

The Joy of Collecting

By Charles Lowenhaupt

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Philip Shulman was one of the great collectors I have ever met.

When we were first acquainted, he had just retired as a postal worker in San Francisco. He had spent many years in the military and then working for various companies before he took the position with the post office. His wife had died and her two children, his step children, were his only family. I was introduced by a Japanese print dealer who told me that for a number of years. Phil had purchased prints of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, our own interest, but had not been heard of for five or ten years.

On a trip to San Francisco, I reached out to Phil and said I would like to see his prints. He invited me to his apartment, a small rent-controlled walk up apartment, neat and clean. He had several prints on the wall, faded and in poor condition but then he took me into his bedroom.

From under the bed, he pulled box after box of prints in superb condition, carefully selected for image and quality to be representative of the genre. I expressed admiration for the collection and we spent an afternoon over them discussing the technical attributes, the sensibilities and the historic significance of this genre.

Phil had little understanding of these matters other than knowing this was Japan as it became a superpower at the turn of the century. He had lived in Japan after the war, so he knew Japan and the Japanese. He loved to travel, and it was clear he loved traveling across time as well as across geography. His passion for the collection was clear and he was delighted to find someone equally interested in the collection.

Varying Interests And Tastes

I learned that he had also built a sizeable collection of books of African exploration from the 19th century and apparently sold them at an auction when he found that his apartment was not large enough to hold them. He had also collected postage stamps and coins, but they were long gone. “But my prints fit nicely under my bed, and I like the idea that I am sleeping on them” he told me.

Over the years, Phil and I met several times when I was in San Francisco. On one visit, he came to my hotel, and I showed him all of our prints on the computer. He compared quality and image to his own and seemed pleased and somewhat envious that they compared well to his. And in subsequent visits, we talked more about the significance of the prints and the pleasure we had in collecting.

After two visits with Phil, I learned from my dealer friends that he had again entered the market. Yes, he told me, I had inspired him to start acquiring more. Chasing and catching prints that I did not have were among his goals he said, with a smile. I explained that we were starting to have our collection catalogued and would probably give it to a museum – we had had inquiries not only from the St. Louis museum but also the British Museum and Smithsonian.

An Opportunity Arises

In January of 2008, my wife and I were in Paris when I received word from my office that Mr. Shulman had called. He wanted to talk to me as soon as possible and when he heard I was in Paris, he asked whether I might reach him. I corresponded to say that I would return to the office in two weeks and could call then. He replied by email (not an easy form of correspondence for Phil coming from a postal service background) that he would like me to call him from Paris.

He had been told he required heart bypass surgery immediately, but he did not want to enter the hospital until his print collection was placed in our hands. He asked whether we would be willing to buy it immediately. I explained that we would pay one price for the entire collection, but without refreshing my mind on which would be duplicates, that price per print would be a very low one.

Instead, I offered to return home, look at the photos he offered to send by post and then pay full price for the prints we did not have. He chose our purchasing the entire lot. He explained that price was not important to him; instead he wanted the collection well taken care of and he wanted it to be part of our collection entirely.

A Legacy Continues

I set a price and he accepted immediately after he received the offer.

I told him that his prints would always be attributed to his collection whenever shown and whenever published. In a series of emails, typed by his stepson, he outlined the process he was engaging in to ship all of the prints to me, the care he was taking and the need to have them safely at my office before he entered the hospital. I reassured him (apparently as did his stepson) that bypass operations were now fairly routine and based on reports from his doctors, his would be successful.

The prints arrived at my office; Phil entered the hospital; and I began to receive a daily update from his step children. He had refused to have the operation until the prints were delivered and the doctors recommended against that. He had told his stepchildren that the placing of his collection was important and had to be completed.

The operation did not go well. Daily for a week, we received reports of his deteriorating condition. At the end of the week he died. In one of his emails to me, his stepson wrote the following:

You probably don't realize how wonderful it is for me, someone who does not know this field of art but who greatly appreciates Phil's passion, to understand that someone out there also shares his love. That is also a great comfort to Phil, I know. There can be no greater legacy for his art than to have them endure in the equal appreciation of others like yourself. So it is I who must say thank you to you.

You should also know that Phil delayed his operation to give himself enough time to get these prints organized and sent off to you. I say that only to place in context the importance of these works in his life and the value he placed in being sure that they remained in safe and appreciative keeping.

His stepson later wrote that the disposition of the prints was “the last significant action” of Phil’s life..

For Phil, the passion was consuming and the joy of sharing that passion was as great for him as it was for me. Today, his prints with ours are part of a collection being catalogued and prepared for a major exhibition in St. Louis. Each of his prints will be noted as from his collection.

