The Twenties in New Yorker Cartoons

Created in 1925 to offer an urbane alternative to Life, Judge, and similar weeklies, the New Yorker soon came to epitomize modern sophisticated commentary on the times. Its essays, reviews, and fiction set a new standard for periodical offerings, and its cartoons became a phenomenon in themselves. Providing guidelines for cartoon submissions, editor Harold Ross wrote: “Generally speaking, ideas should be satirical without being bitter or personal; our secondary need being for ideas that are unusual, extravagant, or ‘nutty.’ Situations should be plausible. Ideas should be literal and show how, unconsciously by their speech and acts, individuals of every New York type show up their hypocrisies [sic], insincerities, false fads, and absurd characteristics.” By 1928, writes one of the magazine’s biographers, “the New Yorker cartoon was on its way to becoming a singular American art form.”

In this collection are thirteen New Yorker cartoons from 1925 through 1929 that encapsulate the magazine’s take on the “the Age.” Among the topics are the modern woman, the city, the automobile, radio, Prohibition, the Klan, the Scopes trial, consumerism, stock speculation, and the event that dramatically ended “the age”—the stock market crash of October 1929.

- What constitutes the unique humor and graphic style of “the New Yorker cartoon”?
- How did the cartoons reflect and satirize prevalent issues and attitudes of the Twenties?
- How did they reflect Ross’s cartoon guidelines?
- How did they offer to modern readers a form of witty self-examination?
- How did they function as a mirror of the Twenties as well as a mirror on the Twenties?
- Select one cartoon and explain it. What aspects of the drawing and caption funnel the point to the reader? What makes the cartoon funny?

"We’re really awfully cynical, I guess."
"We can’t help it, dear—it’s the Age."
1927

“Pretty—isn’t it?”
1925

Cartoonist: Nate Collier
The New Yorker, March 14, 1925
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Cartoonist: Frank Hanely
The New Yorker, March 28, 1925
Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.
Cartoonist: Frank Hanely
Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.

The New Yorker, May 30, 1925

“And do you love mamma and papa?”
“Oh them, I dunno—but I got
an awful crush on Uncle Geebee,
Station WGBS.”

Cartoonist: Al Frueh
Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.

The New Yorker, July 25, 1925
"Pretty,—isn’t it?"
PROGRESS IN RURAL AMERICA

Cartoonist: Al Frueh
Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.

The New Yorker, June 18, 1927
“We’re really awfully cynical, I guess.”
“We can’t help it, dear—it’s the Age.”
Cartoonist: Al Frueh
The New Yorker, April 13, 1929

Cartoonist: Al Frueh
The New Yorker, May 8, 1926

Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.
"John, there's an installment due tomorrow and I can't remember whether it's the sixth on the radio, the fourth on the oil burner, or the ninth on my operation."

Cartoonist: Edward Graham
Reproduced by permission of the New Yorker.

The New Yorker, October 29, 1927

Cartoonist: Leonard Dove
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The New Yorker, October 26, 1929
“Say, Doc, do me a favor. Just keep your eye on Consolidated Can Common, and if she goes bearish tell my broker to sell and get four thousand shares of P. & Q. Rails Preferred on the usual margin. Thanks.”

Cartoonist: Carl Rose
The New Yorker, September 9, 1927
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“You poor fellow! The stock market, I suppose?”
“No, lady, I was always a bum.”

Cartoonist: I. Klein
The New Yorker, December 14, 1929
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