

Notes From the Collector

Over the years I've found that there are casual fans of "The Simpsons," hard-core fans of "The Simpsons," and HARD-core fans of the show. I probably fall into the "soft-core" category—I can't recite every episode, I can't imitate the voices (although I can do a reasonable Krusty the Clown), and I don't memorize every plot. But I am a fan of the humor, the dialogue, and the animation, especially the hand-drawn animation from the early days. Although it may look rough by digital standards ("The Simpsons" went digital in 2002), I still enjoy the early years when cels were hand painted and the line work was a bit "rougher." It just seemed to fit the whole "feel" of the show instead of a more polished, crisper look. And of course, it is tough to collect digital work since cels do not exist.

I still remember the first time I saw "The Simpsons"—it was on "The Tracy Ullman Show" in the late '80s and there were a series of "bumpers" between segments featuring this oddly drawn, sarcastic family that was more like my family than I care to admit. I watched them, admittedly as filler before Tracy's next skit, and I enjoyed them—sort of. It was the type of thing that I watched because it was there, not because I sought it, and I was too lazy to try to find the remote. So I remembered the fillers, not enough to be water cooler talk the next day but enough to learn their names so I could be somewhat cool in case any references to them came up.

When the Tracy Ullman show was cancelled, so was my interest in The Simpsons. That is until I saw the Christmas special called "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire," which debuted on December 17, 1989 (thus becoming the only Simpsons episode to air in the 1980s). I tuned in not quite sure what to expect, and after watching the half hour special, finished it not knowing quite what I had just seen. I mean, it was *funny*, and the dialogue and characters were *clever* (which has always been important to me—one reason I grew up a Warner Bros. fan), but the animation was so *rough* and the mouths didn't synch up with the voices and the characters were so non-traditional—I had no idea how this show had gotten on the air other than the sheer desperation of the Fox Network to counter-program their competition. But apparently it worked—over 13 million people watched "Roasting" and Fox was quick to commit to 13 episodes to follow later that season.

I mostly ignored The Simpsons that first year for the reasons stated above and because it was up against my favorite show at the time, “The Cosby Show.” But as I began to “channel surf” during the commercials I caught glimpses of Bart, Lisa and Homer and their various predicaments, and began to take interest. It *was* clever, and Homer no longer sounded like Walter Matthau, and Bart was the smart-aleck I so longed to be but never had the nerve. Calling my Dad by his first name? Not in our household! I tried it once and it was my first and last time. But the more I watched the show, the more I enjoyed the characters, the plots, the humor, and yes, even the animation. I was a bit embarrassed about that--after all, the last time I watched a prime time cartoon it was “Jonny Quest” and I was 10 years old--and this certainly was not “Jonny Quest.” But it was really cleverly done, and the more I watched the more I wanted more of them.

I began collecting animation in the early 1980s—for a person who could barely draw a stick person, animation was an amazing thing to me. My first cel was a limited edition from Chuck Jones entitled “Western Edition” (so my addiction can be directly attributed to Charles M. Jones) that I purchased in 1980, and as most collectors know enough is never enough. So one cel led to two, two led to four, four led to eight, and everything after that led to a very depleted bank account. But it was worth it—I admired the art so much, and just as importantly it brought back great memories of my favorite cartoons. As my collection of Warner Bros./Chuck Jones cels grew, I began to branch out into other cartoons.

In 1993 I was approached by a gallery that began to carry production cels from The Simpsons—cels that had been “under camera” and actually appeared on air. I was thrilled with the prospect of owning a piece of history—something that no one else had and that reminded me of that episode. “The Simpsons” had only been on for a few years so the selection was limited, and at the time the number of animation galleries that carried cels from the show numbered well over 50. So my collecting became a hunt for the proverbial “needle in a haystack”—which gallery might have a cel from the scene I really liked from a particular episode? But as a lot of collectors say, part of the fun is the “thrill of the hunt,” so I had no trepidation about calling any number of galleries I needed to in order to track down that Simpsons cel I “had” to have.

I learned several important lessons as I began to collect more seriously. The first was to be focused—as much as I liked other cartoons and studios, I wanted to focus my efforts on building collections from specific cartoons or characters that

really meant something to me. At first it was hard to have that self-control, but it not only helped me manage my (limited) finances but also helped the galleries I worked with as they learned my specific interests. The second was to be very selective in the cels I chose, so throughout the years I have constantly culled my collection seeking to improve it. If I saw a better cel from a particular episode or scene, I went after it and the one I owned went on the market. That is still my philosophy to this day. And lastly, I collect animation art because I love it, not necessarily as an investment. Although I certainly hope our collection appreciates in value, the market is unpredictable and what I think is a terrific image may not appeal to someone else. So I had better *really* like the image before acquiring it as my assumption is I will own it for a long time.

If you've had a chance to look at the exhibit before reading this you will see that I really enjoy the secondary characters as much as the principal ones. I do like Bart, Lisa, Homer, Marge and Maggie, but they are surrounded by a terrific assortment of friends, family, students and co-workers. I think that is one reason the series is so popular—everyone can identify with someone on the show, whether it be the bratty child, the inept father, the evil boss, the goody-two-shoes neighbor, the school bully, the nerdy friend, or whomever. People often ask me who my favorite Simpsons character is, and I really don't have one. But I do particularly enjoy Krusty the Clown, Moe the bartender, and of course Mr. Burns. The characters are so well defined now you know exactly what to expect—the avarice and self-absorption of Krusty; the crankiness and desperation of Moe; and the evil and sheer greed of Mr. Burns (after all, who else would build a Slant-Drilled Oil pipeline to steal oil from right underneath the public school)?

My favorite episode? Again, that is like asking someone who their favorite child is. Entering its 30th season with over 500 episodes to consider, that is a really tough call. But some episodes in particular come to mind—"Krusty Gets Kancelled," "Bart Sells His Soul," "Flaming Moe's," "Kamp Krusty," "Mr. Plow," "\$pringfield..." and "Cape Feare" are all terrific and I can watch over and over again. But I have also learned that what I may consider the funniest episodes may not have the best cels—the humor may be in the dialogue or situation vs. the animated action. And vice versa—some of the less popular episodes may have a great visual gag or two that make a wonderful addition to our collection.

I can go on and on about my appreciation for the show, but there are two groups I'd like to call out in particular. The first is the voice artists that work on the show and bring the characters to life. It is an incredible team that is able to still make the show interesting and the dialogue clever after 30 years. Their versatility and acting ability is pretty astounding. The second group are the Directors, especially from the early years. They helped develop the foundation of the show from the style of the characters to the situations they are engaged in to the perspective they used in directing each scene. Several are still with the show and many have used their experience to move on to work in popular television shows and movies. Kudos to them!

We are grateful to be able to share our exhibit with the Tacoma Art Museum and fans of the show—casual or HARD-core. Part of the fun of preparing for an exhibit is going through the art to select what will be shown and working with the curators and other staff at the TAM in doing so has been especially enjoyable. They understand and appreciate both the art and the humor of the show, and have selected a great cross-section of episodes, characters and gags. We hope you enjoy them as much as we do and appreciate your support of the Tacoma Art Museum and this exhibit.

Enjoy!

Bill Heeter and Kristi Correa