

The Preservation and Education of Art: Justin Bibee on building and sharing art collections



Justin D. Bibee is currently a PhD student at Durban University of Technology in peacebuilding and is a human rights advocate. A Cranston native, Bibee was nominated for the Peace Corps book award. Bibee spent time in the Peace Corps as a volunteer in Morocco for two years and has since explored many different regions. During these travels, Bibee has collected and catalogued art in hopes of preserving and sharing it with the general public. The collection can be seen online or in person on display in Vermont. Here is what Bibee had to say:

Amanda Grafe: Can you talk about what you are currently doing in the art world and how you got started in that?

Justin Bibee: I would have to say that my interest in art started with my interest in human rights. Studying human rights in college I was introduced to new cultures and that sparked my curiosity. That curious exploration of cultures has never faded for me. I've been very fortunate — however incommensurate it may be at times — to work in a field that allows me to travel. As a human rights advocate, I often go on assignments for months and even years at a time. Moreover, my work takes me to some remote places. This is definitely an advantage in collecting art. From the moment I left the United States I have been captivated by the places I've visited and the people I've met. My favorite aspect of collecting ethnographic art is exploring and discovering the culture behind it.

AG: What has been the public reception to what you are doing?

JB: Earlier this year I began reaching out to local libraries and schools to see if they might be interested in displaying some art pieces from my collection for educational purposes. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all exhibitions will be postponed. But I have created an online gallery where all the pieces from my collection can be viewed.

AG: Where are some of the places you traveled to acquire some of this art?

JB: Most recently I traveled to Tanzania where I was conducting research for the United Nations. I worked with Burundian and Congolese refugees in Tanzania's refugee camps. The refugees made beautiful art and sold it within the camps. I acquired pottery, jewelry and fabrics to support them, and these pieces are now part of my collection. In March I was to travel to Durban, South Africa to conduct more research and I was looking forward to discovering some art along the way. However, that trip was postponed due to the pandemic. Right now, I've been keeping my eye on some online auctions. Just this past week I acquired an Igala Idoma standing female figure from Nigeria, and I have my eye on a few other pieces.

AG: What has your success been so far? Who or what has benefited most from this project?

JB: I've probably benefited the most by finally having my art organized! With my work I'm often forced to store my entire life and move to another country. I had art stored at my parents' house, in storage, in my basement, in my closet. I've gathered all these pieces together for the collection. This has allowed me to appreciate each piece again. Throughout my travels, I've left pieces of my heart here and there; looking at the art is very nostalgic for me. Also, the people's whose art it is and the cultures that these pieces come from are able to be introduced to the public, which is great and the purpose of the project.

AG: Where do you see your project in a year? How about five years? How do you hope it will help shape the art world?

JB: The Justin Bibee Collection is a very modest project. To begin, I hope to display some of the art I've collected in local libraries and schools for cultural awareness and educational purposes. In the future, I would love to host exhibitions and galleries to share the art. I hope the pieces in my collection will spark curiosity about the world's cultures and contribute to cultural awareness and understanding.

AG: Anything else you would like to share with our readers?

JB: I just want to say that I hope everyone is doing well and staying safe during these unusual times.

*To view the collection and learn about the project please visit:
bibeecollection.weebly.com and justinbibee.weebly.com.*