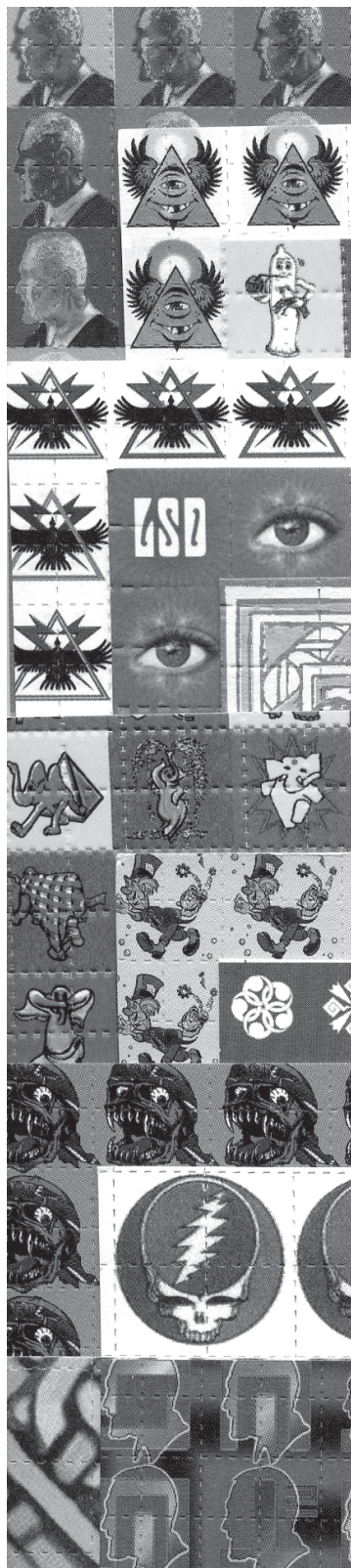


LSD Blotter Art

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MAPS has recently received nearly \$20,000 due to the sale of signed blotter art that was donated by Tom Lyttle and Jon Hanna. This story is about the origins and development of blotter as an art form.

THE EARLY DAYS

Early on in the underground trade of illegal LSD, it was distributed in pills or capsules, or sometimes dropped onto sugar cubes. Around 1970, LSD first began to appear on sheets of perforated blotter paper. This trend has continued, and even today, most street LSD is still distributed on perforated or unperforated blotter paper, often covered with logos or art, and sometimes sold under “brand names.” In the past, blotter art was printed fairly secretly, with underground producers perforating it using hand-cranked machines, feeding in a single sheet and cutting it in one direction at a time, before flipping the sheet 90 degrees to crank the completing set of perf lines. These days, the art is usually printed via the four-color separation process. One blotter art producer recently even went so far to print his design on a hemp-blend paper with soy-based edible inks. Perforations for blotter are nowadays primarily done by professionals in the print industry, quickly stamped out by the thousands via automated die-cutting machines.

As LSD entered our cultural consciousness, it affected a generation of artists. In the late 1960s, “fantastic realist” painters like Mati Klarwein and Robert Venosa were heavily influenced by LSD. The album cover art that they produced for Santana’s *Abraxas* reflected this new style. (This cover later appeared in miniature on LSD blotter art.) In San Francisco, underground comic and rock-and-roll poster artists like R. Crumb and Stanley Mouse soon saw their images appropriated for use on LSD art, which featured the likes of “Mr. Natural” and “Flying Eyeballs.” In more recent years, work from contemporary psychedelic artists has also appeared on blotter, such as “Carbon Jesus” (aka “Purple Jesus”) by Alex Grey, “Lucifer” by Reverend Samuel, and “Tribute to Preston Blair” by Frank Kozik.

Eventually, satirical blotter art started showing up; one sheet depicted the “FBI Emblems,” while another featured the mug of former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev—the popular “Gorby” acid. Every variety of pop art and ideology became fair game, as LSD blotter art spread like wild fire. LSD is a powerful spiritual experience for many, and for some this experience has political overtones. It also seems to enhance the creative process. Occult or religious symbols, moire patterns, and fractal designs have been exploited on blotter art. Examples include: “Chinese Dragons,” “Pentagrams,” “Tetragammatons,” “Eye of Horus,” “Knights of Malta Crests,” and so on. But one of the most consistently popular inspirations for blotter imagery has remained the lowly comic or animated character. Over the years, examples of appropriated cartoons have included Otto Messmer’s “Felix the Cat” and Walt Disney’s “Goofy” and “Mickey Mouse Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” as well as the more contemporary “Beavis and Butt-head,” “Bart Simpson,” and “South Park.”

FROM THE STREETS TO SOHO

The original collector and scene maker of blotter art is Mark McCloud, a San Francisco artist and former art professor. McCloud’s collection covered everything from the late 1970s up to today: several hundred types of LSD blotter art. In the early days this art could only be obtained with LSD already on it. He bought these sheets, matted and framed them, and hung them like fine art. Ironically, it was initially quite difficult for McCloud to collect the undipped (and hence legal) sheets of art, making him both an art collector and a potential outlaw due to his interest in this unique form of folk art. But soon McCloud began to produce his own images—

as well as make connections to other such artists in the community—and the bulk of his collection shifted to completely legal, undipped blotter. (The older pieces from his collection have been purposefully exposed to ultraviolet light, to destroy any LSD that might have been on them.) McCloud promoted his collection at galleries, and he won second place at the 1987 San Francisco County Fair for his “unusual but timely” art exhibition. National Public Radio gave McCloud exposure, and he won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and others.

The year 2000 saw McCloud busted by the federal government for “conspiracy to manufacture and distribute LSD.” In a highly-publicized trial, the DEA claimed that he was supplying chemists and wholesalers with perforated sheets of undipped blotter art, as 30,000 of these had been found in his possession. This was the second such arrest for McCloud—having been busted on similar charges in 1992—and in 2001 he obtained his second acquittal. It is estimated that McCloud spent over half a million dollars on his defense, and the prosecution spent *unknown* amounts of money on a year-long stake out of his home-based businesses.

McCloud, along with New England art and antiques dealer Adam Stanhope, has recently published a key piece of the prosecution’s evidence from his trial: a large binder filled with a collection of blotter obtained from busts across the United States spanning the ten years previous to his arrest, compared side-by-side to art that was seized from McCloud’s home. *The Bust Book* acts as a history of the art of blotter as compiled by the federal government, making it a unique offering in the world of art. It is only available in a limited edition of 250 numbered and autographed copies for \$500, or a special edition of 10 that also include an actual sample of the vintage (undipped) “Eye of Horus” blotter art—the oldest piece of blotter art still in existence—for \$1000. (See www.acidartz.com for more details on this book.)

SIGNATURE PIECES

Back when I was publishing my journal *Psychedelic Monographs and Essays*, a friend introduced me to Mark McCloud. With Mark’s encouragement, I started my own collection of undipped blotter art. After I had been collecting for a while, I had an idea. I approached psychedelic luminaries, like Albert Hofmann, Timothy Leary,

Ken Kesey, John Lilly, Robert Anton Wilson, Laura Huxley, Alexander Shulgin, and many others, and asked them to sign limited edition, hand-numbered blotter art prints. These then were matted and framed per museum display specs, and sold to galleries, art catalogs, nostalgia buffs, autograph stores, and 1960s memorabilia brokers. This was the beginning of what has been termed “vanity” blotter art. That is, blotter art which has been produced solely for art’s sake as a collectible, and which was never intended to be dipped with any drugs. Indeed, in rare cases, including a signature on these pieces made them

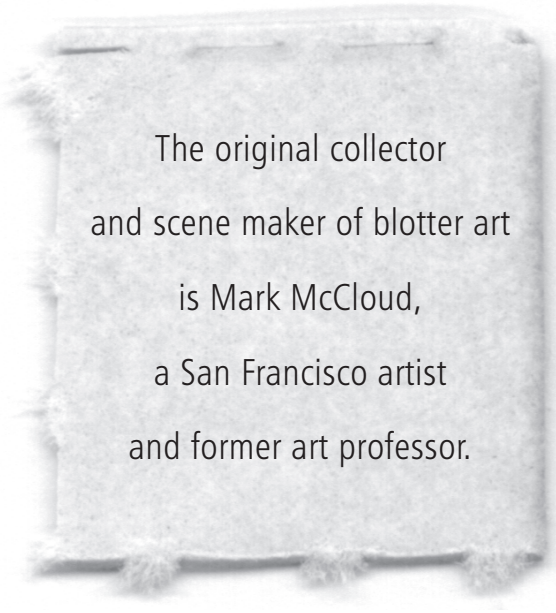
more valuable to collectors than if they had been dipped with LSD and sold on the streets. (Autographed vanity blotter art has been advertised for prices ranging from \$65 to \$4000!) Soon I was making decent money from the sale of my autographed blotter art, and in a few years was actually able to quit my job working as a chef, which I had done for 25 years. I spent more time at home, pursuing my true loves of art, writing, and research.

One of the first projects I collaborated on with Mark McCloud and Robert Demarest was getting Timothy Leary to sign some of our undipped blotter art. As the figurehead for the LSD movement, Leary

was even more famous than the man who discovered LSD himself, Albert Hofmann. Through Leary’s archivist Michael Horowitz (who I was doing book business with), I contacted Tim and was pleased to hear that he agreed wholeheartedly with my idea of creating signed blotter. The first sheets he signed were called “Roses,” featuring art produced by Stanley Mouse and Anton Kelley, well known to Grateful Dead fans. All 250 of the “Roses” sold out in less than a month!

We then contacted Albert Hofmann in Switzerland, and in 1994 he signed about 15 “Knights of Malta Shields” blotter art sheets. We sent a few of these “Shields” sheets to Tim Leary, and he included his signature alongside Albert Hofmann’s—a powerful artistic statement to be sure. [Editors note: *Those pieces with autographs from both Leary and Hofmann have sold for the highest prices to motivated collectors.*]

The blotter that I’ve produced has appeared in art catalogs such as ArtRock, Key-Z Productions, and Vroom. Through third-party brokers, my blotter appears all over the world, in rare book catalogs like Flashback Books and Red Snapper. The major auction houses Christie’s and Harrods UK have even taken an interest, and my



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Swiss artist H.R. Giger, famous for his work on the *Alien* movies, signs blotter art for Thomas Lyttle.

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autographed blotter designs continue to increase in worth and collectibility. I’ve even sold blotter art to police departments, drug counselors, DEA officials, and universities. It’s somewhat surreal to see law enforcement agents buy my blotter art for display in their offices.

Timothy Leary signed many sheets of blotter; by doing so he helped to raise LSD’s image into the world of fine art. The very week of his death, Leary was signing blotter art sheets for myself and others—Ram Dass was even sitting next to him during one such signing. More recently I contracted with porn star/director/sex educator Annie Sprinkle, PhD, to do a limited edition of “tit prints:” her breasts were dipped in paints and pressed onto blotter art sheets, which were then autographed. A 2002 project included a new blotter image, this time in collaboration with digital art guru Laurence Gartel, featuring his cybernetic *Fetish* imagery.

Signed and unsigned “vanity” blotter art is now available from web sites such as lsdblotterart.com, blotterart.co.uk, tripatourium.com, and my own

thomlyttle.com, as well as half-a-dozen other sites. E-Bay regularly holds 50 to 75 “live” auctions where legitimate dealers and those interested in collecting converge. Art galleries around the world, such as Luna Star Café (Miami), the Fuse (NYC), and Galerie Macabre (Fort Lauderdale) regularly showcase blotter art. Blotter art collecting has gotten so popular that counterfeiting occasionally occurs. For example, images from Mark McCloud’s original underground collection, such as “Red Lightning Bolts” and “Japanese Crests,” have been unethically reprinted. H.R. Giger’s “Illuminatus I,” a signed and numbered limited edition blotter art that was originally produced by myself in cooperation with Giger and his agent Leslie Barany, has been counterfeited; fakes of poor quality were sold at Phish and Other Ones concerts, as well as being hocked on E-Bay. Another potentially questionable approach taken by many underground blotter art producers is the appropriation of images from famous contemporary artists, such as Alex Grey, without paying royalties. Underground blotter producers may justify borrowing the imagery that appears on their work, due to a concern that they don’t want to implicate the artist by directly involving him or her in the process. And, they themselves quite reasonably wish to remain anonymous. Producers of vanity blotter have a harder time defending such an approach, now that this form of folk art is an above-ground cottage industry.

Aside from Mark McCloud’s two busts, the legal issues surrounding blotter art have mostly been minimal. I recently went to British Columbia carrying about 50 sheets of signed and unsigned blotter art, and I was stopped by Customs. They immediately knew what it was (or what it was *supposed* to be). After a lecture that lasted about an hour—one of my funniest—a crowd of Customs officials were drawn into the conversation. They eventually recognized that this *was* only art, albeit controversial and creative. They seemed amused enough, but at no time did they make any tests or remove anything from my collection for review. I walked right into B.C., Canada with my perforated sheets of blotter art, selling to several collectors there, with a great new story to boot.

Finally, blotter art has come “full circle” in recent years, acting as a fantastic support vehicle for the psychedelic community. In 2003, Dr. Albert Hofmann signed blotter art designed by visionary artist Stevee Postman (see the inside back cover of this *Bulletin*)—a piece conceived of by Jon Hanna to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the discovery of LSD’s effects and to act as a fund-raiser for MAPS and Erowid. [*Editor’s note: In fact, this article was edited on a computer purchased with funds raised from Hanna’s blotter art donation.*] MAPS has recently obtained nearly \$20,000 due to the sale of blotter art. In this way, blotter art not only has raised LSD to a culturally valued art form, it has also contributed back to the community that generated it. •