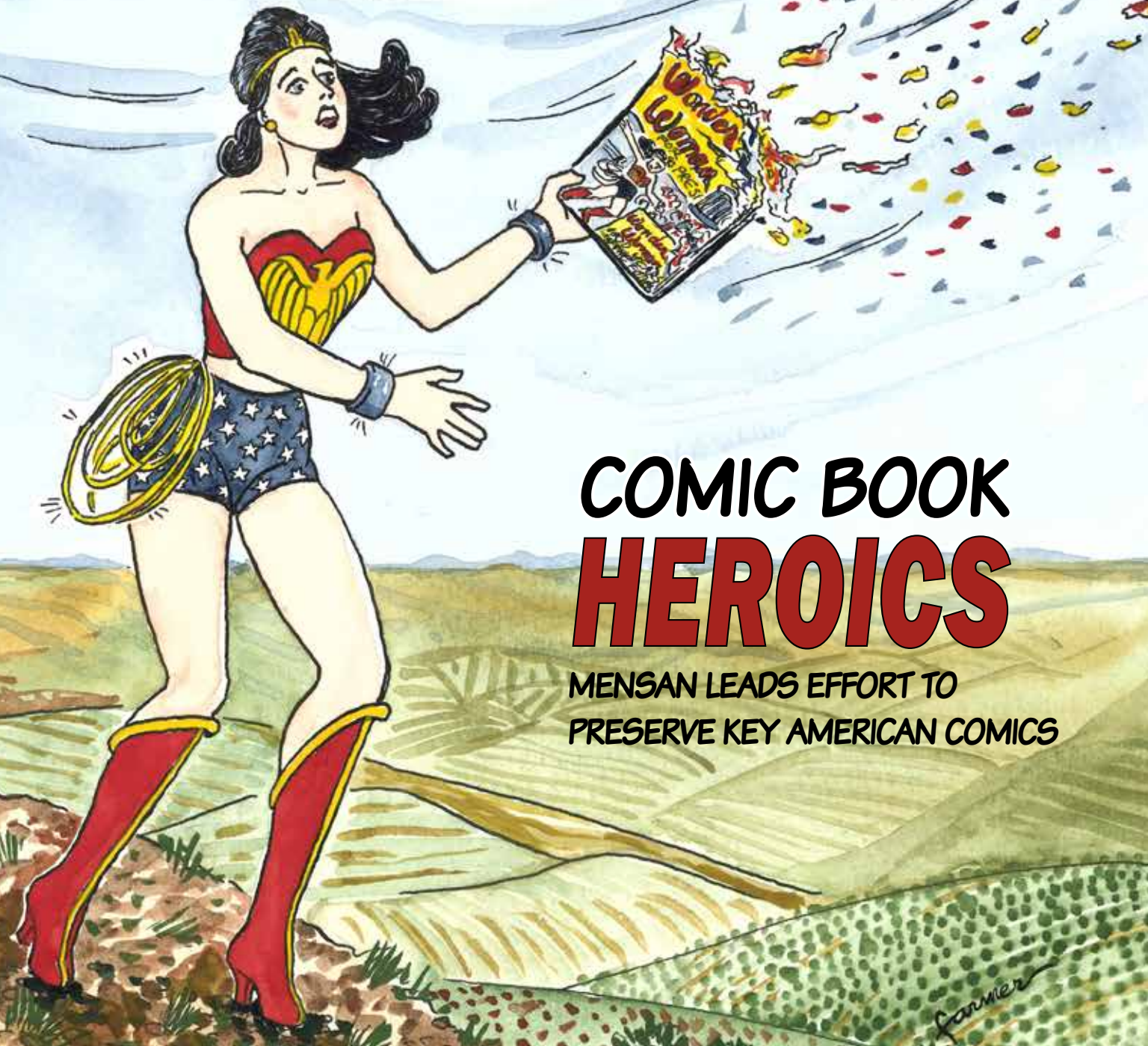


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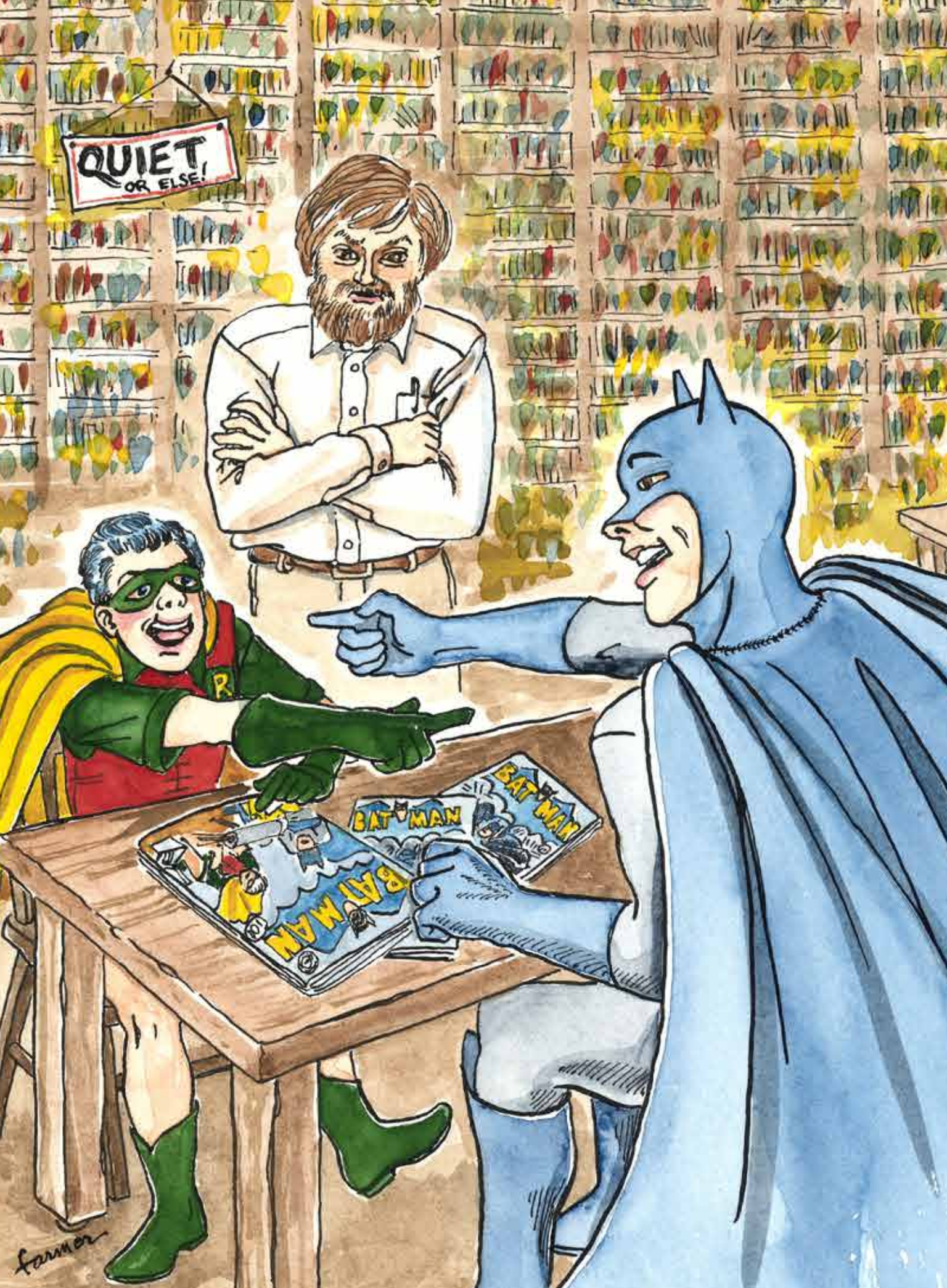
THE MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN MENSA



## COMIC BOOK HEROICS

MENSAN LEADS EFFORT TO  
PRESERVE KEY AMERICAN COMICS

*Farmer*



farmer

# COMIC BOOK HEROICS

MENSAN LEADS EFFORTS TO PRESERVE AGED COMICS

by Michael Hill, Ph.D. | Illustrated by Joyce Farmer

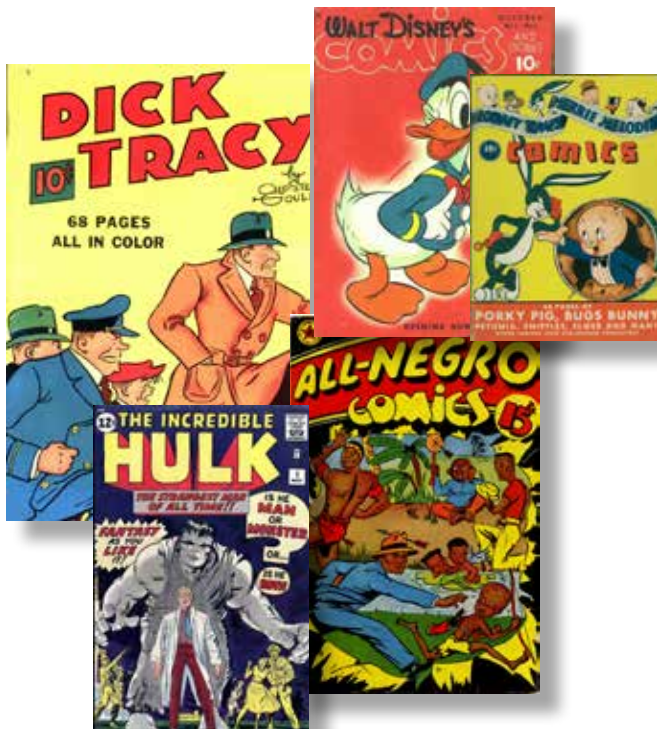


**E**very comic book hero has an origin story. Mensan comic book collector John Sindall's began with his purchase in spring 2001 of a rare 1939 *New York World's Fair Comics*. Barely an antique, the comic was coverless and in poor condition, leading Sindall to send it to professional restoration specialist Matt Nelson. Unfortunately, time had already taken its toll and restoration was no longer possible. The only thing to do with a comic book in this condition, Nelson told Sindall, was "stick it in a drawer and forget about it."

Sindall was appalled. "This rarity could not even be read since it had turned brittle with age," he said. While the comic's monetary value meant little to Sindall, he could hardly bear witnessing a piece of American history literally disintegrate.

"Time was destroying a part of our printed heritage in the same way that the historical treasures of the Royal Library of Alexandria were destroyed when Julius Caesar accidentally set it on fire."

It was clear to Sindall that because of their poor-quality, acid-based pulp paper, many early comics would suffer the same fate. So, like any good comic book vigilante, he took matters into his own hands. In an effort to save culturally significant early American comic books, he formed the Q-Collection Comic Book Preservation Project (the *Q* a nod to his former residence in Quincy, Mass.). The organization, which is advised by an esteemed 26-person international advisory team, plans to preserve a collection of key North American comic books that will one day be devoted to a museum or some other preservation institution.



## COLLECTOR'S EDITIONS

Notable selections from the Q-Collection

(clockwise from upper left)

### Four Color #1 (1939)

The first of the iconic “Four Color” series that ran from 1939 to 1962. A total of 904 issues were published.

### Walt Disney Comics & Stories #1 (1940)

By the mid-1950s this title was the best-selling comic book in the United States, with a monthly circulation of more than 3 million.

### Looney Tunes & Merry Melodies #1 (1941)

Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig made their first appearances in a comic book.

### All-Negro Comics #1 (1947)

The first comic book known to be produced entirely by African-American artists and writers had limited distribution in the Philadelphia area in 1947.

### Incredible Hulk #1 (1962)

In his first appearance, the Hulk sported gray skin.

—John Sindall

## SUPER-POWERED COMICS

Just as Marvel’s Captain America had been preserved in ice for years then reanimated in a fully functional fighting state, Sindall and the Q-Collection developed a method to halt the aging process of old comic books. Unlike Steve Rogers, however, the magazines in which he appeared would not be injected with a magic serum that increases strength and resiliency to super-heroic proportions; nor would they be shielded by Vibranium.

In 2001, Sindall’s research led him to a recently developed UV-resistant long-life Mylar laminate that could be used to preserve the pages of the most historically important comic books. Unsatisfied with binders sold in stores, Sindall invented his own: museum-quality wooden box binders that open flat to allow the comics to be read and then close securely, like a box, to protect the laminated comics from light, moisture, pollution, insects and mishandling.

To date, Sindall and the Q-Collection advisory committee have collected some 225 key American comic books published between 1933 and 1972, a lineup that boasts mostly rare debut titles, including the first issues of *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Captain America*, *Fantastic Four*, *Amazing Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, *Green Lantern*, *Flash*, *Walt Disney Comics & Stories*, *Looney Tunes & Merry Melodies* and many others. Along with the debut issues, the collection includes several titles featuring the characters’ first appearance and noteworthy reboots or redesigns of established characters, such as the 1940 *Detective Comics* #38 in which Batman’s sidekick Robin is introduced.

Sindall calls the trove’s constituents among the most important, most valuable and rarest comic books in existence. Many of the comics that are being preserved have fewer than 100 copies known to exist – in some cases, fewer than 10. The market for some individual titles seems to bear this out. On the Q-Collection’s website ([q-comics.com](http://q-comics.com)) a comprehensive list of the collection is paired with their respective worth according to the respected hobby publication *The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*. Some saw their initial 10- to 25-cent cover prices multiply a millionfold. If these comics were in mint condition, the Q-Collection’s value would total nearly \$7 million.

With a noteworthy collection of works assembled, the Q-Collection is now searching for an individual, company or foundation to produce these time-capsule binders on the project’s behalf. The cost, Sindall said, would depend upon both the material used and the production method, which could range from thousands to tens of thousands of

Wow! 1940!  
THEY REALLY  
KNEW HOW  
TO DRESS!



dollars. Both the binders and the rings that hold the comics to the box binders would need to be custom-made. “This is not a partnership that should be entered into lightly,” Sindall said. “It will require a top designer, contracting with a company to provide the exotic woods required and a company that can produce the custom-made metal parts.”

## CONTROVERSIAL METHODS

While project funding and locating a venue for the collection are ongoing, the project has nevertheless garnered serious attention from the comic book and preservation communities, thanks in no small part its 26-person advisory committee of comic book professionals, writers, artists, historians, academics and advanced collectors from 19 countries. The group advises Sindall on the relative merits and appropriateness of titles he considers adding to the collection. The committee also lends credibility to the project’s controversial preservation methods.

Much to the consternation of commercial-minded collectors, Sindall actually cuts and trims the edges of the comics’ pages before running each Mylar-encased page through a laminating machine at temperatures of 266 and 295 degrees. While permanently preserving the comics, the process robs them of all resale value. Collectors pay big money for acquisitions that have been packed in plas-

tic bags or that have been slabbed and graded in hard plastic. Slabbing, of course, makes it impossible for anyone to read the comics’ contents.

In addition, slabbing actually traps oxygen in the plastic case, Sindall said, which allows the acidic pulp paper to continue to deteriorate – not exactly a preservation method.

The Q-Collection aims to give readers a first-hand look at the comics in their original form that has been preserved and protected. “Once preservation is complete, the comics are no longer a commodity,” Sindall said. “They revert to what they were meant to be, a form of entertainment and a forever stimulus to the imagination of the reader.”

Maintaining the comics in their original form was one of the reasons Sindall opted to not simply digitally scan the publications. He was also concerned with the long-term vulnerability of digital storage.

“Only hard copies will survive our rapidly changing technologies,” Sindall predicts. The binders, he said, ensures the comics can be preserved for thousands of years.

## THE ‘NOBLE AMERICAN-BORN ART FORM’

In a world in which comic books have long been treated as consumables and ephemera, the Q-Collection Comic Book Preservation Project represents a significant plan to preserve key items of these as popular cultural artifacts. The collection also preserves several associated artifacts, such as trading cards, bubble gum wrappers, photographs, ads, membership cards, publicity photos and promotional materials. Together, they form a slice of pop culture history that is distinctively American.

In a 1993 speech at the Diamond Comics seminar, author Harlan Ellison referred to comic books as the “noble American-born art form” influential in spreading Western culture around the world. Ellison had previously, in the 1987 documentary “The Masters of Comic Book Art,” tallied just five native American art forms: the banjo, jazz music, musical comedies, the mystery story and comic books.

The preservation of the Q-Collection ensures the safe-keeping of these fragile works so they can remain a part of American history for generations to come. ❖