

## Animated Repatriation: Disney Art Returns

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Cels with background from the Disney animated film "Sleeping Beauty" (1959). They are being returned to the studio after languishing for almost 50 years in a janitor's closet in Japan.

A Japanese university plans to return about 250 pieces of original animation art to the Walt Disney Company that were mislaid in storage after traveling to Japan nearly five decades ago.

Disney said that the art — cels, backgrounds, preliminary paintings and storyboard sketches — was part of a collection that was handpicked by Walt Disney himself. It was sent to Japan in 1960 for a touring exhibition timed to the opening of the film "Sleeping Beauty." The exhibition opened at Mitsukoshi Department Store in Tokyo in May of that year and traveled to 16 other stores throughout Japan.

"Walt wanted to explain every element of the animation process, so he chose artwork from all phases of production and a number of films," said Lella Smith, creative director of the Disney Animation Research Library in Burbank, Calif., which preserves the studio's artwork. "But the primary focus was 'Sleeping Beauty.' "

Although most of the art is from that film, the collection also includes rare set-ups (cel and background combinations) from two Oscar-winning Silly Symphony cartoons: "Flowers and Trees" (1932), the first Technicolor cartoon and the first film to win the Academy Award for animated short film, and the landmark short "Three Little Pigs" (1933).

"The 'Flowers and Trees' set-up is an extremely important piece," Ms. Smith said in an interview at her office in the library. She said other highlights included two backgrounds from the "Nutcracker Suite" and "Rite of Spring" sequences in the 1940 film "Fantasia."

Among other striking works is a sequence of images by the designer Eyvind Earle that show how he created the stylized forest backgrounds for "Sleeping Beauty." The delicate clusters of leaves and intricately textured bark on the trees reflect Mr. Earle's interest in 15th-century French manuscripts and the painting of Van Eyck, and foreshadow his later serigraphs.

After the department store tour, Disney donated the artwork to the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. But the material was not considered a good fit for its permanent collection, so the museum gave the pieces to Chiba University to enhance the study of the visual arts.

Chiba's academic focus was on science, engineering and medicine, however, and the Disney art was consigned to a janitor's closet and forgotten until it was found by chance four years ago. Although the artwork suffered some damage because of dampness, the rarest pieces were sealed in frames, which protected them somewhat.

After a year of restoration work by technicians at Disney's Animation Research Library, some 200 works went on tour in Japan, along with 350 additional pieces lent by the studio in an exhibition titled "The Art of Disney." The show toured seven museums around the country in 2006 and 2007, including the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art. At the end of its run, Chiba University offered to return the artwork to Disney.

In a statement Chiba University's president, Toyoki Kozai, said, "The response to the exhibit gave us a new appreciation for the historical and artistic value of these works."

Because the university was concerned about keeping them in good condition for the next generation, he said, it "concluded that entrusting them to Disney would be the best route to take."

In return, Disney is giving Chiba University high-resolution digital copies of the artworks and \$1 million for scholarships. But both sides said the deal should not be viewed as a sale.

In 1960 little value was placed on artwork from animated films, and cels were sold at Disneyland for a few dollars apiece. Today animation art is prized by collectors, and a top-quality Earle background from "Sleeping Beauty" might sell for \$20,000 to \$30,000. Given the rarity of some of the pieces, it is hard to assign a dollar value to the collection over all, because nothing comparable has been offered for sale.

"There is no way to put a price on these works — they represent our artistic heritage," Ms. Smith, of Disney, said. "That said, their value as archival materials for study and research is very high." She added that when the works were discovered, they did not have much commercial value because of years of accumulated damage from mold.

Mr. Kozai said that Chiba University would channel the donated money into its overall educational programs and into research on art and animation and what he called "the sound growth of children."

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