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

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

By Thomas W. Ganzevoort

As any book collector can tell you, looking at someone's personal library can be very revealing. Bibliophiles tend to be obsessive, building their collections around the subjects they love. Anyone looking at the roughly two hundred books in my own collection would certainly be able to guess a few things about me. First, I really love art, especially European modern art and American abstract expressionism. Second, I like pulp fiction, mystery writers, and true crime, particularly the work of Raymond Chandler and James Ellroy. Third, I like jazz music. And fourth, I like vintage Americana from the Depression era up to the late 1950s, especially diners and diner history.

My tastes were not always so specific. It took years for me to hone my interests down to a select few things, but then, time and experience tend to do that. In my case, there were two formative life experiences that served as catalysts to ignite my current obsessions and, not incidentally, make my library what it is today. One was art school. The other was working as a bookseller.

I've always known I wanted to be an artist, even before I knew what being an "artist" meant. I began drawing when I was about three years old, and my first obsession was born. Family members watching me work with my ever-present pencils, paper, crayons, and coloring books would inevitably remark, "Are you going

to be an artist when you grow up?" I would always nod: if it meant I could draw all the time, then that sounded good to me. It was about this time that my parents took me to the library to get my first library card. I remember my sense of astonishment and wonder at being able to borrow whatever books I wanted, look at them, and then go back for more. Thus began obsession number two.

By the time I reached art school, libraries and bookstores were my favorite haunts. Libraries were quiet places of retreat. Bookstores were places where I could find new favorites to add to my own growing collection. Art school meant, among other things, studying art history. While other students may have dreaded research, I loved it. I spent hours in the stacks of my

undergraduate library, mostly in the art section. They had a wonderful collection of monographs, biographies, and exhibit catalogs. I loved poring over books on the work of Pablo Picasso, Willem de Kooning, Paul Cezanne, Claude Monet, and many others.

Fast forward a few years. I graduated from art school. I painted and drew as much as I could—I still do, actually. I was lucky enough to land a job at my favorite local bookstore. As if that weren't good fortune enough, I was put in charge of the art section. I was like a kid let loose in a candy store.

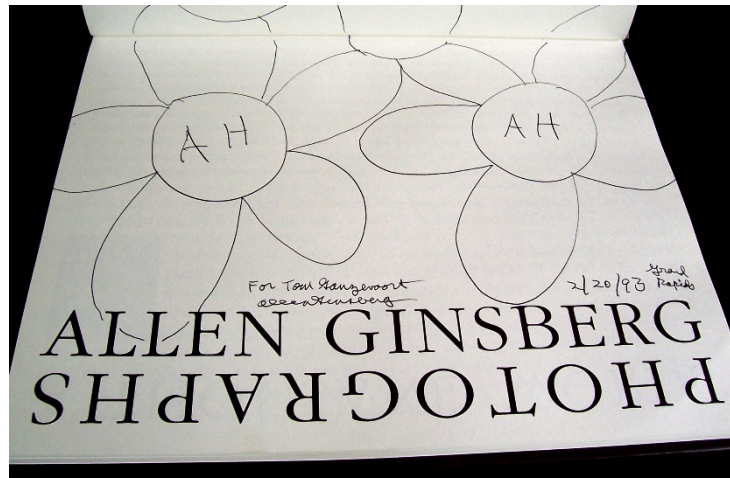


Bookstore work does not pay well. Fortunately, there are other compensations. Most of my co-workers were like me: creative types—writers, artists, musicians—who loved books and loved working with fellow book addicts. It was like living in an arts colony. Better yet, all of us received employee discounts. Best of all—and hardest to believe (the owner told us he was able to write it off his taxes every year)—every employee received a monthly thirty-dollar book credit. It was like winning the lottery. Consequently, my book collection, which had numbered around fifty volumes, eventually grew to be about five hundred. It took twelve years' worth of monthly book credits to get there, but eventually I had a collection of books on art, photography, film, and pop culture to rival that of a small arts college.

Over the years, moving such a large—and very heavy—collection proved to be a formidable task. Consequently, each move has seen my library dwindle in size, if not quality. I've sold off books here and there, but only the ones that, for whatever reason, I never looked at. My personal library is now pared down to the essentials, the ones I need around me. Books on modern art and artists still form the bulk of my collection. Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning are my two biggest influences; consequently, I own more books about them than any other artists. Other European modernists such as Henri Matisse, Alberto Giacometti, and Max Beckmann also hold pride of place, as do some of de Kooning's fellow abstract expressionists: Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Philip Guston.

My most treasured volume isn't about a visual artist, though; it is a book of photographs. When I was a bookseller, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg came to town to do a reading at the local Unitarian church. For my colleagues and me, Ginsberg's visit was like meeting literary history. Calls were made, and the poet agreed to appear for a signing at the bookstore. Weeks before, I had bought a copy of Twelvetrees Press's new release, *Photographs: Allen Ginsberg*. The night of the signing, I brought it with me, along with my copy of *Kaddish*. I waited nervously in line with everyone else.

When it was my turn, I handed over my books. He opened *Kaddish* to the title page, asked if he was signing for me, and then asked my name. "Tom Ganzevoort," I said. "Ah—Dutch," he said. He started to write, "To Tom Ganzevoort," which is the more common spelling. I had to interrupt him to say, "Actually, I, ah, spell it with a 'Z.'" He looked



bemused. "I see—very Dutch," he said, before correcting it and dating the inscription. Then he took *Photographs* and proceeded to draw large sunflowers on the title page before signing and dating it too. In the center of each sunflower, he wrote the word "AH" in capital letters, signifying the wonder and sense of delight expressed in his poem, "Sunflower Sutra." When I look at my books, I feel the same sense of wonder and delight in the words, ideas, and images contained therein.

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