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From Past to My Present: The Art of Saint Louis

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From Past to My Present: The Art of Saint Louis

My dorm desk is covered in lots of little scraps. Mostly scrawled notes and to-do lists, the casual observer would remark on how messy it appears, and I dread the day my mother sees it. Nevertheless, there are plenty of details that betray that I am both an artist and art lover: torn bits of Canson cold-press paper, with its craggy textured surface, a reflective polaroid of the brutalist library at Fontbonne, satin brochures from the Pulitzer. It is fitting then that the books on the shelf above that mess are just as all over the place, unified only by my love for art and how I can relate it to my sense of self. The books I own and cherish have evolved from how-to art books and calligraphy manuals destined for the trash to a collection gathered equally encyclopedically and eclectically.

My book collection is a way for me to solidify and clarify my identity. I am a lifelong St. Louisan, but my parents and the rest of my family are not. My parents were born and raised in the Soviet Union, living a completely foreign experience to mine, until they came to the United States in search of a better life. During my early childhood, my mom would flip the brittle yellowed pages of Russian children's stories for my brother and I, and my dad's gloriously retro science texts that lined the high shelves of his home office were a constant source of visual fascination. His cyrillic edition of Tom Sawyer, which was my parents' primary knowledge of the entire State of Missouri for the longest time, is the only connection between where I grew up and their far off world. Books for my parents are a major lifeline to their pasts.

My own collecting helps me feel like a native, like I belong here in St. Louis, especially as an artist. I have a long time fondness for the Saint Louis Art Museum that began when I was little and continues as strong as ever now; it was where I was always bugging my family to take me, and while I never felt like running away like Claudia in *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs.*

Basil E. Frankweiler, I could certainly sympathize with her interest in staying at the Met forever. Chance finds at local thrift stores began a full on preoccupation with grabbing any text or exhibition catalogue that related to arts institutions in Saint Louis, however minimal the mention. *Masterpieces from the Berlin Museums*, an 1948 exhibition catalog that showed works rescued by the Monuments Men, contains exactly one reference to Saint Louis: on the title page, it is written that the travelling show came to the “City Art Museum of Saint Louis” after the end of the Second World War. Despite the tangential connection, the black and white reproductions of works by Franz Hals and Sandro Botticelli took on a new relevance because of my introductory art history lectures and allowed me to further my own personal research. The consequences of a single name have the ability to drive me further and further down a historical rabbit hole that on the surface does not seem to have much relevance. Like the trope of a hare brained conspiracy theorist who pins ideas on a large board, connected by string and hopes that will never be realized, I do the same with my texts (though with only slightly more legitimacy). It is hard to say why I spend my free time this way, why I live for these curiosities and happenstances, except that just as my parents’ books are a lifeline to them, these texts ingratiate me into a past that is now part of mine.

When I first read my book *Bingham’s Missouri*, with the signature of Governor Christopher Bond and one of George Caleb Bingham’s jolly archetypal characters gracing the cover, it made me feel more of a Missourian. In the mid 1970’s, the Mercantile Library had to sell a rare collection of Bingham drawings. The governor managed to raise the money from a public eager to help the legacy of Missouri’s famous son to buy the sketches for the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. This is why when SLAM exhibited Bingham’s works in 2014 many of them were listed as “Lent by the People of Missouri”.

Uncovering this detail, while a small one, has made me feel more connected to where I was born and raised; I have no recollection of anything else, but somehow I feel that even though I did nothing in regards to those works of art, I am part of that civic pride too.

While I prize the contents of my texts highly, a passion for design has led me to appreciate the look of a beautiful cover or a thoughtful approach to placing text within, which in turn has pushed me to expand to focus on the form of books. My fascination with artist's books is new and represents the next phase of my search for arts literature. Gwen Frostic's *To Those Who See* was an accidental discovery, found while searching for a book that I stupidly let slip away at a Goodwill Outlet (the catalogue was so rare to me and my lapse so unprecedented that I cringe even today). But the handmade papers and inclusions of the Michigan artist's poetry text made it well worth it to me, and holding it makes me feel like I am in the presence of an art object. In keeping with my new appreciation for what a book can be, that I call a zine by a fellow artist a book that fits along my others would be pushing the boundaries for a younger me. However my most modern score is a short and self published zine, written and illustrated by Elliot Wyatt, a fellow artist in the Sam Fox School. Despite the fact that is printed on computer paper and stapled together, it is another gem for me. The illustrations are wild and surreal in a way that I'd never really been exposed to before seeing their style, with a lot to unpack in terms of content. But there is clearly now a place for the contemporary among my old, brittle books that continues to fit my fascination with where I belong.

There is a special place in my heart for the required paperback classes from high school and my detective stories and Tintin comics, but it telling that out of all the books I could have taken with me to college, the ones that take pride of place on my desk are those I obsess over: my art book collection. The fruits of my research are invaluable, if only to myself, because if I

can know about what went on in my city in 1948 as well as what goes on around me, I am more comfortable calling myself an artist, and especially one from Saint Louis.

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