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Where Beauty Collides With Creepy

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

Here is a novel proposition: [Henry Darger](#) (1892-1973), the self-taught Chicago recluse who painted big, lurid watercolors of bands of little girls violently persecuted by adult male soldiers, was an art collector. That is what “The Private Collection of Henry Darger,” a revelatory exhibition at the [American Folk Art Museum](#), is supposed to show.

Organized by Brooke Davis Anderson, director and curator of the museum’s contemporary department, it presents about 40 of the almost 100 collages and drawings that Darger hung, tacked up or pasted on the walls of his one-bedroom apartment. These, Ms. Anderson asserts, constituted an art collection, which means Darger was an art collector.

But this is misleading. Darger collected lots of stuff and displayed scores of pictures in his cluttered apartment, but there is nothing in this exhibition to suggest that he acquired objects he considered independent artworks. It appears, rather, that everything he acquired — including news photographs, magazine illustrations, coloring books and evangelical Christian publications — was grist for his creative mill. Busily systematic, he filed many images in labeled folders to use as references for his watercolors. So it is hard to see what is gained by calling Darger an art collector; hanging up pieces of their own work and other items of visual interest on their studio walls is just what artists do.

What is truly remarkable is the revelation of a heretofore little-known aspect of Darger’s production. Focused mainly on images of young girls, and to a lesser extent Jesus and Mary, his collages are murky, mysterious, creepy and eerily beautiful. Cut and pasted without fuss, they have a pitch-perfect sense of design, but they are not narratives, and there is hardly any graphic violence in them. Compared to the novelistic watercolors, they are lyric poems — windows into the soul of the artist.

Some are single images glued to pieces of cardboard: from a coloring book, a cartoon girl watering flowers in a window box; a [Norman Rockwell](#)-like color picture of a beaming cutie rolling out pie dough. In many works he added borders made from Christmas Seals (the kind resembling postage stamps). He thus framed an illustration of a bearded, bare-chested Jesus, armed with a sword and gazing heavenward. (The impoverished Darger was a devout Roman Catholic. He also loved children so much that he applied to adopt one, which is something to think about. He was rejected.)

More intriguing are the collages of multiple images. Their seemingly obsessive concentration of little girls evokes another kind of collector — the madman who abducted living female specimens in [John Fowles](#)’s novel “The Collector.” One unsettling scrapbooklike panel bearing multiple images of Vietnamese orphans also includes, oddly, a newspaper photograph of [Joe Namath](#). Other than a coloring-book picture of a tumbling female skier — another single-image piece — there is nothing else in the show to suggest an interest in sports and certainly not in male athletic heroes.

Darger was, it seems, a natural-born Cubist. It would be interesting to know if he was aware of collages by [Picasso](#), Braque and other high Modernists. Like the Cubist works of those artists and unlike his vividly hued watercolors, Darger’s collages tend to use a gray and brown palette. That, in addition to their aged and weathered appearance, gives them a romantic aura that calls to mind the distressed photographs of Mike and Doug Starn. Also similar are the fuzzy, surreptitiously taken pictures of young women translated into battered prints by the eccentric Czech photographer Miroslav Tichy, especially in how they look and what they suggest about the erotically yearning mind of the artist. [Joseph Cornell](#), who also was preoccupied with pretty girls, is a kindred spirit too. With his collages, Darger was, albeit inadvertently, closer to the mainstream of modern art than he was in his visionary watercolors.

Ms. Anderson observes in an interview in this month's Art in America magazine that artists like Darger could have gotten from magazine ads, billboards and commercial packaging the idea of jamming together disparate but related images. That is why she favors terms like "trickle-down modernism" and "vernacular modernist" over "outsider," which can construe self-taught artists as more isolated from modern life than they really are. That seems sensible. Nevertheless, in Darger's case, you feel that you are dealing with an extremely atypical psychic constitution.

As with the more fantastic watercolors, enormous mental tensions animate the collages: not only between male and female, but also between adult and child, purity and prurience, and mercy and sadism. Such contradictions are not foreign to the experience of more socially adjusted folks. But in Darger's art they come to the surface with unabashed immediacy and uncanny emotional intensity. However impressive his works may be aesthetically — he was about as consummate an artist as ever there was — the thrill would be less if we didn't sense in them a mind desperately struggling to keep itself intact.

One of the more haunting collages has photographs of two boys juxtaposed with the twice-repeated image of an older man's craggy and stern yet kindly visage. It might be a fantasy of the father he never knew by an orphan who himself imaginatively fathered countless children in epic tales of Oedipal anxiety.

"The Private Collection of Henry Darger" continues through Sept. 19 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.