

**Randy Siegel Art Collection**  
***When the Walls Speak***

If the walls could speak, they would have told you my secrets. My collection gave voice to what I could not at the time. A collection mirrors the collector, and my collection is a psychological study of self-awareness and self-acceptance.

I collect folk art, flea market portraiture, as well as my own art. The collection includes paintings, sculpture, furniture, ceramics, and books and resides in three locations: our homes in Asheville, North Carolina, Lake Toxaway, North Carolina, and Saint Simons Island, Georgia.

I've been collecting folk art for more than forty-five years. I began collecting in the 1980s when I was in my early twenties. I was attracted to folk art's raw, unabashed creativity and the artists' disregard for others' expectations and approval. As a collector I became obsessed, and over the next twenty years amassed close to three hundred works with a focus on Southern African American pieces.

My collection was featured in *Esquire*, *Good Life*, *Folk Art*, *Art Papers*, *Southern Homes* and other publications. Pieces from the collection were exhibited in The Corcoran's "Black Folk Art Show" in 1982, The New Orleans Museum of Art's "Passionate Visions of the American South" in 1993, The High Museum of Art in Atlanta's "Local Heroes: Painting and Sculpture by Sam Doyle" in 2000, and numerous other museums, shows, catalogs, and books.

In the early 2000s I auctioned off a significant part of my collection in a mute attempt to simplify my life. The walls didn't stay empty long. Soon after I began collecting flea market portraits, which I affectionately called my "Lost Souls Collection." During dinner parties I would invite guests to tour the collection, pick a portrait, and tell a story about the subject. In almost every case the stories reflected their own. When the "Lost Souls Collection" grew to nearly one hundred pieces, I donated it to a church, keeping my favorite pieces.

In addition to folk art and portraiture, my collection includes my own art. After receiving some recognition for my pencil drawings in the last two years of high school, I enrolled in the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia in 1973. I lasted only a quarter before transferring to the business school to pursue a degree in marketing. It would be another twenty

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### ***When the Walls Speak—Add One***

years before I'd return to creating art.

Whether folk art, flea market portraiture, or my own work, I'm attracted to art that exposes and expresses the psyche. People collect art for many reasons, including financial gain, social status, creative community, and creating a legacy. While I can relate to all of these, for me collecting art is primarily a journey of self-awareness and self-expression. Allow me to elaborate beginning with self-awareness.

#### Art and Self-Awareness

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that the shadow represents those aspects of ourselves that we deem unworthy and relegate to the shadow of our unconscious. Three aspects of my shadow-self show up in my collection. Each begins with a "S":

1. Separation
2. Secrets
3. Spirituality

The bulk of my collection is folk or outsider art. I now understand that one of the things that attracted me to this genre was that, like the artists, I felt like an outsider.

Some memories are hard to face and growing up in the South in the 1950s was one of them. Taunts of "Not good enough," "Only sissies cry," and "Be a man," still ring in my ears. Things were different back then; being gay was not as acceptable as it is now. I grew up thinking no one would love me if they knew I were gay. To fit in, I was the altar boy, Eagle Scout and struggling student. I was positive, upbeat and above reproach. Slipping into the armor of perfection, I strove to meet every one of my parent's and society's criteria for success. I learned, as many gay men and women learn as children, it was not safe to be who I was. I

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### ***When the Walls Speak—Add Two***

masked my true self to conform to society's norms. As a child, my bedroom closet was my

secret sanctuary, a temple of safety. There, I retreated into a fantasy world—my imagination the only defense against the powerlessness I felt. Dressing up in flowing red robes, crowns and crosses, I became a man of authority, power, and control. I was lord over my destiny.

Flying through the house with a red robe tied around my neck, I was Superman. All my superpowers I would have gladly traded for the power to create a world in which my personhood could thrive.

Before my fortieth birthday, I said, “Enough!” I came out, divorced, left my job and moved from Atlanta to Asheville. Slowly dropping the masks, I began to shed layer after layer of the heroic image like a snake that sheds its skin.

During that time, I commissioned artist Leslie Staub to paint my portrait. I didn’t want her to simply paint my portrait; I wanted her to document this pivotal time in my life. And I wanted to be a partner in the creative process.

Over the next few months I sent her weekly mailings. Beginning with my public persona, I mailed press clippings, photos, my resume and several professional articles I had written. A month later I began to expose my more private side with pages from my journal, poetry and a copy of my divorce decree.

We finally met in person at her home in New Orleans in the fall of 1996. Our meeting was more like a reunion than an introduction. Three months later the portrait was finished. Shrine-like, its rich paint and jeweled frame evoked the sacred. Those who know me say that while the likeness wasn’t exact, the artist captured my soul.

I am dressed in a black turtleneck shirt that resembles a clerical collar. I hold an old press photograph representing my public persona. As I rip the photograph, a flame rises from the tear. A banner above my head reads “Onward.”

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### ***When the Walls Speak—Add Three***

The image did not come easily to the artist. “I had just sanded your portrait back to the wood. It wasn’t working,” Staub said. “I’d been thinking your old press photo was your nemesis.

Then, it hit me: that black and white photo was not your nemesis, but your dearest friend. It died so that you could live.”

She captured my experience. Death birthed life, and life sparked light. In the light I was free to examine my values, focus on that which truly matters, and begin living a more authentic life. Authenticity is one of the main reasons I’m attracted to folk art. What separates many of these artists from the mainstream is that they aren’t afraid to expose their most authentic selves.

The Lost Souls Collection also speaks directly to separation. I am curious how these portraits became estranged from their subjects and their families to land in a shabby flea market or upscale art gallery.

One of the themes I’ve explored in my own art is separation. In a piece entitled “Hanging It Up.” I composed a facial mask with old press clippings from my career. Covered in wax, the mask is reminiscent of a death mask. Hanging below the mask is a plastic garment bag holding one of my old dress shirts. For me the piece is a celebration of hanging up my old persona, integrating parts of my shadow, and finding the courage to share my authentic self with others.

The second shadow aspect of the collection is secrets, and the greatest of my secrets was my sexuality. In addition to the more overt sexual pieces in my collection, there’s an old portrait of a young man in a white t-shirt holding a paint brush. It’s one of the oldest pieces in my collection. It was reportedly found in an attic in Atlanta’s Ansley Park. Owning and displaying this painting was my secret way of naming and claiming my homosexuality. It was a way of bookmarking my authentic self until I had the courage to come out.

The final aspect of shadow-self seen in my collection is spirituality. Whether folk art, the Lost Souls, or my art, you’ll find a large number of crosses and portraits of Jesus. In our Saint

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### ***When the Walls Speak—Add Four***

Simons Island, Georgia, home a 1940s life-size carving of Jesus overlooks the living room, and in Asheville an antique Grecien tray holds a large collection of small crosses collected on our travels. I’ve always considered myself a spiritual person and at one point in my life considered going into the ministry. Even though faith has been an important part of my life, it’s only in my

third act of life that I've recognized it is the most important thing in my life. Many of the folk artists in the collection share my strong commitment to faith.

My collection held space for my authentic self until I was able to reclaim it. Living with the pieces in my collection helped me know, integrate, and eventually share hidden aspects of myself.

### Art and Self-Expression

I've found collecting, curating, and actually displaying the pieces in my collection are a wonderful means for self-expression. I invite guests not only to look at the individual pieces in the collection, but also at how they are displayed. This is what makes viewing a collection in the home of the collector so special. Each piece dialogues with that which surrounds it. Pay attention and one can almost hear the conversation between the art, furniture, accessories, and architecture.

Collecting art also gave me permission to explore my own creativity. Since taking up painting, I've learned that it's not unusual for collectors to become artists, and of course many artists also collect art. I primarily use acrylics, alcohol ink, and mixed media. My work ranges from abstract to primitive to portraiture. I've also dabbled in photography, ceramics, and sculpture. All of my art is heavily influenced by my collection of folk art and portraiture, as well as the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and, of course, spirituality.

In conclusion a collection mirrors its collector. Looking into the mirror of my collection, I now like what I see. In my late-sixties I'm in a good place—a place where I can let my collection go.

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### ***When the Walls Speak—Add Five***

### Art as an Exercise in Non-Attachment

An art collector builds a collection, enjoys it for a time, and then lets it go. Over the years, I've seen works that were once in my collection in an exhibition, coffee table book, or another collection. It's always a poignant reminder that we never really own a work of art; we are only its temporary steward.

Perhaps amassing an art collection is like Tibetan mandala sand painting where monks painstakingly create elaborate paintings using colored grains of sand. Once the masterpieces are completed, they destroy them as a metaphor for the impermanence of life.

Collecting art can be an exercise in non-attachment; it's an opportunity to allow things to flow through our lives. I am grateful for the time I've spent with the collection, and now it's time to release it so that it can serve others.

Over time, I will donate my collection to the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Georgia, and my walls will become silent. I will relish the silence knowing that in some small way this collection will inspire others—as it has inspired me—to explore and express their most authentic selves so that they may stand in their power and become the full expression of all they are.

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1925 Words

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