flash's inspiration and chief competitor, Buck Rogers, in 1939. Flash returned to the screen in 1938 in *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars*, and again in 1940 in *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, after which Crabbe settled into a succession of B-Westerns. He starred in a TV adventure series, *Captain Gallant of the Foreign Legion*, from 1955-1957, which co-starred his son, Cullen. Although mostly retired after the mid-1960s, Crabbe did accept several movie and TV roles in the 1970s, including a highly publicized guest appearance on the TV show *Buck Rogers*. Always the athlete, Crabbe broke the world swimming record for the over-60s in the 400 meters free style in 1971. His last role was that of Duke Montana in 1982's *The Comeback Trail*.

SERIALS:

- *Tarzan the Fearless*, Principal, 1933
- *Flash Gordon*, Universal, 1936
- *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars*, 1938
- *Red Barry*, Universal, 1938
- *Buck Rogers*, Universal, 1939
- *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, Universal, 1940
- *The Sea Hound*, Columbia, 1947
- *Pirates of the High Seas*, Columbia, 1950
- *King of the Congo*, Columbia, 1952

CARL LAEMMLE presents

THE TUNNEL OF TERROR

CHAPTER NO. 2

FLASH GORDON

FROM ALEX RAYMOND'S FAMOUS NEWSPAPER STRIP
BUSTER CRABBE AS FLASH
JEAN ROGERS AS DALE ARDEN

CHARLES MIDDLETON AS EMPEROR MING
PRISCILLA LAWSON AS AURA
FRANK SHANNON AS DR. ZARKOV
JOHN LIPSON AS VULTAN
RICHARD ALEXANDER AS PRINCE BARIN

DIRECTED BY FREDERICK STUPEL
SYNDICATED BY KING FEATURES
A UNIVERSAL PICTURE

THE GIGANTIC SERIAL SPECTACLE!

Flash Gordon (Universal, 1936)
One Sheet (27" X 41")

There was action aplenty to be found in Flash's inaugural silver screen adventure. Starting with the origin as told in the comics, Flash, Dale, and Dr. Zarkov arrive on Mongo to prevent its imminent collision with Earth. Dr. Zarkov eventually convinces Ming that it would be better to conquer Earth than to destroy it, thus saving the planet but, at the same time, plunging our heroes into even greater peril. Weathering an attack by Lion Men, evading the tempting seductions of Princess Aura, contending with Vultan, King of the Hawkmen, and defeating more monsters than you could shake a ray blaster at, Flash manages to save the day by the end of Chapter 13¹.

Appropriately, this serial was enshrined by the National Film Registry, established by the Library of Congress, in 1996 as one of the "great American films." Considered "culturally, historically and aesthetically important," it joined an impressive list of 24 other films so honored that year, including, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *The Graduate* (1967), *The Producers* (1968), *M*A*S*H* (1972), and *To Be or Not To Be* (1942).

Not slow to capitalize on their success, Universal released its second Flash Gordon adventure in 1938. *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* was based on the 1936 Big Little Book adaptation of Raymond's storyline, *Flash Gordon and the Witch Queen of Mongo*. Mongo was changed to Mars to take advantage of the hysteria, and subsequent fascination, surrounding the Red Planet as a result of Orson Welles's famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast. This time the cast, which had all returned from the first serial, included a comic relief character, a luckless reporter named "Happy" Hapgood, played by Donald Kerr. Although released only two years after *Flash Gordon* (1936), this later 15-part epic advanced significantly in terms of special effects and production values. The story revolves around a revived Ming, presumed dead at the end of *Flash Gordon* (1936), and his alliance with Queen Azura and the people of Mars. The only real flaws in this serial are the aforementioned comic relief character, who adds little or nothing to the plot, and the total lack of menace projected by the lovely Beatrice Roberts, who plays Azura. As a villainess, she left much to be desired. True to the best heroic



Flash Gordon (Universal, 1936)
Lobby Card (11" X 14")

¹ An interesting anecdote about this serial: Crabbe had to dye his naturally dark hair in order to play the blonde Flash Gordon. He was incredibly uncomfortable about this, and constantly wore a hat when not in front of the cameras. The reason? His fair hair and powerful physique invited whistles not only from women but from men as well.

tradition, Ming is roundly defeated at the end of Chapter 15, reduced to a smoking pile of ash, a victim of his own disintegration chamber.

1940 saw the third and final Flash Gordon chapter play, *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*. Based on the storyline, *Flash Gordon and the Ice World of Mongo* (that originally appeared in the comic strip and became the subject of a popular *Big Little Book* in 1942), this is by far the most elaborate and elegant of the three serials. Costumes, sets, props... all show a high degree of care and craftsmanship, making this particular serial a true joy to watch.

Ming is back, of course, without a word about how he survived the personal devastation of the last film. Played once again by the wonderful Charles Middleton, he was joined by fellow Flash-veterans Buster Crabbe and Frank Shannon as Flash and Dr. Zarkov, respectively. Carol Hughes, an attractive brunette with a surprisingly robust filmography under her belt by 1940, played Dale Arden.

This time our heroes faced, “The Purple Death,” a mysterious malady that struck the Earth courtesy of Ming. Rocketing off to Mongo once again, the intrepid band, this time without the burden of a comic sidekick, face the usual assortment of monsters, madmen, and strange creatures. Ming perishes once again in the 12th and final chapter by crashing his rocket into a tower that just happens to be filled with explosives. Hedging their bets this time, Dr. Zarkov revealed that there was one possible means of escape from what seemed certain death for the malevolent villain, but as this was Ming’s last appearance, it was never revealed whether or not the mad dictator actually survived.

Interestingly, this serial seems much more a product of its times than its predecessors. Ming is more than once referred to as a dictator, and mention is made of his concentration camps. Additionally, there’s a much more militaristic feel to the costumes in this epic, albeit in a somewhat comic opera way. Even Ming, who before looked like a close relative of Fu Manchu, with his bald head and flowing robes, is now dressed in a striking white military jacket, reminding one very strongly of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. This film was obviously made in a time when the United States was keenly aware of the turmoil engulfing the world and was preparing for its own eventual entry into the conflict. Because of the inclusion of veiled real-world concerns, the stakes are raised in this final Flash Gordon serial, and the results are spectacular.



Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, R-1950s) Lobby Card (11" X 14")



Buck Rogers/Flash Gordon Combo (Universal, 1953/1938) Herald



Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, 1938)
Color Stock One Sheet (27" X 41")



Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe
(Universal, 1940) Color Stock One Sheet (27" X 41")



Flash Gordon (Universal, 1936)
One Sheet (27" X 41")



Flash Gordon (Universal, 1936) Lobby Card and Title Card (11" X 14")

COLLECTING FLASH GORDON SERIAL PAPER

As an early Universal serial, we can make some assumptions about the advertising campaign for the first serial, *Flash Gordon* (1936). Certainly duotone chapter sheets were produced, although only eight to ten are known to exist today. Full-color advance, or stock sheets may have been produced, although none are known to have survived. Three and six sheets, as well as a marquee banner, were also likely produced, although, again, none are known to exist today.

Anyone considering taking up the daunting task of collecting *Flash Gordon* (1936) paper should be cautioned that one sheets for the feature version of this first serial do exist, and are easily confused with paper from the original, serial version. All paper from the serial version will bear the legend, "A Universal 15-Chapter Serial"; the feature paper will not. According to the pressbook, Universal produced one sheets, three sheets, six sheets, and a window card for the feature, all of which stated clearly, "The Big Feature Sensation!"

For *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* (1938) and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940), Universal produced a full color advance sheet, 15 duotone chapter one sheets, and lobby cards in sets of eight for each chapter, each set featuring a stock title card and a chapter title card.

Paper from these serials is extremely desirable, as they are seen as crossover pieces, bridging the collecting fields of both serials and science fiction. Consequently, competition can be fierce, especially for exceptional pieces.



Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, 1938)
One Sheets (27" X 41").



Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, 1938) Lobby Cards (11" X 14")





Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, 1938) Pressbook



Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe (Universal, 1940) Title Card and Lobby Card (11" X 14")



Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe (Universal, 1940) Lobby Cards (11" X 14")





Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe
(Universal, 1940) One Sheet (27" X 41")



Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe (Universal, 1940)
Lobby Card Set of 8 (11" X 14")



Flash Gordon (Universal, R-1950s)
Mexican Lobby Card (12.5" X 16.5")

Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars (Universal, R-1950s)
Mexican Lobby Card (12.5" X 16.5")



Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe (Universal, R-1950s)
Mexican Lobby Cards (12.5" X 16.5")