



Obscurity is the MOTHER of Collection

Any collector who is worth his weight in colored cardboard squares either owns or at least has heard of all of the more popular non-sport sets. These include sets such as *Mars Attacks*, *Star Wars*, *Horrors of War*, *Wacky Packs*, and a myriad of others. Also, many of the newer sets that are based on movies, comic books, and other popular media are big sellers, attracting a large flock of collectors as well. In fact, just about any card set in circulation can be seen in the vinyl sheets of three-ring binders everywhere. However, not all sets have seen the bright, lucrative light of popularity. Somewhere, in the darkest recesses of the attics and closets of the die-hardest of the die-hard collectors are sets that few people other than the manufacturers themselves know about. These ultra-obscure cards are not only largely unknown and generally unavailable, but they are also based on some of the most

fascinating, unlikely subjects. Three such sets we have recently come across deal with subjects that are way off the beaten path: Russian kings, famous Rabbis, and French accordion players. These are actual collectable non-sport cards, and they not only provide an educational experience, but they also represent the epitome of hard-to-find cards.

Crumb's On The Accordion

The accordion is an instrument that has generally declined in popularity since its heyday of the 1920s and 1930s. Lately, it can only be heard on the stereo playing in the foyer of Olive Garden restaurants. Accordion players have all but become extinct, with virtually no famous players of this once-popular instrument. In the set *Les As Du Mussette*, by R. Crumb, tribute is paid to the masters of the accordion from days long since past.

by Elliott Mertes

Crumb is well-known for his sixties 'n' hippies style of comic art, having produced such underground cultural icons like *Zap* and *Home Grown Funnies* comix, and such unforgettable characters as Fritz the Cat (the star of the first "pornographic" comic), and Mr. Natural. Aside from drawing whacked-out hippies and women with exaggerated figures, Crumb had a passion for the jazz and blues styles of the 1920s and 1930s.

He conceived and penned a set of cards for the great blues players from those decades, but elected not to do the jazz set on American players. Instead, he based the jazz set on famous French accordionists from that period, whom he felt pioneered jazz music, especially in France. There are 36 cards in the set, published by Oog & Blik of Amsterdam, with each card portraying a Crumb drawing taken from a photograph. On the back of every card is a brief synopsis of the accordionist's life and career. Most of the descriptions contain major highlights from the artist's live performances as well as studio recordings, but some contain only sketchy details due to the accordion player's obscure history. The set is in full color, their stories are interesting and informative, and R. Crumb's name graces another collectable undertaking. All in all, *Les As Du Mussette* is a set worth looking into, if you can get hold of one!

Hey, Comrade, kards only five kopecs!

The Cold War is long over. The Space Race ended with the joint collaboration of Russia with the United States on a space station. The former Soviet State is a mere shadow of its former self. What to do with all that leftover Russian stuff taking up space in the Kremlin basement? Sell them to rich, sentimental American capitalists! Soviet-produced items are just starting to be incorporated into the national purchasing mentality. This is made apparent by the emergence of the *Sovietski Collection*, a catalog which contains various assorted trinkets and treasures from the former Soviet Union. The *Chicago Tribune* ran an article on the catalog in a recent Sunday issue, signifying that it is indeed acceptable to possess a piece of Russian

history.

One byproduct of this new collectibles market is a set of cards entitled *The History of the Russian Throne in Pictures*. The cards present a dignified, aristocratic view of Russian nobility throughout its history. Beginning with a crude sketch of Ivan the III from the 15th century, and ending with a somber portrait of Nicholas II, this set chronologically covers more than 500 years of the Russian throne. The set contains 26 full color cards. Included with the set is a list which has information on the original prints such as who painted it, when it was painted, what kind of materials were used, etc. On the back of the list is a genealogical tree of the monarchs for easy reference. The backs of the cards contain a bio about the ruler, including his or her name, years ruled, and the title they usually went by. Also, a brief summary of the monarch's reign, and some little-known trivia are given. Beautifully designed, these cards from Raduga Publishers reveal the grace and elegance of the leaders of the largest country in the world, and bring the once-great majesty of the Tsars into any card collection.

I'll trade my Rav Meir Shapiro for your Rav Moshe Feinstein

The third and final card set to be reviewed here is, without a doubt, one of the most difficult to come by, as only several hundred sets have ever been published. These gems are a once-in-a-lifetime find, and the vast majority of card collectors will most likely never see an actual set for themselves. The cards are called *Rabbi Personalities*, and were produced in 1990 by Torah Personalities, Inc., (3407 Taney Road, Baltimore MD, 21215), a nonprofit organization. Originally created to be used as rewards for orthodox Jewish schoolchildren, some of these cards have managed to find their way into the hands of collectors, who prize them for their rarity.

On the front of each card is a full-color portrait of a famous *Rosh Yeshiva*, or the head of a university or school. Some of the rabbis pictured are still teaching today, but some of them are deceased. All of them, though, were actively teaching between the 1960s

and the present day. So, these are figures that Jewish children either may have had as a teacher, or know of.

According to Arthur Shugarman, of Torah Personalities, Inc., the main motivation behind producing these cards was to expose the children to contemporary leaders that they might not have known previously. In addition, these cards have helped to bridge the gaps between the different Jewish factions by exposing children to the different facets of their culture, "to rise above all those lines and sects," as Mr. Shugarman explained.

Released during a period when images and songs of gratuitous sex and violence are rampant, these cards could be construed as an antidote to the ills brought about by the mass media. Focusing on the rabbis as heroes in a time when heroes are difficult to find, these cards provide not only an educational form of entertainment, but role models for young people. The overall effect of the cards seems to be rather profound, especially since most cards today are produced either to cash in on a hot property or to exploit some aspect of American culture.

There are 36 cards in this set, which is actually the third in a series of five. In all, 216 different cards have been produced. Each oversized 4" x 6" photograph card is, coincidentally, of the same dimensions used by manufacturers for the new "photo card" format. The back of each card has the rabbi's name, title, where he teaches (or taught), and birth place, both in English and in Hebrew.

Mr. Shugarman stated there will also be a new set released sometime in the near future, though it is still under construction. Don't hold your breath waiting for this new set to hit the market, though. Like the previous five, Torah Personalities, Inc. plans on producing a very limited number of sets.

So, if you ever come across the opportunity to obtain one of these obscure card sets, make sure to secure them without hesitation. Due to their rarity, their value will remain optimistic. Plus, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you possess an item that has not been processed, packaged, and mass-produced like so many other sets. □