

Comic and Cartoon Art: What's So Funny About This?

ABSTRACT

The most commonly encountered paper support for historic comic and cartoon art is a multi-layered Bristol board. These Bristol boards are usually four-ply, but occasionally one will find only two-ply or three-ply, and once in a while there will be a five-ply or six-ply Bristol. They are produced by pasting the layers of paper to one another with what appears to be a starch paste. The plies are generally a white paper, ranging from stark white to a warm creamy white, and are dense in their structure, rarely taking on a dark saturated appearance even after prolonged immersion in water baths. The finish is normally smooth or plate, but it is not uncommon to find boards with a toothy or vellum finish. Some of the boards have the embossed stamp of the Strathmore Paper Company, which is, or was, a circular design with an oak leaf motif surrounded by the wording "Strathmore Use Either Side." The papers are quite strong, even when severely abused through benign neglect or ignorance, indicating that the fiber is of high quality. A current description of Strathmore's 500 Series Bristol in the product literature states that they are "100% cotton, acid free, and buffered with calcium carbonate."

India ink appears to have been the medium of choice, often with graphite underdrawing. Corrections and editorial alterations were often made with a white lead pigment, evidenced by frequently observed stages of deterioration from gray to black. Acrylic white-out pigments seem to begin appearing around mid-century. According to conversations with one of my clients who specializes in dealing in this and other illustration genres, many of the changes rendered through the use of white-out were made at the editor's request, or even in the printing room by a pressman, and were done to make the published image more readable. Other editorial notations and directives were made with blue pencils.

This paper presents the extensive and complex conservation treatments of two India ink cartoon drawings by Thomas S. Sullivant, whose work spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This artist had a rather unique approach to his work by making his corrections as he drew. His apparent preference for correcting or changing his design was to remove the ink by scratching it off the surface of the paper. Not only did this result in a rough and disturbed surface, but he made many changes in the same few areas, often working his way through successive plies of the Bristol board. In addition to this "nature of the working process" condition, the supports had sustained extensive water and microbial damage, and had heavy surface soiling. One of the supports also had mottled red staining throughout the bottom third, had been chewed by rodents, and smelled like brake or power steering fluid, although the client maintained that the piece had been treated with thymol only.

After dry surface cleaning with block white vinyl erasers, the treatments required delamination of the paper supports' structures, washing, stain reduction, and reassembly using all or nearly all of the original plies, although they were in severely degraded condition. The drawing which reeked of a petroleum product also had to be washed in several baths of ethanol to reduce the red staining and remove the contaminating material. The areas of the supports which were badly degraded from microbial attack were reinforced with L-tissue as an interlining. Minor inpainting was done with watercolors.

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