



**Celebrating
Collections**

The Pellone/Barrett Puppet Collection

By Greg Pellone

It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old, they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams. —Gabriel García Márquez, novelist.

Recently I was asked two questions about my puppet collection: “Tell us how you have decided what to have in your collection, and what are your long-term plans for the collection?” Easier said than done! I believe that to understand “a collection” (that is, any collection), you must understand “the collector.” However, even the great father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, had trouble explaining his own collecting obsession. According to Brunella Eruli, collectors are contradictory figures who live between greed and magnanimity. The collector must love the object of his/her quest and must have an obsessive and restrictive passion that becomes some sort of rule or reason for life. In the days before the pandemic, when we all could still enjoy social events, it was fun to watch how people reacted when the conversation eventually got around to “so what do you do?” and I would say “I’m retired, but I enjoy collecting puppets.” After an awkward pause, the expected eye roll and “Oh really?” I’d explain that puppets are not just for children and that many cultures over thousands of years have had some type of puppet tradition. It is amazing how many people still think puppetry is only for children. Luckily for them, I’m always ready to tell them about my collection!

The Pellone/Barrett (P/B) Puppet Collection actually became official around 25 years ago; before that, it was mainly a lifelong hobby. My mother made my first puppets when I was five years old. She was a talented artist, and they were excellent puppet replicas of the two wonderful characters of Beany and Cecil the Seaside Sea Serpent created by Bob Clampett for *Time for Beany* (1949–1955). Unfortunately, they no longer exist, but they sparked an enduring interest in the art of puppetry. I spent 20 of my early years serving in the U.S. Air Force and was fortunate to travel around the world in various assignments. It was during that time that I became more serious about acquiring puppets and puppet ephemera from other countries. Living in Germany for more than eight

years allowed me to travel the European continent as well as the Middle East and offered more opportunities to find unique and indigenous creations. I was curious about how puppets in different countries and cultures were made and used. How were they constructed, what materials were used, and how were they controlled? It’s one thing to look at a picture of a Bunraku puppet head in a book, but quite another to hold one in your hand! Those were pre-internet days, and my research required visiting libraries and consulting books. Even today, online

information about puppetry is generally limited and many books about puppetry are cursory. Over the years, the P/B Collection slowly grew, and I decided to try to acquire a puppet from every country in the world that had some type of puppetry tradition. It got a little complicated with countries like Russia, which was then the core of the Soviet Union and included many other unwilling participants. It’s intriguing that Eastern Bloc places like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Uzbekistan are still influenced by the old Soviet puppetry traditions.

I have been extremely fortunate to be able to continue traveling (that is until COVID) and to explore the cultures and folk art traditions of different countries. I have also been excited to visit some of the finest

puppet collections in the world and to meet or correspond with some of today’s great puppet makers, masters, authors, and experts. The P/B Puppet Collection is very modest in comparison to many other collections in the world, but *modest* is a relative term. There are some significant pieces that are one of a kind and irreplaceable (this seems to be an occupational hazard in the puppetry arts). I am extremely proud to have helped preserve, for example, puppets from Mali, considering the recent crisis involving a corrupt political system, extreme poverty, and continued violence. Before her untimely death, my dear friend Linda Petrysak was prophetically concerned about saving puppets from destruction due to war, political unrest, natural disasters, or just general neglect and loss of traditions.

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Bunraku puppet heads.
All photos by Brian James, from the Pellone/Barrett Puppet Collection.



Greg Pellone with Lafleur, star of traditional French marionette productions in the area of Amiens.

continued from previous page

She made me promise to conserve the creative works in the collection to the best of my ability. Currently, there are over 500 puppets from at least 32 different countries in the collection. The collection's breadth is eclectic, but there are some beautiful examples of world puppet traditions. Some of my favorites include a rare Temes Nevinbur puppet from Vanuatu, a peerless set of Tunisian marionettes, a unique hand puppet by Rufus and Margo Rose, an opera puppet by Ernest Wolfe, several Belgian marionettes from the Royal Theatre Toone, and the Punch and Judy puppets of Bryan Clark of Great Britain. Many puppets in the collection have unknown origins and could be classified to a specific country if a provenance were known. In addition to the puppets, there are masks, ephemera, posters, papers, pictures, etchings, sculpture, paintings, ceramics, and an extensive library that includes many author-signed first edition volumes.

Before I really knew anything about Alan Cook, I would see his name pop up quite frequently whenever there were discussions or writings about puppetry, and I thought: *this guy really knows his stuff!* Little did I know at the time! As the



Sicilian marionette.



Hand puppets from Uzbekistan.

collection grew, I would acquire an odd puppet that I couldn't identify and thought I'd take a chance and contact this fellow who seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of puppets and puppet history. To my surprise, he always replied almost immediately and provided the information I was seeking. I was impressed by his gracious willingness to help a total stranger with a kindred connection to puppetry. To him, it was second nature; to me, it was treasured advice. Although I never had an opportunity to meet Alan Cook in person, I feel quite fortunate that he generously shared some of his valuable time with me. He had a huge influence on my decision to continue collecting and preserving this wonderful art form. The P/B Collection has also benefited immensely through generous donations by individuals. William "Bill" Lorenzen was a Professor of Theater Design for 40 years at University of South Florida, specializing in costume and scenic design and puppet theater. The Lorenzen family was selected by Walt Disney World to write, design, and build elaborate marionette productions for the World Showcase Marionette Theatre featured at the opening of Epcot Center in 1982. The productions ran for an amazing 3,000 live performances. His mentor, Frank Ballard of the University of Connecticut, has always largely influenced

Lorenzen's puppet designs. He and his wife, Suzanne, donated some of his early work, including puppets from *Jungle!* (1970 adaptation of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*). Christine and Robert Gregg have also donated to the collection as have many other benevolent puppetry enthusiasts.

"What are your long-term plans for the collection?" That is literally the \$64,000 question that most puppet collectors worry about and eventually must address. Alan Cook was fortunate that he found a home for his vast and extraordinary collection (officially the Cook/Marks collection), which is now under the competent and watchful eye of Dmitri Carter at the Northwest Puppetry Center in Seattle, Washington. However, many collections are broken up when collectors pass on. I believe collections that offer pieces with some historical significance or legacy can benefit students and researchers, especially if they could get to examine them closely. When artifacts end up in museums or special collections they are sometimes put into storage and kept out of reach, which is understandable with very rare or extremely fragile items. Museums and special collection facilities are geared toward the conservation of artifacts and are trained in the methods of storage and safeguarding valuable art works. As a private collector, I can say with experience it is no small task to properly document, preserve, and store over 500-plus puppets and related objects. Special care precautions must be observed, such as protection from light, humidity, pests, and other pollutants, and the puppet storage should meet archival standards. Every puppet in the P/B Collection has been photographed and cataloged. Information about each puppet is cross-referenced to its photo. I've tried to keep descriptions, spellings, provenances (if available), and historical facts accurate to the best of my knowledge based largely on available references and discussions or correspondence with museums, experts, and other collectors. At the moment, I don't have any profound long-term plans for the P/B Puppet Collection, but I am certain that someday it will benefit puppeteers, students, researchers, or historians.

I was recently encouraged by Dmitri Carter's statement to Ilan Savir of the Israel Puppet Center in Holon from their Facebook discussion November 2020. "We're in an exciting time for puppetry. In the past, puppet history and culture was very seldom written down and was passed verbally from person to person. Traditional puppetry is important because modern artists are inspired by traditional methods and construction. This is an exciting time for outside the puppetry community and puppet museums. Mainstream museums and academic world are finally taking serious notice of puppetry. Theater and anthropology programs are paying attention to puppetry and its impact on human culture...that puppets are important artifacts." So I'm still optimistic about collecting puppets, masks, and related items. Like many treasures in this age of the internet, quality pieces are becoming very hard to find or are ridiculously overpriced by eager sellers. I still rely on physical treasure hunting in antique stores, thrift shops, and flea markets, but success there is a matter of luck. And none of this would even be possible without the invaluable assistance of my loving partner, Louise Barrett. We have traveled the world together and continue to search for and collect interesting new pieces. She has been instrumental in helping to build the collection over the years, as well as to provide love, support, and unlimited inspiration.

Greg Pellone has traveled extensively and now lives on a small island on the larger Treasure Island, Florida. He is an artist, puppet collector/maker, researcher, writer, and occasional performer. He is the curator and conservator of the Pellone/Barrett Puppet Collection.