

The Burdick Collection today, hard to thumb through but slowly coming into view



By George Vrechek



*Approximately 150 cards from the Burdick collection are typically rotated into public display in a small hallway.
Photo by George Vrechek*



Met Hall Attribution: Cow at the English language Wikipedia



Collector John Maiorino and some of Burdick's T205s on display at the Met, photo J.Maiorino

Jefferson Burdick (1900-1963), the “Father of Card Collecting,” donated his 303,000-card collection to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City so that it could be enjoyed by future generations of collectors. In the last years of his life, Burdick carefully pasted the backs of the cards in 394 albums. The cards, including about 30,000 baseball cards, are (mostly) still there, but have remained captive in the Met’s private print room except for a sample of about 150 cards at a time which are rotated into public display.

New York-area collector John Maiorino and his son Jeff were recently able to see some of the Burdick cards not on public display. Maiorino’s report on his visit to the Met confirmed that the bulk of Burdick’s collection is still very difficult to see in person. However, the good news is that the Met recently obtained a grant to start photographing and cataloging Burdick’s collection into a database which is beginning to be accessible on their website. While it is not the same as being able to thumb through Burdick’s albums, it appears to be a solution to the problem of how to fulfill Burdick’s wishes without risk to the collection.



Jefferson Burdick, 1952, photo from The Card Collectors Bulletin 1952

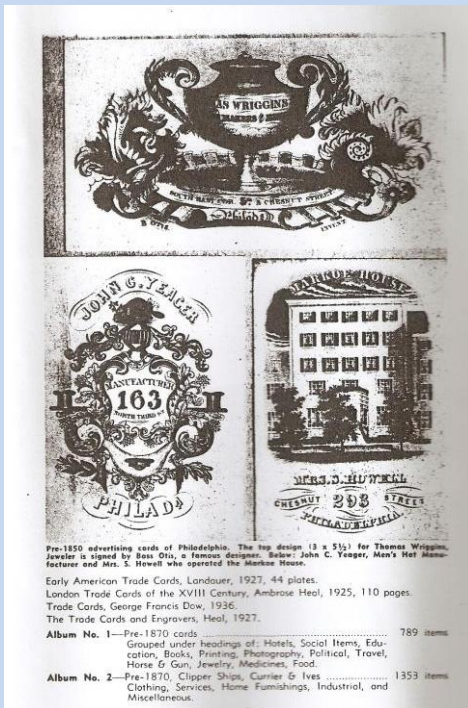
Prior articles

I wrote SCD articles starting in 2003 with The Jefferson Burdick Collection and the American Card Catalog, The Greatest Collection You Will Never See about the Met’s problem of safeguarding the collection and the difficulty of viewing the cards in the scrapbook format. It was with some difficulty that I was able to get appointments to the Met print room to view some of Burdick’s sports cards and about 4% of the entire collection. Photographing the cards or albums in the print room was not allowed.

Recent visit

John Maiorino’s interests include sports as well as non-sports. Consequently, after several attempts, he was able to get an appointment to view non-sports cards in the Met print room. Prior to Maiorino’s visit, I provided him a copy of Burdick’s directory created just for the museum which lists the categories of cards in the various albums. Maiorino was kind enough to share his observations with me. His report follows.

Burdick and Met curator A. Hyatt Mayor created a catalog listing the albums and their contents which was published in 1964. This catalog page describes albums #1 and #2 which include 2,142 items that are all pre-1870.



Turning the pages

“My son and I got there exactly at 10 o'clock and were buzzed in to the drawings and prints room. We were greeted by the current curator, a very pleasant young lady who had been there only a few months, but seemed very knowledgeable about Jefferson Burdick and the history of these cards. Thanks to the directory you sent me, I had an idea of some albums I wanted to see. I gave her a list and she brought them out one at a time. The first was album #5 containing Allan & Ginter, Duke and Goodwin tobacco cards (405 items). She put it down in front of me and asked me not to touch it, that she would turn the pages. I couldn't believe that she intended to stand next to me and turn the pages herself for 2 ½ hours but that is exactly what she did.”

During my own visits in the early 2000s, a museum staffer was there to watch you but not to turn the pages. I notified the staff member if I found a card that was loose or about to become loose – which didn't seem like a very secure situation. Burdick's paste was drying out after 40 years on the job. The museum staff must have reached the same conclusion.



The study room for drawings and prints at the Met, photo Metropolitan Museum of Art

Maiorino continued: “During the visit she said in the past they had some problems with cards coming loose and people stealing them, so I understand. The other thing that was disappointing was that we would definitely not be permitted to view any baseball cards at all. Again, they just will not do that as that's the most requested thing to view (2 or 3 requests a day) and that's where they've had the most problems. So it would have been nice but I love the old non sport as well so that is what we stuck with.

Beautiful cards

“So back to album #5. She put it down and started to turn the pages and any apprehension disappeared as I saw some of the most beautiful cards in some of the finest condition that I had

ever seen. Many I had never seen before. We went on to album #52 with a transportation theme, planes, ships and trains (584 items). Next was #207 with more Duke tobacco cards, which I think are some of the nicest ever made. Album #247 had 20th century tobacco and some novelty items (1,305). Next I tried one of the boxes #652 which had oversize cabinet cards of mostly early 1900s actresses.

“With time getting late, I requested album #324 which has some sports cards listed in them. I thought maybe we could sneak it in. No such luck. She came back and said she couldn't show us that one because it had sports in it but #323 was very nice and it had 1930s and '40s candy and gum issues, R163 and R189. This brought us to exactly 12:30. Our time was up. It went by in a flash. We had viewed 5 albums and 1 box, approximately 1.5% of the whole collection. The two things that I think stand out the most are the range of condition from very poor to near mint, obviously it didn't matter to Mr. Burdick, and the fact that they are all glued and the backs are ruined. Obviously, condition has become more of a priority in recent years. All in all it was a wonderful experience that I hope to do again someday, if possible.

Burdick's solutions

“While there were no loose cards on my visit, there was a section of one album where he tried using those old four corner tabs that we used to use in old photo albums instead of glue. This was bad since they could be easily removed and indeed several cards were missing. I saw that in some cases in order to view the back of the card he made a hinge by just gluing a piece of paper to the edge of the card and the album page. Again, efficient but cringe worthy. I was thrilled to see several hand-written notations on some pages knowing that Burdick himself wrote it.

THE Wagner

“There was one final thrill before leaving. While baseball cards were off limits, we were, of course, free to view the cards that were on display for the public in the hallway. Besides a small assortment of Ramlys, Delongs, T-205s, early Bowmans, and some turn of the century beauties, there stood Burdick's own T-206 Honus Wagner. The condition was outstanding, no creases or surface damage at all, nicely centered, just a little corner wear. There must be very few out there that are in better condition. It was very exciting to see one of, if not the most, iconic cards in the hobby.”

THE Wagner card currently on display at the Met. Photo from the Collection Online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Jefferson R. Burdick Collection, Gift of Jefferson R. Burdick



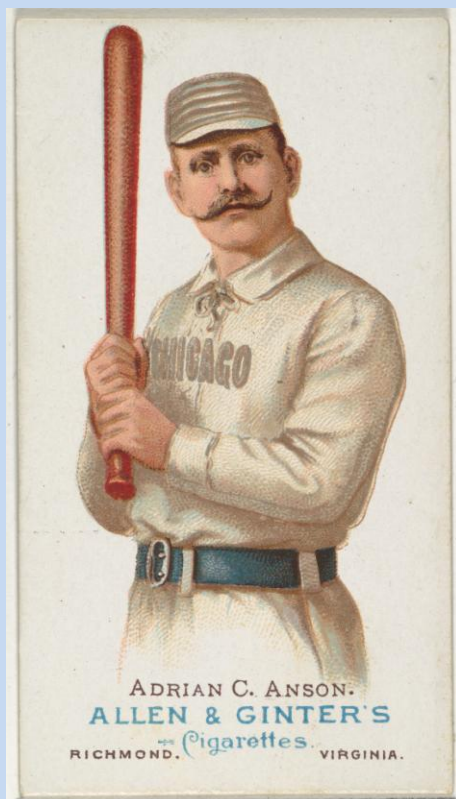
Grant for photographing the collection

Almost concurrently with Maiorino's visit, Associate Curator Freyda Spira, announced on the museum website “under the auspices of a generous gift from Beth and Leonard Wilf” that Burdick's collection would be photographed and begin to appear on the museum's website. There is now a landing page for the collection at <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/museum-departments/curatorial-departments/drawings-and-prints/burdick-collection>. Donor Leonard Wilf is the vice chairman of the Minnesota Vikings and had been in New York in 2014 when the Met displayed a collection of Burdick football cards.

Assistant Curator Allison Rudnick was contacted for information on the museum's progress. Rudnick confirmed that while there are currently over 10,000 cards in the online database, the plan is to photograph the entire 303,000-card collection and make it available through the website. The museum also hopes to feature more specialized displays of Burdick's cards in the public area and to continue to rotate those displays every six months.

Viewing the cards through the website

You can click on "View the Collection" from the Met's website and see some wonderful, rare cards. Cards are posted beginning with N1, nineteenth century tobacco cards of American Editors. The images are clear, colorful and detailed. Since the cards are pasted onto pages, you won't be able to see the backs of the cards, but you can't see the backs anyway in the albums.



Left: Just one of the 10,000 cards now found online: Cap Anson, (N28),

Right: One of the few named and numbered actresses, card #197, Mamie Gordon, from the Actors and Actresses series (N145-5) issued by Duke Sons & Co.

Photos from the Collection Online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Jefferson R. Burdick Collection, Gift of Jefferson R. Burdick

Until more cards are entered in the system, searching the database for a specific card won't be very fruitful, and there may have to be some translations between the museum listings and how collectors would expect to search for an item. When I looked at the site, I found plenty of "actresses" in tights (N45s), but could not easily browse all of the 10,000 plus images reportedly available. The search and browse functions are cumbersome at present (you are searching through all of the Met's collections), but capable of improvement. Seeing the online Burdick collection reminds you that he had 10 times more fish, fowl, fans, flags and fancy dresses than ballplayers.

Time consuming

It will be a pleasant surprise if the photographing continues quickly. Burdick vastly underestimated the time it took him to organize and mount 303,000 cards, eventually moving to New York City and doing most of the work himself, finishing just two months before his death.

Photographing the first 10,000 cards started over a year ago. Just to view the collection online will take time. If you took 20 seconds to read each caption and zoomed in on each card, and you did so for 40 hours each week, it would take 10 months to view the entire collection. I don't know if anyone has had an opportunity to thumb through all of Burdick's albums, but based on the time I spent looking at 4% of the collection in person, it would still take you about a month just glancing at all the cards quickly and not having to read anything. Alternatively, if you want to see the real cards on public display, and if the museum rotated 150 cards from the collection every six months, you'd get to see everything in just over 1,000 years.

Time and money

According to an October 13, 2015, online article by Joe DeLessio of VICE Sports based on information from Spira, "The project is funded through November of 2016, and the goal is to get all the sports material in Burdick's collection online by then." This bit of information makes sense: that the Wilf donation might take care of whatever sports cards (especially, football cards of interest to the donor) could be photographed by November 2016, but that additional funding would have to be obtained to get the bulk of the collection online. It looks like the photography efforts after awhile focused on sports cards and skipped over non-sports cards.

Burdick had the same problem, once complaining in *The Card Collector's Bulletin*, that organizing all the unnamed and unnumbered "old actresses" was bogging him down. It wouldn't be the end of the world if not every fish, fowl, and actress card got the full photographic treatment. At least the museum would be able to direct the frequent sports card inquirers to the website rather than the print room.

Burdick reproductions

Periodically, the museum store produces items using images from the Burdick collection. Cards and posters have been sold in the past, but not very frequently. Currently the museum has some Burdick postcard reproductions available, but nothing sports-related and nothing is planned for the near future. However Eileen Fitschen at the Met responded that, "I will add these items to our 'hope to bring back' listing." Museum staff is also aware that Burdick card reproductions have been touted as the real thing and may take steps to minimize future misrepresentations.



How to display 303,000 cards

While Maiorino's visit confirmed that Burdick's collection has become next to impossible to view in person, it showed that the photographing and cataloging efforts can be a helpful alternative for collectors.

Of course art lovers would rather see the Mona Lisa in person than to see a scan of the Mona Lisa online. Collectors would prefer to see the cards rather than pictures. If money were available, the entire collection could theoretically be mounted in secure holders and protected like other Met properties on public display.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, photo George Vrechek

However, the space needed for such a display would be vastly out of proportion to the number of visitors who come to the Met to see trading cards versus works of art. Major museums typically display only a small fraction of their entire collections. The Met has over 2 million works of art vying for the public space which may accommodate only 20,000 items (1%).

Thanks to John Maiorino and the Met museum staff for sharing information on Burdick's collection today. Thanks to the Wilfs for their grant to help bring some of Burdick's collection into the light. Any way you look at them, the cards are amazing.

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This article appeared in the February 5, 2016, SCD.