

True Love Forever: Preserving the Legacy of Norman “Sailor Jerry” Collins

ABSTRACT

Norman Keith Collins, known as Sailor Jerry, has helped to elevate the status of tattoos to fine art. A renaissance man of his time, Jerry was interested in art, electronics, politics, and business. Early in his career, he traveled the globe with the U.S. Navy, eventually landing in Honolulu to set up a tattoo shop on historic Hotel Street in Chinatown. He built a reputation for quality work, which attracted customers in spite of the cost. Sailor Jerry is credited with the invention of the magnum tattoo needle, used to apply broad strokes of color to the skin, as well as an improved tattoo-machine construction, whose smooth operation resulted in greater detail and less pain for the sitter. He was the first tattoo artist to find and use a purple ink that was not fugitive or toxic. During a time when trade secrets were guarded, he befriended the most talented tattoo artists in the world, corresponding only with those whom he tested and deemed worthy of his attention. His studies culminated in a style that combined the bold colors and designs seen in Japanese tattoos with iconic Americana imagery. Sailor Jerry, who longed for the day when tattooing would be seen as fine art, would be pleased to learn that his flash, stencils, rubbings, and sketches underwent full conservation treatment at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts.

Twenty-six sheets of Sailor Jerry’s original flash, 148 acetate stencils, and 19 original drawings were examined, treated, housed, and framed to the highest standards for long-term preservation and exhibition. The colorants used to create the bold flash art found on the walls of Sailor Jerry’s shop remain brilliant, mainly due to the conscious decision of the artist to invest in quality materials. The acetate stencils, slightly yellowed and brittle, are artifacts of a tattoo craft made obsolete by today’s digital means. The sketches illustrate Jerry’s confidence and his control over his hand and tools. This collection reveals the progression of the artist’s idea

as seen in sketch form, its realization in full-color flash, the translation onto the acetate stencil, and the rubbings taken from the stencils. Treatment included selective surface cleaning, tape removal, mending, and flattening of a variety of supports, including watercolor paper, transparent paper, and acetate pieces. The tools and materials used by Sailor Jerry were diverse and demanded creative problem-solving in terms of their conservation treatment, display, documentation, and transport. Communication and collaboration with the owner was vital, and the cultivated relationship has spurred research, exhibition, and outreach opportunities. One of the most rewarding aspects of the project has been the opportunity to present conservation and preservation issues to new audiences, including tattoo enthusiasts, in the form of lectures, newspaper articles, blog posts, and video documentaries.

SAMANTHA SHEESLEY

Paper Conservator

Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts

Philadelphia, PA

ssheesley@ccha.org

Presented at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC’s 40th Annual Meeting, May 8–11, 2012, Albuquerque, New Mexico.