

Cool/Collectibles

by Jon Waldman

Collectibles re-paints

For many collectors, finding a new memorabilia item at stores or in an auction is a pure thrill. For others, however, finding a new piece is an inspiration point.

These collectors take the items they have just purchased and re-work them into pieces that they would enjoy even more. These collectors, known as customizers or re-painters, can take a Roger Clemens Yankee piece and put him in a Boston Red Sox uniform, or convert a Mike Richter figure into Grant Fuhr.

For the people who do re-paints, their inspirations to do so stem from a desire to create something that they cannot purchase. In the case of Joe Ingrassia, a long time repainter who displays his work on his site, www.customsbyjomo.com, explains that his re-painting began when Todd McFarlane Productions released its first baseball series. The figures, at that time, were only licenced by the MLB Players Association, and therefore did not have the proper logos of the teams. Ingrassia, who had previously purchased fully licenced sports figures, was not satisfied with the piece.

"I was a Starting Lineup collector, (so) when I purchased my first McFarlane baseball figures, it was prior to McFarlane having the licence from the leagues to use the logo of the teams," he recalls. "As a long 'suffering' Cubs fan (and a plastic model/resin figure painter), I wanted to add the Cubs logo etc. to my Sosa piece."

"I repainted the figure, found the logo on a sports Web site, printed the decals on some decal film, and experimented a bit."

Once Ingrassia completed his initial work, he began to work on others. Soon, he and a fellow re-painter began to work together, offering other painters advice on how to create their pieces properly. "After I did that one - I did all the original baseball and hockey figures, and posted some pictures on the Spawn message boards. There I started to correspond with TW Thomas, and

people started posting questions, e-mailing him and me, asking for instructions and help. We put together a "step-by-step" guide, and I created a Web site to host the instructions, and pictures of stuff that he, I and others started to make."

This sharing of re-paints via the Web is one of the key elements in the customizing culture. On message boards across the Web, customizers post pictures from their latest creations. The response they get helps to perfect their pieces. Mark Weber, sports manager with McFarlane Toys and moderator of spawn.com's sports message board, says that the interaction between customizers is a great benefit for the artists. "It's honest feedback. When someone puts something up that's not quite right, they get told that," he says, adding that the negative responses are, "usually not too aggressive, because if it's another customizer, they understand the work that went into it, and if someone doesn't customize, they probably have no idea how to even begin the process."

"Even if something isn't totally well received, there's usually an amount of respect given in the post."

After a re-paint is finished, the work is not necessarily done. Creating one player often leads to further inspiration to create others. Some re-painters like Ingrassia go on to do more work, building extravagant scenes. "I think some of my best work involves trying to duplicate an actual scene, like this one from the Alabama/Miami championship game of George Teague and Lamar Johnson," he says.

Creating the scene for Ingrassia did not just mean taking a couple players and doing a re-paint. To create a completely original piece, such as retired players and hometown heroes, sometimes means using pieces from multiple players to give them as authentic a look as possible. This, as Ingrassia describes, was a large part of his Miami/Alabama diorama. "To duplicate this scene - parts of MANY different figures were used, and the figures that were used, were cut apart and repositioned at the correct angles (Johnson's shoulders, for example)."

Some of the top customizers have begun to sell their work, via their own Web sites or online auctions. These artists, such as Mike Kallenberg of Lancaster, Ohio, take a lot of pride in their work and enjoy being able to create something for collectors who may not be able to do it themselves. "I get the most enjoyment out of doing a figure of the person buying it," Kallenberg says. "Whether it is for a junior hockey player, NCAA player, professional athlete or just a fantasy piece, that figure is going to mean a great deal to that person and I consider it an honour to create their very own figure."

The underlying problem with this side of the hobby, however, is the legalities involved. Creating an item using copyrighted pieces and selling it is not permissible by law; but at the same time, companies such as McFarlane Toys are not looking to put an end to the popular hobby. "It's technically illegal to alter a figure or customize a figure, and then sell it for profit," Weber says. "To say that we're anti-customs or chasing down everybody who's out there doing it wouldn't be accurate. It's kind of a grey area of at what point is it considered someone's hobby in their spare time, versus at what point is it copyright infringement." □



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