

# The Art of Collecting

by Jeff Singh

**T**his is a fun topic to think about but a difficult one to put to paper. So many thoughts and things to say and in the end I fear it will be just a series of loosely connected ideas and anecdotes. Well, here goes...in for a penny, in for a pound.

## Why Do We Collect?

Freud thought it had to do with the trauma of being potty trained and the immense loss we felt with our waste going down the toilet. Hannibal Lecter suggests

we begin to covet what we see every day. Others think collecting is because we were unloved children



and need to accumulate things or that we do it to attract mates by showing off our skills at accumulating things. Jim Halperin suggests other reasons in the Heritage Auctions Intelligent Collector Magazine. These reasons include knowledge and learning; relaxation and stress reduction; personal pleasure (including appreciation of beauty, and pride of ownership); social interaction with fellow collectors and others; competitive challenge; recognition by fellow; altruism (since many great collections are ultimately donated to museums and learning institutions); desire to control, possess and bring order to a small (or even a massive) part of the world; nostalgia and/or a connection to history and finally accumulation and diversification of wealth. I believe each collector has different reasons both conscious and subconscious for collecting. I do think it is worthwhile examining why we individually collect as it does make decision making easier when you understand what you like and why. There is certainly a difference between those that collecting things and those that don't and as collectors we can understand what drives others to collect.

## How Do We Collect?

For me, this is a more interesting question. I have gone through many phases in my collecting since I started. Even before art I was a collector. I envied Bert's bottle cap collection and had a small one when I was young. I collected Matchbox cars, Star Wars figures, coins, stamps, sports cards, books, magazines, antiques, old medical equipment and of course comics. I no longer collect any of these items in any true sense since I became an art collector. I still buy a lot of comics and read more than ever but I would not consider myself a collector as I traded off my entire collection and the new trades get read and thrown in a pile I will pass on to someone else in a few



months or years. I guess I still collect comic related books and have a library of shelf porn I am happy with. I still buy sheets of special Canada Post stamps when they come out and stick them in a file somewhere but I have not looked at stamps in years, I just seem to accumulate them. A big part of this hobby for me is collecting experiences like going to conventions, travelling for comics, meeting fellow collectors, sitting on panels, writing for this journal and all the other things I do that enhance my enjoyment of this hobby. If I really distill it



down to the bare essence, I collect original comic art, experiences, friends and I keep a bunch of other stuff.

## Collecting Phases

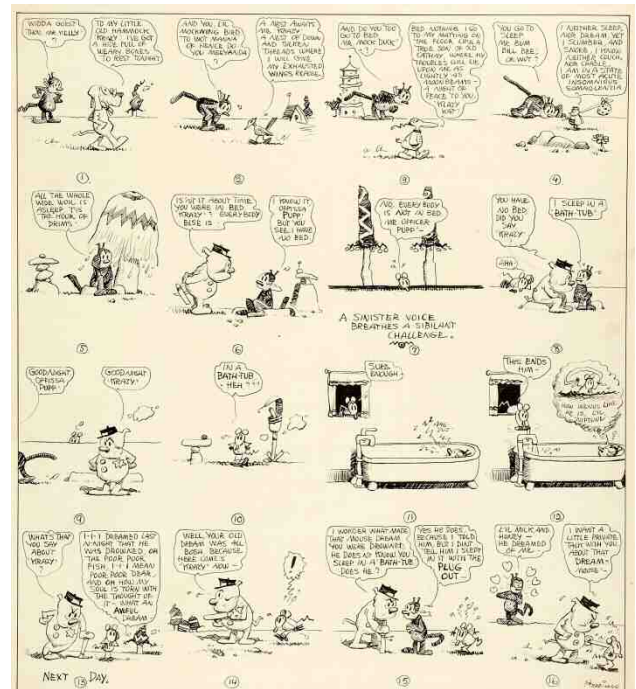
I bought my first piece of comic art as a novelty. At the time I was collecting Fiction House comics, particularly of the Jungle variety. I like the jungle girl genre and so my searches on the then early eBay would turn up art which I largely ignored. One day I thought I'd buy a page. It was fun and a

novelty. Then I saw some vintage Fiction House pieces come up and I bought a few. Then more. I liked good girl art too so that was also a focus of my early comic collecting and art collecting. The next phase for me was to try and collect art by every artist not having any idea of exactly how difficult and unfulfilling that approach would be. I ended up with thousands of pages of art I got because it was an example of an artist and perhaps a theme or elements I liked. Not a well thought out strategy. I also was very artist focused early on pursuing art by Bill Sienkiewicz and Howard Chaykin. Both of these interests were offshoots of my earlier comic collecting focus. I had always thought these two artists were brilliant and pioneers in comics. I was also a big Daredevil fan and so much of my earlier purchases were DD themed. For my first 6 or 7 years of collecting I collected by theme (jungle girls/GGA), artist (Sienkiewicz/Chaykin), character (Daredevil/Sheena) and broadly (trying to get all artists). As misguided as this strategy was, it did mean I got to see a lot of art and I started to understand and see the difference between different artists. The education I got from this period served me well later on.

**Art for art's sake.** Even from early on in my collecting, there were many times I was blown away by an artist I had never heard of and so I'd get some art from them. I still do that. I am not afraid of

exploring new artist, themes and tangents. A recent example is while in Lucca, Italy for a comic convention an art dealer had gotten about a dozen pages from an artist named Anna Brandoli. Apparently she was important in Italian comics but I had never hear of her or seen any of her art. I liked it a lot and it did remind me very much of Hugo Pratt. The pages were expensive but I liked the art enough to take the plunge on something that spoke to me artistically. I love the page but I know no more about her then I did before. Exploring new artists is also how I have met some very good friends. One I'll introduce you to either in this or the next APA, J.M. Dragunas.

**Checkbox and want list collecting.** This can be looked at in several ways. For a new collector or perhaps investor who does not know the hobby, having a list of must haves that everyone else seems to have is not uncommon. Big money enters the hobby and wants a Watchman page, a Killing Joke page, a Dark Knight Returns Page...we have all seen it. In recent years I have taken a want list approach to my collecting. Every year I make a list of my top 10 wants plus a few others. As items get taken off the list, new ones go on. Personally I have found this the best thing I have done as it gives me focus, keeps me from wandering as often and at the end of the year I look back at what I have managed to add to my collection with some degree of



accomplishment. This year was a big year for me as I crossed off the last of the big pieces I have had on my list since I started making a want list, a Crazy Kat



Sunday. My want list is still full of the 10 plus others and it does still guide me but I now have a feeling of completion. I feel like I could stop collecting now but since I don't want to I will continue. It will be a different phase for me, one I look forward to experiencing.

### ***Shrinking the Collection.***



Several years ago I decided my collection was too big and too spread out. Things I had once collected had lost some of their appeal as my interests, tastes and collecting took different paths. Over the past 2 years I have sold a lot of art. I would guess I sold around 1500 pieces which is close to my goal. Ideally I would like to have my collection down to 1000 pages but this would mean not having multiple pieces by many artists who I like to collect and thinning out other parts of my collection. I am not there yet but I am getting closer. Although my art acquisitions have slowed in the past 2 years to around 100 pieces a year I have balanced that with selling off a lot more. The art sold has allowed me to purchase bigger items previously outside of my budget range. This was a necessary step for me to evolve in collecting and to obtain some goals that

were no longer attainable. I am sure we all went through that with collecting. At one point \$100 was a lot of money and a ceiling. Then it was \$250, \$500, \$800, \$1000, \$1500, \$3000, \$5000, \$10000, \$15000, \$25000... who knows where it ends. I suspect it end around the \$25000 mark for me but I would stretch beyond that for a Hugo Pratt Corto page and perhaps another Tintin by Herge. Otherwise, I am much more comfortable in the 3 and 4 figure ranges and less when possible. It certainly is a very slippery slope.

### ***What will happen to the collection in the future?***

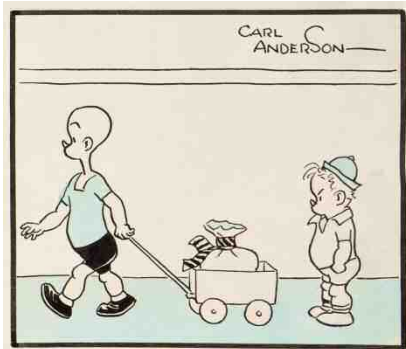


This is something I have given a lot of thought to and my views on this will likely continue to evolve. My kids find the art interesting but not interesting enough to be invested in it. Other than a few favorites, I don't think they would keep the art. There are some very personal commissions I am hoping that are kept with the family. So I suspect in the end my collection will be broken up. I do plan on donating some of it to the Billy Ireland Comic Museum and Library. Likely all my Caniff prints and specialty pieces and perhaps all the rest of the Caniff material. I think they will also get some strip art from me. I'd also like to have some of my collection be part of the Angouleme Comic Museum's collection and so I will likely donate there as well. Everything else will likely go to auction and move on to other collectors and collections. I am not sure when this will all happen. Will I take care of this before my time is up or will it be done after I am gone...? I am not sure yet. I suppose I'll have to see how things go and how much time I get. My goal is to have it all pre-determined so when the time comes there are no questions and hopefully a lot less work for my kids.

## Platitudes, Idioms and Thoughts

### *We are only caretakers.*

I do believe every piece of art I own is on a journey just as I am on my own journey. I am just one stop



on the art's journey. I might be first and I might have been the one that commissioned a piece into being but that piece along with all the

other art I own will be around long after I am gone. I very much subscribe to the caretaker of art philosophy as opposed to "its mine and I can do what I want with it" mindset. To this end, I do not get art personalized but I do like to get it signed. I did get art personalized early on in my collecting days but it was only a few pieces and once I caught on to the idea of a bigger picture outside of my collection it made sense to me to stop doing it. This also goes to the responsibility that comes with art ownership to care for it, protect it, restore it if in need but most importantly make sure its journey doesn't end with you.

### *Sharing and Showing*

Whether to show or not to show, that is the



question. I believe art is meant to be seen and shared. I have a lot of art on my walls, I often welcome guests into my home to view art and I post everything I get on line. Some people view this as showing off but I disagree with this view. Others don't want to share what they collect for various

reasons including not letting on what they are after, wanting art to be "fresh to market" when they do decide to sell or just not wanting anyone to know what they have. I can understand all these reasons and have toyed with them myself but in the end, I believe art is meant to be seen and shared.

### *Buy what you like.*

Everyone says this but what does it really mean, especially when you like everything. I think it means don't try and be one of the cool kids and get what everyone else wants unless it is something you really want yourself. Stick to what you are interested in and buy for your enjoyment, not to prove something to others. Imagine you could never show or tell anyone about your collection and so you never have to explain that awkward piece or theme...that is how you should collect. I do think I try to do this but like I said earlier, I seem to like everything. I have been swayed by others in the past but more in the sense that if so many people who like things I like like this, perhaps I should try it again and I find either through maturity or personal growth, I do too like it when previously I had written it off. Am I trying to be like the cool kids...I hope not but maybe a little bit.

### *Don't buy for investment*

Although I agree with this idea in principle, with the amount of money some pieces cost, I think it would be foolish not to have some consideration of what you are paying. Understand the market, understand where the piece fits in the market, pay what you are comfortable with (even if it is above value) but don't be blind or stupid about it. I do overpay for art. I enter into each bigger purchase with the mindset that if I get back about 75% of what I paid for it one day that is good enough. I will have enjoyed the art for years. If I knew at the end, every piece of art I bought would have a value of \$0, I think I would collect quite differently.

### *Buy the best example you can afford*



I have slowly come around to this way of thinking. In the beginning, I preferred quantity over quality. Even now, I often will be happy with a mid-level example of a



piece as I am often not willing to go up the multiples in price to secure a top tier piece. Historically and probably from a future value point of view, the best stuff is always the best stuff and will always have the highest demand and eventual resale value. So although I understand and agree with this principle, I have not yet drank the Kool-Aid.. Perhaps that will be the next stage in collecting for me, upgrading what I have to better quality examples from the ones I have.

### ***When it rains, it pours***



It never fails. As soon as I have committed to a larger deal, I get a series of offers for art that I would normally never pass on. In the past 4 weeks, 4 out of the 10 things on my current waiting list came up including things that I have not seen available for over a decade. I ended up saying yes way more than I should have but I also know that if I passed on these pieces I would have regrets for years.

### ***The only art you regret is the art you didn't buy or that you let go of.***

If you are a true collector like I am sure we all are, this one needs no explanation, just a sigh as some painful memory comes back to haunt you.



### ***There are always more fishes in the sea.***

There is always more art. And how! It never ceases to amaze me the steady supply of art that comes out. If you miss something you have your regrets but it doesn't take long to find something else to



spend the money on. It is a good thing to keep in mind when setting your limits on items at auction and not getting

too swept up in the bidding wars.

### ***There Can Be Only One!***

Each piece of art is unique. If you own it, you are the only one. It is also what makes the transition difficult from comic collecting to art collecting where condition is so important. When you get a piece of art, you accept it along with all its flaws as it is the only one and no better copy of it exists. It is one of the things that separates hobbies that involve unique items from those that collect based on grade and rarity of mass produced items. This title can also be applied to the too often misused term Holy Grail.



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### **Mailing Comments APA 104 Parody**

David Applegate – great work again David. I really liked the cover you came up with. I enjoyed seeing your Clinton painting again.

Gary – I was very happy to see your article on Nast. Someone I knew of but not about and now that has changed.

John B – I enjoyed your article. You Barron Storey anecdote made me smile. So unpredictably Barron.

Ray – I have seen Roy's work but never really put a name to the art. Thanks for filling in some gaps in knowledge for me.

Wally – Very cool Twilight Zone story and the reference images were fun to see. I have one of the really racy, pornographic small comics from the 20's, a fun novelty item. You had mentioned Bill Ward, one of my pickups from my first San Diego Comic con was this Torchy Daily. From the Donnelly brothers no less. In answer to our question, Betty over Irish any day of the week ☺



Bill – Great variety and excellent quality of your editorial cartoon collection.

Benno – OK.. That was an awesome story. What a great find kudos to you for dealing with everything so honestly. Of all the pieces, I think the *Peanuts* is my favorite. I appreciate your thoughts on how to deal with politically sensitive topics and I too am struggling with what to suggest. I very much want to write on women and people of color artists and will likely do so but how do you give a title to such an issue of APA.

Bob – I enjoyed reading about Peter Bagge from your perspective as a huge fan who knows his work as intimately as anyone. It was good to see you again last week and I'll see you next month at the annual art gathering.

Ron Sonenthal – Great Willy & Joe cartoon! Like you, I prefer the earlier version. A very poignant image and commentary on many topics.

Scott – Great work on the display. What you did, even if it was not all you had hoped for, it is important work.

Joe – I find there are many artists who despite being prolific and true masters never get noticed or acknowledged. When I wrote my Glenn Cravath article a few years back, I was surprised by how little anyone knew of him or his life story. At least he got to sign his work.

Michael – Fun article on Nancy that I enjoyed very much. When at San Diego this year, a book won an Eisner that I was unfamiliar with and have since bought. *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* by Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden. My understanding is they teach the elements of comic design and storytelling through a single Nancy strip. It is supposed to be a great read. It has been added closer to the top of my ever expanding "to read next" pile. The Eisners also turned me on to a book called *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* which I am currently reading and enjoying.

Alan– I had a great time hanging out with you at San Diego. I really enjoyed my first San Diego comic con and the city itself although perhaps we got to see a bit too much of its underbelly in our first digs.

George – Fantastic collection of cartoons. I am looking forward to your visit next month.

Nick K – Great to finally meet you in person! Welcome to the fold. Now I just need to get you and Bob to write that Archie Style Guide piece for me☺

Lee – Congratulations on your book coming out.

Roger – I still go to comic conventions but I have been fortunate to go to many all over the country (and now world) and so my desire to go to any "average" shows is

low. I had never been to San Diego Comic Con but all I ever heard was how busy and expensive it was. Add to that the barriers to going like trying to get tickets or a spot to sleep and I had always said why bother. I knew that I'd have to do it one day and so this was the year I went to Angouleme and so it would be by inaugural Comic Con visit to. I was expecting the worst and came away very happy with my experience. What I thought would be a do it once so I can say I did it experience turned into something I would like to do a few more times in coming years. I found it far less busy than I expected and I'd say less busy than the NYC or Toronto FanExpo cons that I dread. I found several pieces of art at prices I thought were very good and I had a great time at a scenic venue in a beautiful city. So, even though we might get tired of going to cons, you just never know what will turn up.

Dave – cool add for the 1973 Comic Art Convention. Imagine Bill Gaines and the MAD gang being there... Cool Alpha Flight drawing. I am not a big Byrne fan but I do have a soft spot for Alpha Flight.

Kevin – I enjoyed the Altered Carbon series on Netflix too.

Chad – Great Jones piece. I foolishly sold a nice one I had over a decade ago figuring I'd get another...not so.

The other part of the art deal I made with Rich and Steve in San Diego. From the same issue as my grail.

