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## **Bill Blackbeard: The Collector Who Rescued the Comics**

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In early January of 1998, a team of movers arrived at 2850 Ulloa Street in the quiet residential neighborhood known as the Sunset District of San Francisco (Figure 1). Inside, they discovered that the unassuming Spanish stucco home was literally filled from top to bottom with paper material of all shapes and sizes—books, magazines, comic books, pulps, story papers, prints, drawings, and, most importantly, newspapers—bound newspapers, individual newspapers, newspaper tear sheets,<sup>1</sup> and newspaper clippings. The massive collection filled most of the upstairs rooms and the entire spacious, ground-floor garage below that ran the length of the building. The immense garage was a maze of narrow alleys created by floor-to-ceiling stacks of bound newspaper volumes and individual tear sheets, boxes and file cabinets containing millions of comic strip clippings; and rows of shelves made from crates turned on their sides to house books and periodicals (Figures 2–4). For decades, the building also served as the residence of the man responsible for collecting this mass of paper, Bill Blackbeard (Figure 5). Blackbeard was living there with his wife, Barbara, and more than seventy-five tons of popular culture material, when he learned in 1997 that the home's owner would not renew his lease.

Recognizing that the collection, known as the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art (SFACA), would have to be moved, Blackbeard began negotiations with Lucy Shelton Caswell, curator of The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum (then called the Cartoon Research Library). Caswell and Blackbeard eventually agreed that the materials should be transferred to Ohio State. The movers faced the daunting task of packing the entire collection to be shipped across the country to its new home. It was by far the largest collection ever acquired by the library and is one of its most important for the study of popular culture in general and graphic narrative—or sequential art—in particular. Blackbeard's story demonstrates that individual collectors have played a particularly critical role in protecting and preserving our popular culture heritage, a heritage that, until relatively recently, was largely ignored by established academic institutions.

Born April 28, 1926, Bill Blackbeard spent his early childhood in Lawrence, Indiana, a rural town located northeast of Indianapolis. His grandfather operated a service station and his father, Sydney, was an electrician. His mother Thelma handled the bookkeeping side of her husband's business. When he was eight or nine, he moved to Newport Beach, California.<sup>2</sup> The high point of the week for young Blackbeard was the arrival of the Sunday comics. At some point in his youth, he made the happy discovery that—in the days before recycling—many people accumulated stacks of newspapers in their basements and garages, sometimes to use as wrapping or scrap paper or sometimes because they just did not get around to disposing of them.



Figure 1. Photo of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art by R. C. Harvey, ca. 1996, Collection of The Ohio State University Cartoon Library and Museum.



Figure 2. Photos of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art by R. C. Harvey, ca. 1996, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum.



Figure 3. Photo of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art by R. C. Harvey, ca. 1996, Collection of The Ohio State University Cartoon Library and Museum.

During an interview conducted in 2007, Blackbeard reminisced, “Once I discovered this, I had no other interest in life than finding these caches of newspapers” (Personal interview). He mined the piles he located for their comic pages, which he eagerly read and began to keep in stacks. He later recalled, “I wasn’t old enough then to have a good librarian’s sense of order. I just sort of thought they were all wonderful and I kept the stacks going” (Personal interview). His mother did not allow him much space to keep his collection, so he limited himself to daily comic pages and Sunday sections from one or two newspapers.

Blackbeard did not inherit his collecting obsession nor his interest in comics from his parents. When asked if either of them collected, he replied “Oh no, I’m afraid they were pretty much the typical fine people of their time. No, there was no interest along that line at all. I don’t think my Dad ever read the comics . . . No, there was nothing apparent in the family background, going back to my grandparents that would have indicated [collecting]. They didn’t even read much. There weren’t any books to speak of. I built the library at my parents’ [house] because I thought they should have books, you know” (Personal interview).



Figure 4. Photos of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art by R. C. Harvey, ca. 1996, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum.

After high school, Blackbeard joined the army in 1944 and served in Europe during WWII (Williams 17).<sup>3</sup> Following military service, he attended Fullerton College until his GI funding ran out then became a freelance writer, including authoring stories for the pulps (Williams 16). He continued to develop his interest in the humanities and popular literature, especially comic strips. Blackbeard stated, “I began to develop a focus; an awareness that comic strips were an interrelated thing; many things, a business; an art form; etc. and that it was all there for anyone for the asking to plunge into” (Personal interview). Upon discovering the runs of bound newspaper volumes that libraries at the time housed, he said, “I realized that I could literally live in this world with no trouble at all. I mean I could go in at 9:00 in the morning at the library . . . to get a big stack of volumes which I would then read through” (Personal interview).

In 1967, Blackbeard saw the need for a scholarly history of the newspaper comic strip. The comic strip, created in the mid 1890s to sell newspapers and amuse the masses, had rarely been considered worthy of serious analysis or study. Several pioneering efforts fell short of the comprehensive and accurate history that Blackbeard intended to write.<sup>4</sup> By the late 1960s, social history and popular culture studies were gaining respect as legitimate fields of academic inquiry, and he sold the concept to the Oxford University Press (Lewis 28).



Figure 5. Bill Blackbeard, 1971, San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum. Photo by Fitzgerald Whitney, *Los Angeles Times*. Photo courtesy of Jenny E. Robb. Copyright, 2009, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted with permission.

However, Blackbeard faced a dilemma. In order to be able to write with authority about the origins, the important trends and advances, and the social significance of comic strips through the years, one would ideally be able to access complete runs of individual strips. But no such archive existed. The syndicates routinely destroyed original comic strip drawings and proofs that they no longer wanted to store, and few cartoonists kept complete records of their work. The comics could be found in the bound newspaper volumes in libraries, but even that presented problems: there was no index of which papers ran which strips, and that often changed from day to day or month to month. Blackbeard soon discovered that even this last resort would not be a viable alternative for long.

Librarians across the country had encountered problems of their own with regard to the oversized newspaper volumes. They were quite simply running out of room to store them all. Many also feared that the old newsprint—due to the acidic nature of the paper—would deteriorate over time becoming brittle and unusable, even turning to dust. A solution borrowed from the world of military technology gained popularity starting in the mid-twentieth century: microfilm. Libraries could have long runs of newspapers microfilmed, then transfer, sell, or destroy the original paper volumes. The microfilm would, of course, take up only a fraction of the storage space, going a long way toward solving the space crisis. And the proponents of microfilm promised that it would last longer than the newsprint. In addition, copies of the microfilm could be sold to other libraries, which could in turn dispose of their paper volumes. The Library of Congress began its newspaper microfilming project in the 1950s; other public and university libraries followed their lead (Baker 31–34).<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1960s, when Bill Blackbeard was trying to figure out the best way to research comic strips, the San Francisco Public Library also made the decision to dispose of a portion of its bound newspaper collection. Blackbeard learned of the plan from some librarians he knew

who worked there. He offered to take the volumes off their hands rather than see them go to the dump; but, according to Blackbeard, the library's charter with the city would not allow them to transfer the volumes to a private individual. So Blackbeard started a nonprofit organization in 1967. "I never did anything so . . . fast in my life. In less than a week, I was the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art," he explained (Personal interview). Achieving nonprofit status paved the way for the San Francisco Public Library to transfer ownership of the volumes to the new Academy. Speaking in 2007, he enthusiastically recalled that "it was an endless, unfathomable, unbelievable body of bound newspaper volumes, complete for decades. Untouched, some of them!" (Personal interview). But Blackbeard did not stop there. Aided by his wife, Barbara, and various friends, he continued his quest to rescue the comics that libraries across the country were discarding (Figure 6). In addition to the initial cache from the San Francisco Public Library, Blackbeard picked up runs of bound newspapers from libraries across the country, including the Library of Congress, the Chicago Public Library, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the State Library in Sacramento. He even received some collections from the newspapers themselves. Blackbeard claims that, by and large, the librarians were happy to see them go. He even responded to emergencies, such as a crisis in the mid-1970s at the California State Library. In 1985, he wrote to the Librarian there:

About ten years ago, when the powers-that-be in Sacramento decreed the construction of some sort of "safety corridor" through the middle of the State Library's basement newspaper stacks, we received an emergency call from Ken Pettit, then in charge of the California Section, asking us how fast we could remove all of the Library's out-of-state papers, since a space sufficient to accommodate the new corridor had to be cleared in the newspaper stacks within two weeks of his call . . . Mr. Pettit was aware of the Academy's interest in preserving bound newspaper files in their original condition (as opposed to microfilm) and felt we would find some way to promptly meet his request, as we did—to the extent of dispatching and filling some four successive 22-foot truck-loads of papers within the specified two-week period! (Blackbeard, Letter to Leach)



Figure 6. Bill Blackbeard, undated, San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum. Photo by Joseph J. Rosenthal, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Although most of the material was donated, Blackbeard may have purchased some periodicals in the early days as well. In the 1969 Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company phonebook, a listing for the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art under the heading “Book Dealers” states “Wanted; Newspapers, Magazines; Any Amount, up to a houseful; Highest prices; special pay for pulps, newspapers before 1945.” A smaller listing under “Waste Paper” reads “We Pay Well Above Standard Waste Paper Prices For Old Magazines and Newspapers.” However, when asked in 2007 if he purchased collections, he insisted that he never did, adding “I’m sure I didn’t have much to do with that once I was getting whole library runs” (Personal interview). In the same interview, Blackbeard indicated that he had purchased other types of popular literature, such as pulps, story papers and dime novels from British dealers and on eBay.

### **“An Obsession Organized”**

For Blackbeard, collecting newspapers and comic strips became more than a hobby and more than a career; it became his way of life. He and his San Francisco Academy of Comic Art call to mind the words of Nikolai Aristides, who defined a collection as “an obsession organized” and says of the collector, “if he has any introspection, he begins at some point to sense that the collection possesses him” (330). In the text for an SFACA brochure written in 1975, Blackbeard promises “twenty-four-hour accessibility to this material.” Twenty years later, he wrote, “The Academy founder and director is in residence at the Academy with his wife (who is employed elsewhere), and is thus able to work with the collections and Academy undertakings during his waking hours seven days a week” (Blackbeard, *A Brief 1995 Summary*, 2). An early *Los Angeles Times* article by Charles Hillinger about the collection reported that Blackbeard and his wife sold their car and most of their possessions to start the Academy. Blackbeard is quoted as saying, “We’ve spent our life savings giving birth to what we believe a very necessary and important repository for a major art form” (Hillinger). The article noted that “there’s barely room for the couple’s bed, stove and refrigerator. The bathroom is the only room in the house that does not double as academy space.” The reason given for this one exception was the risk of moisture damage to the objects. This state of affairs was not a temporary situation while they processed the material given to them by libraries. Almost thirty years after Hillinger’s article was written, their living arrangements remained the same, according to photographs and visitors. Even after he transferred the majority of the material to the Cartoon Library & Museum, Blackbeard continued to collect, filling the much-smaller home he and Barbara occupied in Santa Cruz.

As Russell Belk points out in *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, collecting is a form of consumption but it is also a creative and productive act (55). Blackbeard did more than just hoard the newspapers. He created a unique archive that would better serve his own studies and those of other cartoon historians, scholars, and publishers. He knew firsthand how tedious and physically exhausting it was to page through the huge, heavy, and bulky volumes, searching each newspaper issue to find that day’s comics page or section. So, he and his wife, along with other comic strip fans who volunteered at the Academy, laboriously clipped the daily and Sunday comic strips out of many of the newspapers given to them in order to assemble complete and chronological runs of the strips by title. In the 1990s, he estimated they had clipped and organized 350,000 Sunday strips and 2.5 million dailies (Blackbeard, *The San Francisco Academy*: 1).

Clearly, Blackbeard is an extreme example of a completist: a “type A” collector rather than a “type B” (Danet and Katriel; Belk 45–46, 72). The “type A” collector is systematic in his

or her approach, collecting everything, or an example of everything, that falls within a certain category. On the other hand, the “type B” collector is less focused, acquiring things somewhat randomly, often because the item appeals for aesthetic or sentimental reasons. “Type A” collectors like Black-beard gain pleasure and satisfaction through completion, or, if completion is not possible, through achieving progress toward it (Danet and Katriel 265–270; Pearce 53–55). In 2007, Black-beard recalled having experienced “collector’s anguish,” which he described as “knowing that there was more out there that had to be found but [not] know[ing] where to find it” (Blackbeard, B. Personal interview. 14 May 2007). Danet and Katriel identified five strategies for pursuing a sense of closure through collecting. The first of these— seeking to complete a series or aspiring to collect all of something—applies to Blackbeard’s collecting method. It was not enough to have examples of comic strips, he had to have complete runs in chronological order. Runs of some strips would not suffice; he aspired to acquire every strip ever published. Even that was not satisfactory. Black-beard recognized the interrelationships between all forms of popular culture. He believed comics could be best understood in the larger context of all narrative and graphic material created for the common masses from “penny dreadfuls” to dime novels, pulp magazines to comic books. His ambition for his collection grew to include all of popular narrative so that he and other researchers could examine the many and varied ways that different popular art and literature informed and influenced each other. Geographically, the collection retained its American focus, but also included particularly strong British holdings along with Belgian and French comic publications. Figure 7 shows a more extensive list of the types of items Blackbeard collected.

- |                                 |                                      |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • Story papers                  | • Posters                            |
| • “Penny dreadfuls”             | • Toys and figurines                 |
| • Dime novels                   | • Comic books and graphic novels     |
| • Victorian illustrated fiction | • Underground comics and newspapers  |
| • Pulp fiction magazines        | • Cartoon prints and broadsides      |
| • Writers magazines             | • Sherlock Holmes special collection |
| • Detective and crime fiction   | • Charles Dickens special collection |
| • Science fiction               | • Reference and reprint books        |
| • Fanzines                      |                                      |
| • Film                          |                                      |

Figure 7. Additional items collected by Bill Blackbeard.

As a collector, Blackbeard was also a connoisseur who demonstrated discrimination in acquiring pieces for his collection. On lists of bound volumes that were available from libraries, he made copious notes about the quality of the printing, the condition of the paper and bindings, which strips the paper ran, and whether pages or portions of the run were missing. The collection contains many instances of individual panels cut out and taped on to comic strip clippings in order to cover a single panel with a printing defect. He often made notes on tear sheets and clippings to indicate that a page was off-register or was an inferior example. He obsessively sought to replace these with better examples whenever possible.<sup>6</sup>

Blackbeard does not appear to have been motivated by profit; he seems to have been content to make enough to support himself and the needs of the collection. He never took a salary from the Academy (Blackbeard, *A Brief Summary*: 2), although its funds undoubtedly paid



for some portion of his living expenses. In an interview conducted by the author, he claimed that he never wrote grant proposals or solicited funds for the Academy, as other nonprofit museums and libraries do, and that income was not a problem. He insisted that he funded his collecting activities by selling copies or duplicates of comic strips and reproductions of pulps to collectors and researchers. “So by reproducing and selling duplicate material, we had no problem with income at all; that was not a difficulty,” Blackbeard stated in 2007 (Personal interview). The archives of the Academy are not yet completely processed and available, so it is not possible to verify this claim, but it is certainly true that he ran the organization from his home on a bare-bones budget. He also edited more than one hundred books using material from the collection, which presumably brought in additional funds to the Academy. When Ohio State acquired the collection, payment was made to the Academy, which Blackbeard continued to direct from his new home in Santa Cruz. In a letter to Ohio State, Blackbeard clarified,

the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art is (and has been for 30 years) an established non-profit association, with no part of its collections “owned” by myself, who functions simply as Director of the association, aided by a board of directors, under federal and California state law. As the Director, I am empowered to dispose of the Academy’s collections in the best interest of furthering the ends of the Academy’s functions and goals, which at present in part consist of moving the Academy collection over a period of time into the possession of another non-profit agency, Ohio State University, in return for a payment . . . to the Academy. (Letter to Caswell, Studer and Dannelly)

In many ways, the Academy did function as a legitimate nonprofit as Blackbeard described above; in other respects it was very much a private collection—the fulfillment of the vision and obsession of one man. Like Robert Opie, whose immense popular culture collection of packaging became the basis of the Museum of Advertising and Packaging (Martin 56–57), Blackbeard, too, institutionalized his collection. In Blackbeard’s case, he did so initially as a matter of expediency—to enable him to acquire objects. Although he officially collected under institutional auspices, he undoubtedly had complete control of the collection from its origin until it was transferred to Ohio State in 1998. The Academy had a Board of Directors, but it is not clear from the available records who served on the board, nor what functions the group performed. When asked in 2007 if he was required to have a board to acquire nonprofit status, he candidly stated,

Oh, theoretically, but they never check on you on that. So any group of your friends can be the board. Oh, yeah, there are certain tangible things that you’re supposed to do, but nobody every looks into it. It just gets in the way, in my point of view. Of course, the purpose of regulations is to prevent malfeasance of some sort or another. I wasn’t “malfeasance” anybody [laughs]. (Personal interview)

While discussing the importance of the Academy’s collection to popular culture scholars, he exclaimed, “Well, it made it available for me. It wasn’t for this wonderful world out there; I wanted it” (Personal interview). Clearly, he collected for his own satisfaction and pleasure, while at the same time serving the greater good by making the materials accessible to all.

Susan Pearce lists contrasting attributes of the private collector vs. the public museum (modified from P. Martin, unpublished dissertation) in her book, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* (67) (Figure 8). Blackbeard’s activities fall on both sides of the lists: he was both a collector and a curator; his motives included a combination of self-gratification and public edification; he seemingly collected for both leisure and work. The very nature of the material he

collected places him on the private collector's side of popular versus elite and "low" culture versus "high" culture, but his status as director of the Academy and editor of numerous cartoon books makes him a qualified professional rather than simply a knowledgeable lay person. It seems the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art was something of a hybrid entity, not entirely private yet not wholly public either.

<u>Collector</u>	<u>Museum</u>
profane	sacred
collector	curator
self-gratification	public edification
leisure	work
popular	elite
"low" culture	"high" culture
knowledgeable	qualified
lay	professional
part-time	full-time
safe-keeping	collection
private	public

Figure 8. Contrasts between the World of the Private Collector and the Museum. (adapted from Pearce 67 [after Paul Martin, "Contemporary Popular Collecting in Britain: The Socio-Cultural Context of the Construction of Identity at the End of the Second Millennium AD," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester

### **Blackbeard's Invaluable Contribution**

Blackbeard collected mass-culture material out of his love for comics and to facilitate his own research, but he also very clearly saw himself as a crusader, rescuing the materials from certain destruction. He exemplifies the "heroic collector," who makes noble sacrifices for the sake of the objects (Belk 149–150). From the beginning, Blackbeard realized how inadequate microfilm was for the preservation and study of comics and cartoons. The process produced only black and white images, which meant that the beautiful pages "that make a rainbow look like a lead pipe," as the *New York Journal* boasted of its new Sunday color section in 1896 (qtd. in Blackbeard, *Outcault*: 63), would be lost if libraries relied exclusively on microfilm.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, color is an integral part of the very creation of the newspaper comic strip, one of the few indigenous American art forms. The Sunday color sections, made possible by advances in printing at the end of the nineteenth century, were inspired by the popular and polychromatic humor weeklies such as *Puck and Judge*. They were pressed into the service of newspaper magnates William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer to serve as weapons in their intense circulation wars. Newspaper sales boomed thanks to the colorful and entertaining comics printed along with sensational headlines and voluminous illustrations. By the early twentieth century, newspapers all over the country had added color sections, prominently featuring comics. Losing access to these vibrantly hued images in their original form would have been a blow to researchers of social history, art, and popular culture.

For example, if only the microfilm version of the full-page tableau cartoon *Hogan's Alley* survived, we would never see first-hand how its main character, Mickey Dugan, got his famous nickname, The Yellow Kid. We would not be able to determine the first time his shirt was colored yellow instead of blue, as it had originally appeared on May 5, 1895, or red, as it

appeared on December 15, 1895. Another example is shown in Figure 9, a scan from a microfilmed newspaper page in the *San Francisco Call* from June 21, 1903.<sup>8</sup> Compare it with a scan of the original tear sheet in Figure 10. In the microfilm version, not only color but text is lost as well. Also, this piece is particularly interesting because of the unusual color printing method. Other color sections were printed using a half-tone process that generated a series of tiny dots in primary colors that were combined to produce the full spectrum of hues. The process used on this *San Francisco Call* page is a less-successful method. Multiple plates were used, but the color areas are solid instead of a dot screen, making only two or three colors possible. This example demonstrates the truly experimental nature of newspaper color printing at the time.

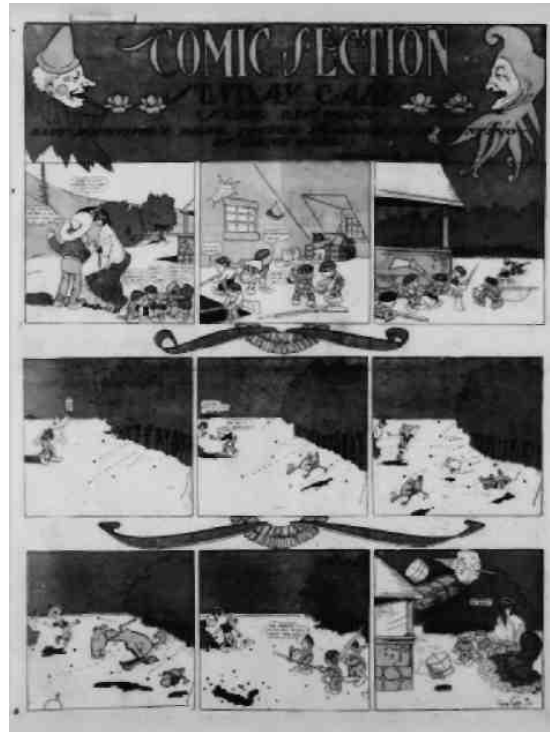


Figure 9. Gene Carr, *Lady Bountiful*, *Sunday Call* Comic Section, June 21, 1903. Digital image from the Chronicling America Newspaper Project to digitize newspaper microfilm.

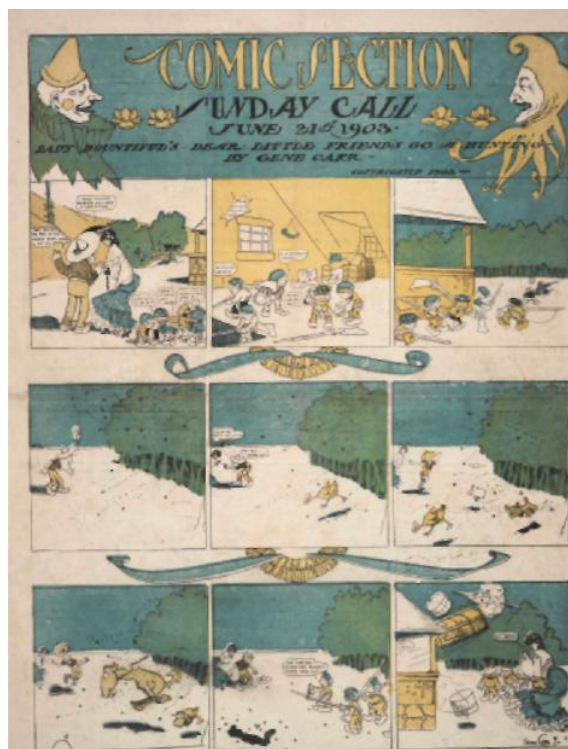


Figure 10. Gene Carr, *Lady Bountiful*, *Sunday Call* Comic Section, June 21, 1903. Scanned from the original newspaper page in the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum.

The quality of the color on the *San Francisco Call* page in Figure 10 is not particularly exceptional, but it is quite spectacular on a page by Lionel Feininger from the May 6, 1906 *Chicago Tribune* (Figure 11). Feininger was an established artist at the time he was recruited to create comics. This strip, like many important early strips, was printed in one newspaper, a paper that is very difficult, if not impossible, to find in bound volumes in any library. Another example of an extraordinary work of art in its own right is a *Little Nemo in Slumberland* page by the great Winsor McCay shown in Figure 12. It only exists in color in this format. What we would call the “original,” is black ink on paper, which raises the question, what is the “original?” Clearly both the ink drawing (if it still exists, which in the case of many early comics, it does not) and the color newsprint version possess artistic and historical value and should be preserved.



Figure 11. Lyonel Feininger, *The Kin-der-Kids*, *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*, May 6, 1906. San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum.

In 1980, Blackbeard wrote “It is my conviction that the present and long-extended determination of most American libraries to dump their often literally priceless printed newspaper files upon ‘replacement’ by microfilm is nothing less than an archival disaster” (Letter to Blitzer). He did not agree with the argument that newsprint is inherently self-destructive. He later stated,

It should be mentioned, in view of the widespread (and largely erroneous) assumption that the pulp paper stock on which so large a part of popular literature and art has been printed is in a state of ongoing decay: browning, crumbling, etc., that the Academy collections on newsprint, in their hundreds of thousands of pages, wholly belie this notion, being firm, fully readable, easily handled, and often as white as the day they saw print, fifty to a hundred years ago. (Blackbeard, *A Brief 1995 Summary*: 1–2)

Indeed, in hindsight, it is unfortunate that national library leaders did not work together to assure the survival of at least one complete printed run of each newspaper, or even each major news paper, which could be checked when problems with microfilm were discovered and also used by researchers who either needed to examine the original or wanted high-quality, color reproductions, a necessary part of comics scholarship. Thankfully, Blackbeard managed to rescue and preserve a part of our heritage that otherwise would have been lost.



Figure 12. Winsor McCay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *The New York Herald*, February 24, 1907. San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum.

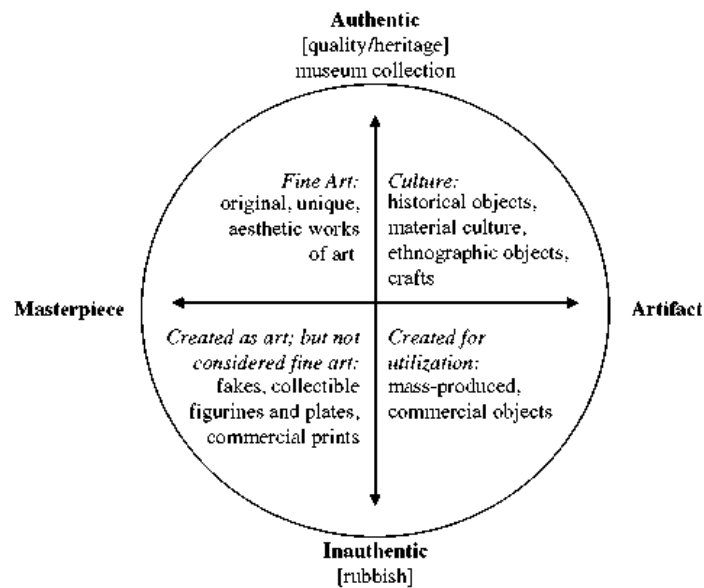


Figure 13. James Clifford's art-culture system (adapted from Clifford 1998: 224 and Pearce 1998: 41, 93).

He was at the forefront of the trend in late twentieth century contemporary collecting to collect the “inexpensive and unconsidered,” the “material detritus of consumer society” (Martin

1) as newspapers, comic books and pulp fiction certainly were—and sometimes still are—considered. Newspapers, and the comics within, were ephemeral and common. They were considered throw-away: something to read today, then used as kindling, or to line the bird cage tomorrow. For Martin, the drive to collect common, everyday objects—seemingly worthless things—“is an act of passive resistance to the spectacle” of capitalistic, corporate culture (45). He argues that it is a way to gain personal control in an overwhelming postmodern, materialistic society where the individual is rendered powerless. Russell Belk writes, “For while consumers can almost always control what they own and possess, collectors who possess an interrelated set of objects control a ‘little world’” (70). Blackbeard indeed served as creator, savior and controller of his “little world.”

And in creating the collection from everyday, mass-produced ephemera, he made a conscious effort to elevate the status of popular graphic narrative, to transport it from the profane to the sacred. His crucial contribution was in recognizing the value of objects that others considered so common as to be worthless, or at the very least, inappropriate for serious efforts at preservation. By collecting and promoting them, he shifted comic strips on newsprint from the status of “in-authentic artifacts” to “authentic artifacts” in James Clifford’s Art-Culture System (Figure 13) which places collectible objects within four zones created by two axes: authentic/inauthentic and masterpiece/artifact (Clifford 222–226; Belk 53; Pearce 40–41). In the world of collecting, value increases as objects advance above the horizontal axis toward “authentic.” As commercial entertainment that was never intended to be displayed as art, newspaper comics seem to fall into the least-valuable quadrant: inauthentic artifact. However, using this classification system, Susan Pearce notes that material can move from “rubbish” at the bottom, which quickly loses value once purchased, to “heritage” at the top. She explains, “collections of rubbish become at first interesting and amusing, then important, and finally emerge as ‘significant social and historical documents in the history of material culture’, with strong genuine heritage pretensions” (93). Blackbeard’s actions transformed comic strips into objects with legitimate cultural, historic, and sometimes even aesthetic value, granting them “authentic” status. Unlike the anti-art of the Dada movement, his intent was not to elevate random objects to the status of fine art as a protest against the establishment, but rather to challenge the relegation of popular art forms to the position of “low” culture.

Blackbeard was part of a wider movement in the second half of the twentieth century of scholars, cartoonists, and cultural critics who attempted to legitimize the study of popular culture in general, and cartoons and comics specifically. It is important to note, however, that several other major collections of comics started at the time focused on the original art, what could be considered the “authentic masterpieces,” rather than the mass-produced newsprint. These collections include the Swann Collection, started in 1967 and now at the Library of Congress, the International Museum of Cartoon Art, founded by cartoonist Mort Walker in 1974 and now part of the Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum, and the Art Wood Collection, also now at the Library of Congress.

When Blackbeard lost the lease on his home in 1997, the objects he had rescued were once again in danger of being destroyed. After a year of negotiation, the Cartoon Library & Museum at Ohio State University was able to purchase the entire collection and to pay for it to be moved to Columbus, Ohio. The sheer mass of material made it one of the largest collections the Ohio State University Libraries had ever acquired, requiring six semitrucks to transport it all. Although Blackbeard and his wife Barbara kept the materials organized and neatly stacked, there was no written inventory or finding aid of what the collection contained. Having literally lived

with the collection for more than thirty years, Black-beard undoubtedly knew exactly what he had and where it could be found. In addition to the lack of a detailed inventory, the complications of packing and transporting the mass of material made processing the collection a truly daunting task. Fortunately, the Getty Foundation provided funding for a three-year project to catalog the collection, beginning with the oldest material first, and to create an online EAD finding aid to make the processed material more accessible.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, less than half of the collection has been processed to date due to its enormous size and the need to inventory each comic strip title by individual date. The collection is used by researchers from a variety of disciplines, including English, communications, art, American studies, popular culture studies, and history. It is also heavily used by comic strip reprint publishers. The popular fiction materials were transferred to Ohio State University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, where they complement the extensive Charvat Collection of American Fiction.

Blackbeard never did produce a comic strip history for the Oxford University Press, the project that started it all. Instead, he embarked on a lifelong collecting effort that has contributed more to the scholarship in the field than any single book could have (Figure 14). "Blackbeard, without question or quibble, is the only absolutely indispensable figure in the history of comics scholarship for the last quarter century," wrote comics historian R. C. Harvey (79). In addition to serving researchers who came to the Academy, Blackbeard used materials from the collection to produce reprint books that inspired the next generation of comics scholars. One of them, Jeet Heer, had this to say in an interview published on *The Comics Reporter* Web site:

An absolutely pivotal experience for me was first encountering, while still coping with the onset of puberty, *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (edited by Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams). For me this is a volume almost as important as the New Testament or the Koran. It's where I first encountered *Krazy Kat*, *Little Nemo*, *Polly and Her Pals*, *Gasoline Alley* and countless other treasures. The book gave me my first sense of how great the early comic strips were, a lost Troy waiting to be excavated. (Heer)



Figure 14. Bill Blackbeard, undated, San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum. Photographer unknown.



*The Smithsonian Collection* was, indeed, a seminal book on the history of comics, but none of the hundreds of comic strips featured in its pages actually came from the Smithsonian's collection; they were all supplied by Blackbeard from the Academy's treasures. Individual collectors like him made a critical contribution to the preservation of popular culture materials, collecting and caring for ephemeral items that libraries, museums, and universities long thought were not worth saving. In this case, not only did institutions fail to acquire comic strip material, but they were actually discarding what they had inadvertently collected, when Blackbeard found his mission in life. His obsession resulted in a remarkable contribution to the scholarly community and helped make possible the preservation and documentation of a rich and colorful part of America's literary and visual heritage.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Collectors and Collecting: Private Collections and Their Role in Libraries Conference (July 2007 at Chawton House, UK) and the PCA/ACA Conference (March 19–22, 2008 in San Francisco).

1. The term *tear sheet* refers to a page cut or removed from a publication. In this article, the term is used to refer to a single newsprint page removed from the rest of the newspaper.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information is from an interview with Bill Blackbeard conducted by the author on May 14, 2007 at his residence in Santa Cruz, California.
3. Also, National Archives and Records Administration, *US World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938–1946* [database online]. Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, 2005.
4. Gilbert Seldes, a writer, editor, and cultural critic, was probably the first to attempt a serious assessment. In 1922, he examined comic strips along with other forms of popular entertainment in *The Seven Lively Arts*, paying particular attention to George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, which he considered a masterpiece. Twenty years later, Martin Sheridan contributed a collection of cartoonist biographies and interviews entitled *Comics and Their Creators: Life Stories of American Cartoonists* but this, too, fell short of a comprehensive, scholarly study of the popular art form. The only attempt to write such a history was undertaken by a cartoonist, Coulton Waugh. His pioneering work, *The Comics*, succeeded in providing a survey of the development of the comic strip and in establishing the importance of the popular art form as a reflection of society. Although filled with valuable insights, Waugh, as an insider in the business, did not have the objectivity of a disinterested scholar. The well-researched book unfortunately lacks citations and suffers from factual errors due to the challenge of documenting the comics.
5. The policy of the Library of Congress states that microfilm is the preferred format for permanent retention and that only newspapers printed before 1870 on rag paper with artifactual value may be retained in original form (US Newspapers Collections Policy Statement, originally written in 1953, revised 1996; <http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/neu.html>).
6. All examples found in the SFACA Collection at The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library.
7. See Baker's *Double Fold* for a discussion of the problems of relying on microfilm to preserve our newspaper heritage in general. Also, see Richard J. Cox.
8. Digital image from the Chronicling America Newspaper Project to digitize newspaper microfilm. The intention here is not to criticize this project, which is an important resource. However, this example demonstrates why microfilm alone is inadequate for comics and popular culture researchers.
9. Available at [http://cartoons.osu.edu/finding\\_aids/sfaca/](http://cartoons.osu.edu/finding_aids/sfaca/). For further information, see Amy McCrory. McCrory was the project archivist for the Getty grant.

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