My Own Private Library: A Peek Inside the Personal Library of a Librarian

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My home library is located on five darkly stained shelves wrapping around the corner of a room that I suppose normal, non-book-obsessed folk would probably use as their dining room. Having never felt an overwhelming urge to purchase a dining room set, this crucial oversight in acquiring standard household furniture nevertheless caused me and my husband several tragically painful head-bonking incidents when we first bought our house, perpetrated by a low-hanging chandelier lurking in the air like a sharp, leaden piñata. Wearying of the surprise cranial pummelings, we quickly divested ourselves of the offending chandelier and subsequently outfitted the dining room as our office and library. This room is now filled with mild-mannered light fixtures that I am pleased to report have all exhibited nonviolent dispositions towards the human head thus far.

I own an embarrassingly large quantity of books, partially because I worked for several years in my twenties as a bookseller, but mainly because I have always loved books and just can’t stop collecting them. My husband has also contributed books to our library – primarily titles in art, design, architecture, graphic novels, as well as antique family books. Having our combined book collection conveniently housed in the heart of our home makes it feel like I am never too far away from those beautiful and interesting friends of mine that just happen to be made of paper and don’t tend to make a lot of noise.

As much as it would satisfy my organizational tendencies to arrange our books in Library of Congress call number order, we own so many oversized books that this is physically impossible. My background is in studio art and art history, and my husband is a graphic designer, so we tend to collect a great deal of art and design books. Due to their substantive heft and proportions, these books must live on the two larger bottom shelves that are able to accommodate them. Here we gingerly place books that, if they ever happened to tumble off the edge, hold the potential for grave injury to unshod feet and small household pets, like Janson’s The History of Art and Hartt’s History of Italian Renaissance Art. I distinctly remember struggling under the considerable weight of these two massive tomes in my backpack during my days as an undergrad.

I hate to play favorites with my beloved books (and at this point, our other books should be advised to put their hands over their ears for just a minute), but these two bottom shelves hold some of our most exciting volumes, if you are disposed towards books showcasing eye candy. Monographs of my favorite artists – Camille Rose Garcia, Frida Kahlo, Mark Ryden, Charley Harper, and Albrecht Dürer, among many others – nestle companionably with my husband’s stable of favorites: Thomas Hart Benton, Alphonse Mucha, and James Jean. Following the individual artists are works that we have acquired on broader art
movements and genres we enjoy – Art Deco, Art Nouveau, 1950s and 60s art, commercial illustration, pulp art, Kodachrome photography, and kitsch paintings. Next to these stand our many books on mid-twentieth-century art and design, as well as collections of art from two of our favorite magazines, Hi Fructose and Juxtapoz.

Also on these shelves (HF, N-NX, and Z, if we’re speaking in the dulcet tones of LC) rest various artists’ manuals, painting and drawing instruction books, and anatomical drawing references, including classics by Gray, Bridgman, and Loomis. Included in the anatomy section is one of my all-time favorites, The Artist’s Complete Guide to Facial Expression, which details the various muscles of the face and how they convey human emotions. Books on graphic design, typography, layout, logos, design grids, advertising, iconography and symbols, and the use of color round out this section, including definitive titles by Paul Rand, Allen Hurlburt, and Steven Heller. Many of these books are ones that I recognized as familiar friends when I saw them on the shelves at my first librarian job at The Art Institute of Atlanta. Hey, guys! I remember thinking when I spotted them among the collection. Good to see you here!

Three volumes of Taschen’s All-American Ads from the 1940s, 50s, and 60s also reside in this section. This gorgeous series, now sadly out of print, contains spectacular reprints of twentieth-century advertisements from catalogs and periodicals.

Beside and above our beloved art and design collection resides a mishmash of genres, including mythology, fairy tales, children’s books, poetry, graphic novels, and hardbound collections of comic books. Included here is my prized half-collection of The Enchanted World series from Time-Life Books, which as a preteen I impassionedly begged my parents to purchase. Filled with world mythology and folklore and generously peppered with sumptuous original illustrations and historical paintings, these beautifully designed large-format books embody a sophisticated aesthetic belying the campy TV ads that hawked the series in the 1980s. A fan of mythology and folklore since early childhood, I would gleefully tear open the cardboard mailers cradling each monthly volume upon their arrival and inhale the stories and art in one sitting.

Next to this series sits the book that sparked my interest in mythology, a first edition of the Book of Greek Myths from 1962 by Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire. With its lovely orange dust jacket long gone due to countless readings over thirty years, this book still remains my most prized, due to its delicate lithographic illustrations and child-friendly yet compelling encapsulations of classic Greek myths. I like to buy new copies of this title to give to our friends with children, hoping that it will generate the same fascination with Greek myths that I experienced while repeatedly poring over it in my youth.

Novels fill the top two shelves of our collection, for which I am forever running out of room to house. I am beginning to suspect that our novels invite others of their ilk over in the dead of night to set up camp on our shelves, or perhaps I should just finally admit that I am constantly acquiring more books than we actually have space for. These cramped conditions persist despite my simple yet stringent personal collection policy for fiction that requires an unqualified and affirmative answer to the question “Will I want to read this book over and over again in the future?” If the answer is no, novels get donated after I’ve read them – often to thrift stores, because I like to contribute to the excitement that I encounter there while hunting bookish treasures on the cheap.

Some of my favorite authors in our crowded fiction section include George Saunders, Neil Gaiman, William Gibson, Barbara Kingsolver, Margaret Atwood, and Lorrie Moore. Because I love re-reading things that make me giggle out loud, books by David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs, Dave Barry, and

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Sloane Crosley are also within easy reach. Taking down one of these books to peruse for a quick laugh can instantly put me in a better mood if I’ve had a rough day.

Nonfiction books not on art or design are organized on our smaller wall of shelves, including etymology, language and grammar, anthropology, religion, sociology, self-help, and my textbooks from library school. Being crafty people, our substantive collection of books on fashion and sewing, gardening, entertaining, home decoration, furniture design, and architecture also make their home here to aid our inspiration. Illustrated works on pop culture and music, and pictorial collections of album cover designs, movie posters, and film concept art fill the larger bottom shelves. Neither of us can resist collecting mid-century books, especially those on crafts and decorating, but the 20 volumes of Mechanix Illustrated’s How-to-Do-It Encyclopedia from 1961, an exhaustive household and craft reference set, are too voluminous to fit in the main collection. Similarly, my collection of vintage cookbooks is forced to make its home out on the kitchen shelves. Although these cookbooks are dangerously close to the stove and refrigerator, I have not yet been tempted to whip up any of the technicolored monstrosities featured in 1962’s the Joys of Jell-O.

At times, it certainly seems that our collection of books threatens to burst at the seams and overrun the house completely, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. As a firm believer that for any potential problem or need, a book exists to address it, I love being surrounded by books – those perennially helpful problem solvers – in our home. However, my husband remains perhaps a bit more practically minded. Upon reading this essay, he simply looked at me with an arched eyebrow and remarked, “You should mention exactly who it was that installed those bookshelves.”

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