Risk Your Opinions

My overwhelming view has always been that books, fundamentally, are carriers of knowledge and that so many of us become "mad" about possessing them by virtue of the wisdom, insight, comfort, and wonder they bring to our lives. But books are also extraordinarily resilient objects capable of performing many worthwhile functions, not least among them the magical way they can become objects of beauty and artistic expression in and of themselves.

I was reminded of this reality during a recent visit to the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Collection at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), in Boca Raton, a gathering of twelve thousand books, artifacts, and pieces of ephemera for which text is an almost incidental consideration. Even Arthur Jaffe, the prime mover of this diverse gathering, admits that what is seen in a collection like this takes precedence over what is read.

"It is a visual collection," Jaffe told me cheerfully during a walking tour of his pride and joy, assembled so lovingly over the past half-century, which remains very much a growing entity that he oversees as a curator and a frequent contributor. He also teaches courses that use the books as teaching tools. "There are words and text, but they are secondary to the aesthetics. Think of this primarily as a book-arts collection—fine bindings, handmade papers, unique artist's books, exquisite typography, book sculptures, and the like. Here, the aesthetic trumps the content. What you see around you are books that are artworks, and we begin to appreciate them on that level."

Jaffe stressed several times during our talk that he likes to think of these pieces as a "happy collection," or something I like to think of as a "feel-good collection," not unlike the wonderful assortment of Christmas books assembled by the late Jock Elliott, who I profiled in my book Among the Gently Mad. (A major selection of Elliott's books sold at Christie's this past December for just under $500,000.)

Some of the qualities that make the collection "happy" are immediately evident, even to the most cynical of observers. There are books made out of wood, fabric, metal, glass, string, and even potato sacking; there are accordion books that unfold, books with three covers known as dos-à-dos (back-to-back) books; there are upside-down books and tête-à-tête books that allow people to look at the same volume while facing each other. There are altered books where an artist has made significant changes to the structure of an earlier book, and tunnel books that lie flat until opened, revealing tiny figures inside. There is a book made out of mud by the late conceptual artist John Cage, and there are dozens of pop-up—or movable—books created by paper engineers, such as Robert Sabuda, who I profiled in a column here last year (see FBC C19), as well as a generous selection of miniature books.

Particularly striking is Working Philosophy, Volume I, a large, almost impressionistic sculpture of a book shaped from handmade paper by the Chicago artist Melissa Jay Craig. Another sculpture, Check Book, by the Florida artist Barbara Brandt, is a clever construction in the form of a chess table, complete with pieces, each one of them a book bearing calligraphic text.

Another Florida artist, Marianne Haycook, was inspired by a fourteenth-century Persian tapestry to fashion a book with acrylic and oil paint on handmade paper that is decorated with peacock feathers. She called it, aptly enough, The Peacock's Tail. A truly striking "printed book" called The Brooklyn Bridge: A Love Song, by the estimable West Coast book artist Don Glaister, features five paintings of the venerable East River span seen from different angles, each done on sanded aluminum sheets and attached to a paper hinge, with a quarter-leather binding made of Nigerian goatskin. The longest book in the collection folds out to thirty-three feet. The largest stands seven feet tall. The thinnest, barely two inches in height, fits comfortably in the palm of a hand. What is to all intents and purposes a gum-ball machine is Book for a Buck, a device designed and built by FAU staffer Nancine Thompson that dispenses—in exchange for four quarters—a tiny book enclosed in a plastic case.

But well beyond the unusual texture of the objects are their functionality as an archive at the university and the role they have played in helping a growing institution achieve credibility as a center of research. Presented to FAU in 1998, the collection is housed in its own wing on the third floor of the S. E. Wimberly Library, with a permanent exhibition of some 250 objects that attracts hundreds of visitors each year. Displays change often, and special presentations are mounted frequently. On the instructional level, various workshops are offered to the general public, and book-arts courses for students enrolled in the university make regular use of the materials.
Jaffe, 86, said he began by acquiring woodcut engravings in the years following the Second World War as a hobby undertaken for pure pleasure. “Every book in the collection has something uniquely memorable about it,” Jaffe told me. “I never thought of myself as a collector in the conventional sense, and I still don’t. A collector means that you have a particular goal, that you have a focus. I saw things that I liked that I bought and enjoyed. I know what I like when I see it, and I buy books, basically, to look at them. I don’t particularly covet old books, either. I like to support the work of living artists and regional artists. So is it eclectic? Eccentric? Idiosyncratic? Yes, yes, and yes.”

A native of Butler, a small city in western Pennsylvania, Jaffe moved to Florida in 1978 after spending a successful career as a partner in a chain of family department stores and began a new life as a professional fund-raiser for numerous charitable enterprises. As residents of Boca Raton, he and his late wife, Mata—whom he credits with bringing “a lot of color and life” to the collection—looked to the nearby university as a possible home for their collection. “There were a number of institutions that made overtures,” Jaffe said, “but FAU was a fairly new school that opened its doors in 1962 and was growing quickly. They needed special collections for their research programs, and we were pleased to work with them.”

William Miller, director of the libraries at FAU, told me that part of the reason Jaffe came to FAU was the assurance that his collection would become a centerpiece of the library. “We were very familiar with his collection and very taken with it,” Miller said. “As a new library, we did not have any significantly large special collections.” When Jaffe suggested donating his treasures, “we jumped at the chance. He felt that his collection would have been given short shrift in a larger institution. Here, it is a featured signature of our library. And he has been happy with the venue and the freedom he has here to teach and promote.”

Another plus, Miller said, has been the willingness of other donors to give their prized collections to the university. Last year, a Florida couple, Marvin and Sybil Weiner, donated a major collection of colonial-era imprints to the library. “The Weiner family saw how the Jaffe collection was being treated and decided that we had the capacity to house and promote the use of their collection. Again, they wanted it featured and used, not just stuck away in a rare-book room.”

The Jaffe-FAU match, to use a shop-worn phrase, has been a perfect fit. For Jaffe, the objects he loves so deeply have a home where they are valued and respected and where he has a hand in directing their future. The university, meanwhile, has become a player in the world of special collections, a necessary ingredient for a college that seeks to attract independent scholars and graduate students to do research.

Never one to consider charging admission to see his collection, Jaffe said he requests two considerations from visitors. “Your curiosity and a willingness to risk your opinions,” he said. “If you don’t have those two, you can’t come. I have a tendency to fall in love easily, and I trust my instincts when I see a book. A book belongs in this collection because it will be in company with other books. They will live together well. They will be happy together. I think it’s as simple as all that.”