

Quite a draw: former curator's collection of American cartoons

by Robert L. Pincus

Who was the first political cartoonist in America? Harry Katz poses the question with a smile on his face.

Not many people would have a ready answer. But he does.

Cartoons and comics have long been a central passion of his, and for many years he was in the right place to preserve the originals for posterity: the Library of Congress. He was its head curator of prints and photographs when he left his major post there last year.

QUITE A DRAW - Harry Katz, formerly of the Library of Congress, has assembled 'Cartoon America.' CNS Photo by John Gastaldo.

As for that first political cartoonist, he says, it was Benjamin Franklin. On May 9, 1754, an image appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, almost surely done by Franklin himself. It's the now-iconic snake sliced in eight pieces (one per existing American colony) with the caption "Join, or Die." It was a visual exhortation for the colonies to work together and was immensely popular in its moment.

The story of Franklin's image (and the image itself) is in Katz's big, new book, the profusely illustrated "Cartoon America: Comic Art in the Library of Congress" (Harry N. Abrams, \$50).

They are part of the tale he tells, along with Paul Revere (yes, the American Revolution-era Paul Revere),

Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Herb Block, William Steig and numerous others in his "A Brief History of American Cartooning." It's just one of many short essays by the likes of New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast and the artist who invented Zippy the Pinhead, Bill Griffith.

"We take cartoons for granted because they are so accessible," he said. "We can lose sight of the fact that they are great art and full of history."

The 48-year-old Katz grew up in Lexington, Mass., and his wife, Anne Hutchins, in Boston.

Katz describes the book project in modest terms.

"I saw this as an opportunity to learn and for others to learn along with me," Katz said. "I see this as an opportunity to teach, too, about how art, history and culture interact.

"I didn't want to be the voice of the book. I felt I could be the facilitator. I wanted to bring in whoever best tells the story. When I contacted John Updike, who I knew had a strong interest in cartoons, he asked to write on Thurber. Chris Ware was a big fan of Frank King and 'Gasoline Alley.' This is the beauty of the book - the connections I didn't see between these people and the subjects they might choose."

The event that catalyzed this project was the gift/purchase of the Art Wood Collection of Cartoon and Caricature for the Library of Congress. It led to both an exhibition and the book by the same name. Wood, who at one time dreamed of creating his own museum, ultimately decided his 36,000 items should end up in this national collection.

"I not only wanted to bring in the collection and the images," Katz explains of his plan for the book, "but people too. I didn't want this to be a rarefied situation. Some of those people have become my friends through the years - Pat Oliphant, for example, and Jules Feiffer."

Oliphant's masterful political cartoons are in the book, but there is also an entertaining little essay by him; it's a first-person narrative adapted by Katz from an interview with Oliphant on "Political Drawings: The British Tradition." Feiffer has been generous to the Library of Congress, and his close relationship with Katz had a lot to do with that; the images in the book are his vintage visual satires from the '50s and '60s.

"Lynn Johnston's essay even had some news in it," Katz adds. "She announced she was planning to end her strip ('For Better or for Worse.'). She talked about the joy of creating her strip and the sadness of ending it."

The book is so much fun to peruse that you may not even notice that a lot of forethought went into every image. Nor does Katz want you to notice.

"I was trying to apply rigorous connoisseurship, scholarship in a way that people who know nothing about

this subject, or everything, will appreciate. The ultimate goal is educational. I would hope to teach kids about the past so they can understand the future, and cartoons can play a role in this education."

Katz took degrees in history (a bachelor of arts at Middlebury College in Vermont) and art history (a masters from Tufts University in Medford, Mass.). He began working summers at the Boston Athenaeum, a private library in Boston, while he was still a student. There, he developed a love of archival materials, including original caricatures and drawings. And he saw how visual materials, like the extensive offerings about the Civil War in the Athenaeum's collection, could be just as vital to the understanding of history as writing about a period.

"My fundamental passion is for the original objects," Katz says.

But just having that passion isn't (and wasn't) enough, he emphasizes. The curator in a library has to have a guiding idea that helps him (or her) to choose objects.

"I didn't collect for now," he says. "I was trying to anticipate history. That was part of my training."

During his time at the Library of Congress, Katz was a prolific curator. He organized solo exhibitions for major political cartoonists, including Oliphant, Block and Ann Telnaes, as well as the theatrical caricaturist Al Hirschfeld.

The reasons for leaving the library were both personal and professional. He had a long list of book projects he yearned to do, and his family wanted to relocate to California. "It was a little scary, but it was also exciting once I realized I could do it."

His commitments still take him to Washington often. Katz consults for the Library of Congress on special projects and oversees the Herb Block Archive. He has book projects in the works from the collection "Baseball Americana," with no definite date for publication, and "Herblock's World" set for 2009. Also on tap: "Battle Lines," a book of eyewitness drawings of the Civil War drawn from many collections. He's started his own business, too: HK/Art Team Associates, a consulting firm devoted to helping libraries and others with collection care and development as well as with preservation and digitization.

Whatever the chosen project, it seems to be guided by the passion Katz has brought to "Cartoon America."

"This is an homage to cartoonists who draw on paper," he emphasizes. "We're losing them. These are the masters."

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