

The World Through Wooden Eyes

The Ideas Store

The John M. Blundall Collection had been at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow for 12 years before it closed its doors for the last time in November 2017, Three years after John's death. On the eve of Lyon & Turnbull's auction of items from the collection, John's longtime collaborator and friend, Stephen Foster talks to Nel Akroyd about his memories of John and his treasures.

John was born in England between the Two World Wars and was a young adult during the Cold War. How did those decades shape him?

There was very little about the Second World War that John remembered other than it provided him with a workshop when he was a little older in the form of an air raid shelter in the back garden. The Cold War had a bigger effect on him. By the time he was called up for National Service he had already met Sergei Obratsov, developed an interest in Russian art and theatre and met many performers from around the world. Now in the RAF he was being told by officers that the Russians were "very naughty people". It did not wash, when he knew that some of the most generous people he had met were Russian.

You'd worked alongside John since 1997 and much of your working life was by his side. How will you remember him?

I think what I will always remember is on one hand his generosity and belief in my ability as a creative artist and on the other his own skills as an artist. The draughtsmanship in his designs is second to none and I believe undervalued.

John some famous run-ins with other members of the puppetry community. Was he difficult to work with?

I have heard him described that way but it wasn't my experience. When I first met John I was completely happy to accept he knew more about puppets, theatre and the arts in general than I did, so had no issues having my work critiqued by him. He set himself very high standards and his own friends and mentors were some of the greatest in the field. He had huge respect for the audience and felt that some shows and organisations did not care about their audience. John also believed you could not develop without honest critique, and not everyone in the arts can accept criticism.



How did the collection start and what did it represent to him? Was puppetry an obsession?

The collection started with John picking up odd books he found interesting when he was just a boy. He was probably influenced by his friendship with Harry Whanslaw and Gerald Morice who were both great collectors of all manner of things. It was not an obsession, more of a passion. His interests were vast but he channelled it all into the puppet theatre. To John the collection represented the innovations and achievements of the hundreds of artists and performers that had preceded and influenced him.

Couldn't the collection be saved?

Sadly not. The collection is so big that any museum would have had to invest a significant amount of time and space to it and no one seemed to be willing or able to do that.

What has the process of breaking up the Collection involved? It must have been difficult for you.

The process has been very long and involved. The Lyon & Turnbull staff involved have spent more time preparing this auction than any other they can remember. They had to sort through hundreds of boxes to find and assess individual items before they could even begin choosing items for the auction.

What happened to the books in John's collection? I can't see any in the catalogue.

The book collection was sold as a single concern, as nearly 7000 books were not something the executors thought they could deal with or store individually.

Lyon & Turnbull are high-end auctioneers. How were they selected?

I believe that Glasgow Museums, who had stored and looked after John's collection, use Lyon & Turnbull when they need something valued. They were probably recommended to the executors by the Museum service.

What have you made of the auction environment? Will you be at the auction in person?

It is a different way of looking at things and it's been interesting learning how a large auction house prepares a sale. I think I have spent long enough helping with the auction that I do not need to be there.

Are there any stand-out items in this first auction and why?

There are so many incredible items in the sale. The most famous item is obviously Parker from Thunderbirds. It may not be a screen-used puppet but it has the unique distinction of being the only Parker carved from wood not modelled or cast from fibreglass or resin. There is a copy of "The Marionette" by E G Craig, owned by the man himself, and some fantastic old glass slides of 19th century harlequinade performers. There is just too much to try and sum up here.

John was made an Honorary Lifetime Member of UNIMA Internationale, the international puppetry organisation aligned to the UN. What role did the organisation play in his life?

UNIMA had a huge influence. It allowed him to see all the great puppet theatres perform and have regular communication with practitioners around the world. He valued UNIMA as a forum where people from all over the world could meet and put aside political and religious differences, something of vital importance during the Cold War especially.

Which other collections and puppeteers did John admire?

John visited so many museums and collections throughout his life that it is hard to say which ones made the biggest impact. Again there were many performers, directors and designers he had huge admiration for. People like Yang Feng from China and the Czech director Josef Krofta. The Polish designer Adam Kilian, whose designs John really loved, was a great friend.

Did any puppets “get away” from him?

I cannot think of anything specific that he wanted for the collection. He would have liked to have found a nice old Polichinelle or a design by Kilian.

What does the future hold for The World Through Wooden Eyes now that the collection has gone?

The World Through Wooden Eyes will continue to exist; the collection in the Mitchell Library was only part of what we did. It will continue to create puppets and masks for performances and develop new creative puppet theatre. Workshops for adults and children will still be created and run and, at some point, the website will be re-developed to reflect the changed nature of the company and act as an archive in an attempt to create some form of a virtual version of the collection.

What do you think John’s legacy to the world of puppetry will be?

John’s legacy is twofold. It is the vast amount of work he created and, more importantly, the people he trained who continue to pass on the skill, knowledge and experience he himself had developed and learned from those that came before him.

Interview: Nel Akroyd, 27th February 2018

Visit The World Through Wooden Eyes website for more information about John’s career.

<http://www.theworldthroughwoodeneyes.co.uk>

Go to the Lyon & Turnbull website for details of the auction in Edinburgh, 28th February 2018:

<https://www.lyonandturnbull.com/news-article/john-blundall-puppet-collection>

Follow the dedicated John M. Blundall Collection Auction facebook and twitter pages for auction updates.

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