{h1}Saving 'Sailor Jerry'{/h1}

Posted On Apr 12, Posted by JonesyBoy Category TatShirts Blog

Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts preserves work of legendary tattoo artist Norman Collins

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Philadelphia Daily News

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TO MANY, he's the godfather of American tattooing, the original outsider artist.

Between 1940 and 1973, Norman "Sailor Jerry" Collins inked his distinctive tattoos on the flesh of visitors to his Hawaii shop. His distinctive style combining bold lines and careful coloration is still imitated today and can be found today on thousands - perhaps tens of thousands - of people.

"It's pure folk Americana and it has a rich history," said Erich Weiss, of Philadelphia, who wrote a book and directed a documentary about Collins. "People now consider tattooing as an art form, but back then they didn't see it that way. "

Now Center City's Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts is preserving Collins' work for prosperity with the same care they've put into historic documents and other masterpieces of art. They're finishing up the project in time to mark the 100th anniversary of Collins' birth this year.

The center is a nonprofit conservation laboratory that focuses on works on paper, ranging from paintings to rare books to photos. Among the historic documents that have crossed the center's

tables: Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, abolitionist Frederick Douglass' diaries and a copy of the U.S. Constitution.

The conservators have painstaking, sometimes tedious, jobs. They must maintain the integrity of the original works while repairing obvious damage. Tools of the trade include fragile Japanese paper, brushes, erasers and gentle solvents.

The center handled three types of Collins' work: drawings on tracing paper, stencils on acetate, and "flash art," the designs that the artist displayed in his studio.

"This gave me a really wonderful opportunity to do some research on the man and his contributions to the tattoo art," said Samantha Sheesley, the conservator who headed the center's 10-person team that restored Collins' works.

Younger people may associate "Sailor Jerry" with the brand of clothing and other commercial items such as rum that bear his name. They may also be familiar with Collins' style as designer Ed Hardy was one of his proteges. Once based in Philadelphia, the Sailor Jerry brand is now headquartered in Ireland.

But they may not know that "Jerry" was a real person, a grizzled former sailor who plied his craft for years in a Honolulu shop that had lines of patrons stretching out the door.

Some of the works that the center is preserving will now join art exhibitions in Oregon and New England, said Brigette Fuscia, the operations manager for the Sailor Jerry brand.

"We didn't just want it to be about the things we sell," said Fuscia. "We wanted it to be about the history and legacy of this man, because not a lot of brands have that."

A native of the western United States, Collins traveled the rails as a young man, first learning to hand-tattoo with a sewing needle and ink, then becoming adept at using a machine to create

his designs on skin.

After joining the U.S. Navy, Collins further refined his craft on his fellow servicemen. After leaving the Navy, he set up shop in Honolulu. He died in Hawaii in 1973.

What made Collins' art special is the way he was able to combine the bold lines of American-style tattooing with the colors and styles of Asian artists, Sheesley said. His attention to detail and to color was legendary. He was the first artist to incorporate purple in his designs.

"He wanted to bridge the gap between tattoo art and fine art," Sheesley said. Preserving his work, "is a step in that direction."

Collins was also an inventor - he developed the magnum tattoo needle - and an early advocate of needle sterilization.

"The man never slept," Sheesley said.

With examples of Collins' work spread out on tables in the center's 23rd Street office recently, Sheesley pointed out some of the nuances. Collins managed to be both edgy and bold, with images of knives and skulls, while also designing softer images such as flowers and butterflies.

The images were often symbolic. A sailor would get a tattoo of a small bird like a swallow, for example, after having crossed an ocean by ship. They were also meant to bring the sailor home safe.

Sailors often had their feet marked with images of a pig and a rooster to protect them from drowning. The theory was that those creatures didn't like water and would find the quickest way to shore in an emergency.

Because the center was dealing with a variety of materials, each required different preservation techniques.

All needed to be cleaned, but the flash art was water-sensitive and couldn't be washed. That meant it required gentle brushing. Tape - the conservator's natural enemy - had been used to hold the posters in place and it needed to be painstakingly removed.

The fragile tracing paper was riddled with tears and missing entire sections, meaning conservators had to use comparable papers to fill in the missing pieces.

All told, the center devoted about 3,400 hours to the project.

Working with the 148 acetate stencils that were used to transfer a design to a customer's skin was particularly interesting, Sheesley said. They were made of a material the center doesn't usually handle, and it was fascinating to think that each one could still be out there, permanently inked onto someone's body, she said.

Sheesley was so inspired by the designs she worked on that she decided to get a Sailor Jerry tattoo of her own. The colorful artwork, on her left forearm, features a sparrow and hearts with a banner that reads, "True Love."

"I wanted it to be something I worked on while it was here," she said. "He has imagery that speaks to every person."

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