

Chasing Paper

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A Chance Encounter

Sometime in late 2001, I was searching ebay for back issues of John Byrne's run on the Fantastic Four. I thought it would be fun to re-read the series that I'd enjoyed so much back in my High School days. By chance, a piece of original art turned up in my search. I don't know why, but in the 25 years of on-and-off comic reading I'd done, it never occurred to me that the original art to these books actually existed. Strange that it hadn't dawned on me sooner since I'd been to comic conventions, and even made a point of visiting some of the artists with whom I was familiar. At one New York show, I recall seeing Charles Vess and Bill Sienkiewicz sharing a table. Bill had painted pages that he'd been working on for his upcoming Daredevil graphic novel and I remember an interesting discussion in which he explained, among other things, how he had used wallpaper for the Kingpin's vest. I even stood over Mike Zeck's shoulder for about 40 minutes while he rendered a Punisher illustration. Maybe in hindsight I was less surprised by the fact that these pages existed, than I was by the fact that I could actually own them.

The Chase Begins

Now that I had the notion in my head that I could buy this stuff, I thought it would be great if I could get a nice page from my beloved Fantastic Four. Little did I know that this would be no small feat. On that day in 2001, I began my "chase" for a Byrne FF page. Mr. Byrne's run as the full time artist and writer on the FF began with issue 232, and ended with issue 293. A whopping 62 issues. At 22 pages per issue, plus covers, John produced roughly 1,426 pages of art. This was going to be easy, right? Wrong. Since I'd always preferred John's art when he was doing the inking himself, I would have to eliminate issues 274 through 293 which were inked by the likes of Joe Sinnott, Al Gordon, Bob Wiacek, Jerry Ordway, P. Craig Russell, and even (gasp!) Terry Austin. That meant there were only 42 issues to choose from (roughly 966 pages). Still good odds right? Wrong.

If you were to search today through every seller of original comic art on the Internet, you would find zero pieces of Byrne-inked FF art for sale. That's right, ZERO. This has generally been the case since that day in 2001 when I started looking. As I type this, of the 127 pieces of Byrne art listed in the famous Bruce Lowry gallery, only 3 are Byrne-inked FF pieces. These same statistics apply to ebay as well, and though I can't quote exact numbers, I can say that only a handful of variously priced Byrne-inked pages have been available. While this is all common knowledge to me now, it would be many months before this actually sunk into my head.

I decided to quench my thirst for a Byrne penciled and inked piece by focusing on a different title that had also been a favorite of mine throughout those High School days. During his FF run, Byrne launched and simultaneously produced his best-known creation, Alpha Flight. As with the FF, Byrne handled the writing, penciling and inking

chores for most of his tenure on the series. Since the AF stuff was from the same period as the FF stuff, and since I had enjoyed it as well (AND since I could actually find a page available), I purchased my first Byrne-inked piece of comic art.



My first Byrne penciled and inked comic page from the now classic "Death of Guardian" issue (Alpha Flight # 12).

A Startling Discovery

Acquiring good Alpha Flight pages would prove to be substantially less difficult, so I continued my pursuits in that direction, all the while keeping my eyes out for a good FF page. In the summer of 2002 I saw something that blew my mind. The entire issue, cover and all, of the Fantastic Four 269 was up for sale on ebay. To say I was interested would be an understatement. I'd already been spending a good deal on this new hobby, and the price tag for this item had one more zero than I was

accustomed to seeing on my purchases. I had to sit on my hands and watch it go by. The only consolation I felt in not being able to buy the story was in the fact that it didn't sell to someone else. Feeling a little dejected, and thinking that I'd never get a good page, I went on with my life, and continued to check dealer websites, and ebay auctions faithfully. In December of 2002, a few days before my birthday, the white whale appeared again on ebay! This time, the price for the 269 was a bit lower, and I decided to go for it. I watched the auction on a painfully slow dial-up connection as the final seconds ticked down. I won.

Finally, I was satisfied. After a full year of searching, I had gotten a good example. Well, not just an example, but an entire issue! This was much more than I had ever hoped for (or needed), but I was thrilled and proud to be the new owner. I took on a new appreciation for Byrne's work. To think that this guy could write, pencil and ink this stack of art in one month, and to do this for over three years (not to mention the AF stuff and various other projects), was staggering.

The Big One

Although I was happy with my acquisition, I still continued looking for more good Byrne FF art, among other things. One day, while exchanging emails with a fellow collector, the question was put to me – if you could have any one piece of comic art, what would it be? I’m not going to argue that Byrne is the best comic artist to have ever worked in the industry. I don’t even think that’s true, but in this hobby, nostalgia is king. There may be better drawn, or more interesting pieces of art, but the thing that struck a nerve with me was Byrne and his FF run.

After perusing the Mile High Comics website and looking at all the Byrne FF covers, I came up with my pick – the cover to FF 266. This was just a great image that I remembered looking at over and over again. While it didn’t feature all four of the main characters, it was to me, a classic image of a “damsel in distress”. My fellow collector suggested to me that this cover might actually be attainable, and relying on the network I had built over the last few years, I sent out an email to a buddy who I thought might know where it was. Well, not only did he know where it was, but he was looking right at it! Within a few weeks, we had worked out a deal, and the cover was mine.

Byrne and Beyond

That takes me to the end of the road for Byrne art. The chase, for me, is finally over. Or is it? While I do have that “one piece”, there is still so much great art out there by so many other talented artists. On the relatively short journey that I took to get my fix, I stumbled across so much great art. Comics have been around for quite a while, and I find the more I dig into its history, the more great things I find (and want to collect). I kick myself for not getting into this hobby sooner since the prices of art these days can be daunting, but I also look forward to the road ahead, and to the next chase – whatever that might be.



Page 11 from *Fantastic Four* 269.



My "Grail" – John Byrne's cover to *Fantastic Four* 266.