

# The Incredible Shrinking Collection!

## In the Beginning

This past year marked a strange milestone in my collecting life. In 2005 I was just as enthusiastically buying comic art as I had been in the past. In fact, I would say I've been more enthusiastic than ever. For the first time however, after about five years of collecting, my collection started getting *smaller*. Since we, as human beings, are constantly changing and evolving, I suppose it's only natural that our collections do likewise along with us. Many people adhere, subconsciously or not, to a collecting "philosophy". The old and simplified comic art collector adage "*buy what you like*" is one that immediately comes to mind. That adage did not apply particularly to me in my early collecting days as much as the "*buy what you can afford*" adage did (why don't I ever hear anybody in the hobby saying that?). I recall studying very carefully, a couple of pages that a particular dealer was selling, for a good few weeks before I ever pulled the trigger on a piece of art. They were about \$75 each! (By the way, this did not take place in the 1970's as you might assume from the prices, but in the year 2001!) What's even more comical is that the first piece of comic art I ever purchased (in 2001) was a panel page for about \$7. Yeah, I wanted to take things slowly...

So, after getting my feet wet, and getting a taste of owning original art, I started to build (without real planning) my "collection". The first few pieces were relatively inexpensive. I bought a really nice **Ryan Benjamin/Sal Regla** splash for \$45 that I only just sold a few months ago. A few other pieces trickled in not too long after, and I was off and running. Once I started acquiring pieces, and knew that I was officially a "collector", I did start following the "*buy what you like*" adage. This is most likely due to the fact that I don't have quite the level of exposure to comics as a lot of other collectors do. Sure, I read them as a kid on and off, but I wasn't a die-hard reader of the stuff until the 1980's when I was in my late teens, and even then, I didn't read too many titles.

Since my exposure was so limited, there wasn't the same level of nostalgia for me as

the average collector who read (it seemed to me) every comic book ever published. Instead of focusing on the nostalgia pieces, I focused more on the artistic aspect of the hobby. As an amateur artist myself, I have always been drawn (har-har) to art, and my love for comics as a kid likely stemmed from that appreciation. It's no small coincidence that in my early teens, I used to copy comic book covers that I liked, which represented some of the earliest drawings I'd ever done. I distinctly remember re-creating the cover to Mike Grell's Warlord # 24, and Jim Aparo's Batman # 324 (Note: for you concerned readers; the re-creations were neither threatening or menacing!). For me, the biggest appeal of comics was the art (remember, I started reading in the late 70's – I don't recall too many great stories being published back then...)

So, rather than being what I call a "nostalgia" collector, I considered myself an "art" collector. I simply bought anything that I thought was drawn well and appealed to me. Many of the pieces I purchased were from comics I had never even seen before. I typically collected art that was very clean (or as some would say, "pretty"), and loved good inking. I paid particular attention to the flow of panels on a page, the layout of the individual panels, the spotting of blacks, use of lighting, accurate anatomy and so on. I soon discovered comic strip art, which I believe is a great way to get the best art for your money. I started buying strips by artists like Leonard Starr, Dan Barry, John Cullen-Murphy, Frank Godwin, Stan Drake, Mac Raboy and Alex Raymond; great draftsmen all. I also started buying older comic book art (pre-1960's) by artists like Jack Davis, Bill Draut, and Kurt Schaffenberger. Nothing was off limits to me, and my collection reflected that. I had art from as far back as the 1940's all the way up to the present. I was pretty well diversified.

I wasn't only buying the unfamiliar however. I was able to find some of those "nostalgia" pieces from the comics that I really enjoyed in my youth, and had a fair amount of those as well. It should be noted (or shamefully admitted) that I looked down my nose on the

pure nostalgia collector. I recall getting together with a bunch of collectors once (most of whom I'd never met in person before) to have an art show-and-tell. Several of the collectors brought along with them large portfolios of art. While they did have some interesting pieces, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of nameless, faceless pages staring back at me. I looked through piles of mediocre pages from what appeared to be the dark ages of comic books – the mid to late 1970's! I don't mean to be mean, but man was there a lot of junk. After a while I felt like I was being punished for some long-forgotten crime I'd committed. It was exhausting to look at page after page of the stuff, and I do not kid when I say it was depressing. It appeared to me, since I could find no artistic merit on most of the pages, that I was looking at what I call a "pure nostalgia" collector – someone who buys art simply because they read and remembered the stories, talent be damned! (One could make the argument that it all boils down to personal taste and that the stuff was actually "good". That topic however should probably be its own separate article.)

How was I different from these people myself when I fully admitted in the last paragraph that I was a nostalgia collector too? I'm glad you asked. As I said, the biggest appeal to me about comics as a kid was the art; so I was naturally drawn to comics that featured good art. As a result, the stuff I am nostalgic about tends to be well-drawn art anyway! I'm not saying there's anything wrong with buying based purely on nostalgia; just don't expect me to look through all your damn portfolios. I'm kidding!! (Sort of.)

### **The Times They Are A-Changin'**

So after several short, furious years of grabbing everything in sight, I took a look at what I'd done; which was basically spend way too much money on comic art (has anyone else ever done this? I'm thinking about starting a support group). I decided (or was it my wife?) that I should spend less money on comic art. A LOT less. I took a good, hard look at my collection and realized that while I had a bunch of really nice looking art, a lot of it meant little to me outside of being nice to look at. My goal

was to condense my collection to a much smaller selection of high quality pieces of art. Pieces that I REALLY liked. Not only was I going to trim the fat, and get rid of stuff I didn't "need", but I also decided that I would only buy new art if I could pay for it by selling off some other art.

At first, it was relatively easy to identify which pieces had to go. While I didn't really want to part with ANY of them, I found that once they left my collection, I didn't miss them all that much. Then I started selling some things to pay for other art. This proved to be somewhat more difficult since, as I was buying art that was relatively expensive, I had to sell equally expensive art to pay for it. The problem with selling equally expensive art from my collection was that it inevitably ended up being something else that I really liked (hence the high price tag). In the final analysis however, I determined that it was okay to sell something expensive I liked to pay for something else as long as the new piece was both visually appealing, and NOSTALGIC to me.

That's right, I turned into a nostalgia collector! How did this happen? I'm glad you asked. Whenever I took a look through my collection to figure out what had to go, I would invariably find myself looking at a piece and saying, "*I can't sell THIS!*" It wasn't too long before I was able to identify which were the key pieces in my collection – the ones that weren't going anywhere (for the foreseeable future). Those tended to be the things that I had enjoyed reading as a kid. Since I am a child of 80's comic books, my favorites were like most other people who were reading comics from that period and tended to be the best WRITTEN comics of the time. Luckily, these great writers were often teamed with equally great artists, so it was a win-win for me.

On the next few pages, I will highlight some of my more recent acquisitions. Some of the pieces are significant to me because of the art, and some for the particular story, but usually because of both. Since I am a child of the 80's, there are two writers that tend to appear in the credits on the pages I want – **Frank Miller**, and **Alan Moore**. Not only are these guys writers who became prominent in the 1980's, but they are also writers who I

think will be considered *important* in the context of the medium. There are some specific pieces that I would still like to acquire by these guys, but frankly I'm beginning to doubt the likelihood of obtaining them because of scarcity and pricing. The two examples that I would like to have are:

**Alan Moore's Killing Joke**  
**Frank Miller's Dark Knight Returns**

If you have an example from either series and are considering trading or selling, please contact me as I'm very interested in these stories.

**In Other News**

I was fortunate enough to see the **Masters of American Comics** dual exhibitions in LA at the **Hammer** and **MOCA** (Museum of Contemporary Art) museums before they disappeared completely. Saw the Hammer show in December, which featured comic strip art and the MOCA show in February, which focused on comic book art. Both shows were terrific and will be traveling to 3 other cities in the US. If you live nearby, you may want to check it out:

*Milwaukee: April 27–August 13, 2006*  
*Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee*

*New York/New Jersey: September 15, 2006–January 28, 2007*  
*The Jewish Museum, New York, and the Newark Museum, New Jersey*

I'm not sure if all the pieces in the show will be on display, but you can probably get info from the specific museum websites.

The Hammer show, which featured comic strip art, was very good. Upon entry, you were treated to an entire room of **Winsor McCay** art. The giant sized **Little Nemo** strips were very impressive, and there were plenty of **Rarebit's** and some political cartoons. The next room featured some **George Herriman** pieces – **Krazy Kat** dailies and Sunday's and some specialty pieces. The only other thing that really intrigued me at the show was the selection of **Schultz Peanuts** strips. I took my time and read every single one of them often laughing out loud. They had examples of all the classics – the Great Pumpkin, The Red

Baron, Lucy pulling the football away just before Charlie Brown can kick it, strips featuring Lucy and Schroeder at the piano, Charlie Brown on the pitchers mound being the "goat" etc. Just the best examples you could imagine and a great way to end the show.

Someone told me that the MOCA show featuring comic book art wasn't as good as the Hammer show but I disagree completely. The show was just as good, and possibly better. They had some pretty good **Kirby** pieces from a variety of titles, and overall I'd say most of them were excellent examples. On another wall in the same room was the **Eisner** art. Many **Spirit** pages and some **Contract With God** stuff – all very beautiful. Some of the Spirit stuff was the best I'd ever seen. The show also featured some underground artists including **Robert Crumb** who I have long admired. They had a very nice selection of his stuff, and I found myself drooling over many of the pieces – they were small but simply incredibly rendered. Another notable artist on display was **Art Spiegelman** who I know nothing about outside of **MAUS**; examples of which were on display. I hadn't realized what a talented artist he is until I saw his stuff on display there. If you're at all able to get to the show, I highly recommend it. There's a lot of great art to see. If you can't make it to any of the shows, there is a book that has been published by the organizers of the exhibits called (oddly enough) **Masters of American Comics**. While it does not feature every single piece displayed in the exhibits, it is a beautiful hardcover book that shows some of the major works on display and gives biographies on each of the artists in the show. I believe amazon.com has it at the lowest price (currently \$29.70).

**Gene Colan**

I love Gene's work, but since I know very little about him, I'll leave the opinions and insights to the experts. The only piece of art I ever owned by Gene was a **Jemm Son of Saturn** page with inks by **Klaus Janson** (anybody remember that series?). I've always liked Gene's style, but imagine that he'd be a nightmare to ink – he's so loose and everything just flows beautifully on the page. I'd hate to try and re-delineate those beautiful pencils with a pen and brush.







