



Ink & PAPER

The timeless collaboration of artwork and sports cards

BY DAVID LEE

Sports cards, like paintings, have no intrinsic value. Both are simply ink on paper.

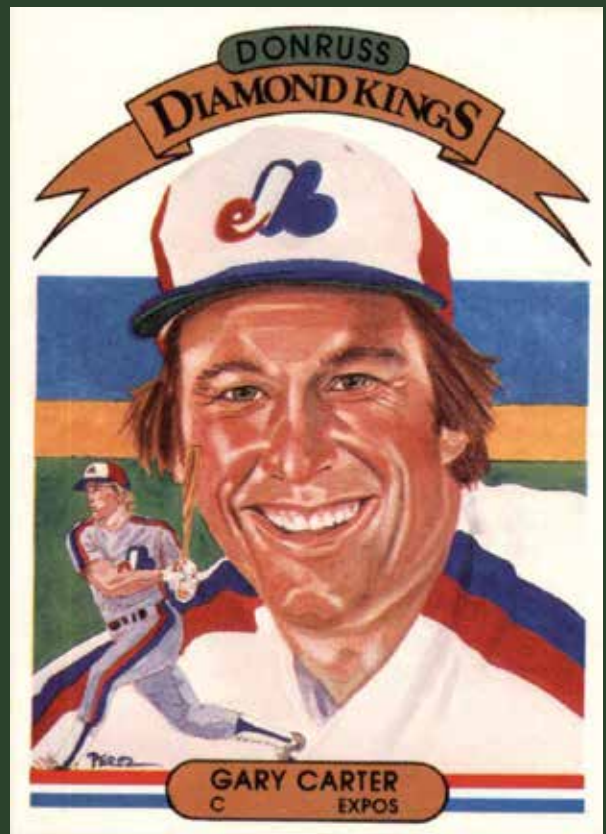
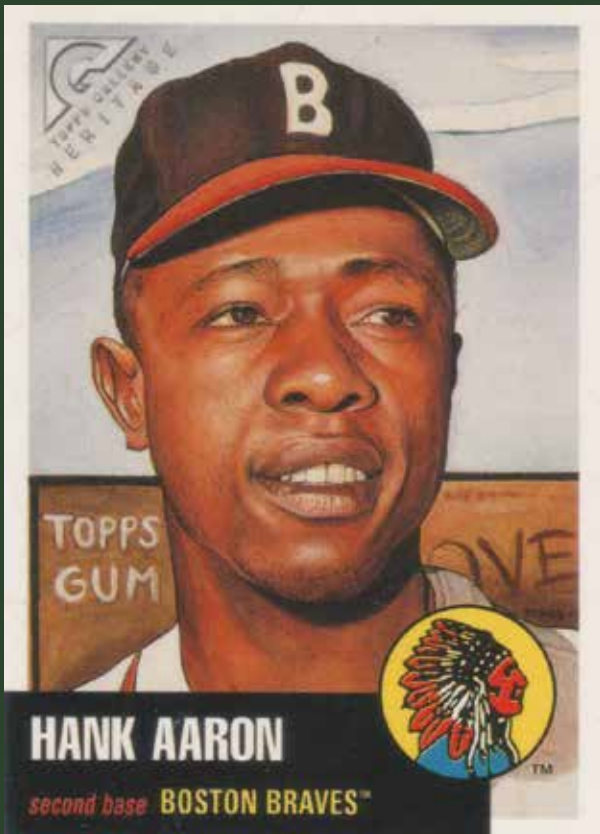
But as novelist Jerzy Kosiński wrote, “The principles of true art is not to portray, but to evoke.”

The same can be said about sports cards. Like art, the value is not in what they’re made of. It’s in what they evoke. It’s how they make you feel.

Art and cards are timeless. Both are creative expressions. They mark history and conjure memories. They tell stories and mold culture. To appreciate them requires imagination.

Maybe that’s why they have collaborated so naturally for more than a century. From the colorized images on the early 1900s tobacco cards to the widely popular Topps Project 2020 today, sometimes art and sports cards are one in the same.



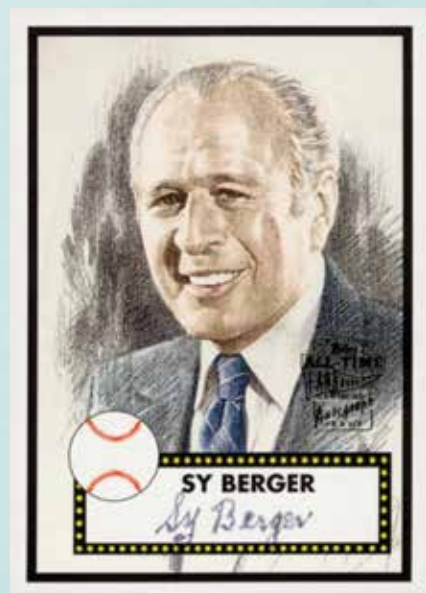


Launching the Modern Baseball Card



The evolution of baseball cards took a huge leap forward in the early 1950s as Topps and Bowman battled for dominance in the industry. Led by visionary executive Sy Berger, who is referred to as “the father of the modern baseball card,” Topps brought unique size, designs, player stats, and overall beautiful eye appeal to post-World War II baseball cards.

Following the groundbreaking 1952 Topps set, the 1953 release derived its images from miniature oil paintings. The result is the most iconic uniting of artwork and sports cards ever produced. “I designed that 1953 card and was instrumental in getting the painting done,” Berger once told *Sports Collectors Digest*. “We had a guy doing those paintings a mile-a-minute. A little off-the-wall guy named Moishe. He did the bulk of the cards.”





In 2010, more than 100 original paintings for the 1953 set hit Robert Edward Auctions in what was dubbed “The Sy Berger Collection.” In 2018, the Satchel Paige painting resurfaced in another sale that commanded \$45,000.

That 1953 set is largely responsible for inspiring one of today’s premier sports artists. James Fiorentino, who has painted professionally since he was a teenager and is behind some of the most popular art cards of the last 20 years, says the set is one of his all-time favorites. “One of my mentors and friends when I was in high school and college was Gerry Dvorak, who was one of the original ‘53 artists. I just love the cards he painted for that set.”

In 1999, Fiorentino realized a dream when he created paintings for Topps Gallery Heritage—20 baseball cards styled after that iconic 1953 set featuring names such as



Derek Jeter, Hank Aaron, Ken Griffey Jr. and Barry Bonds. Two years later, Upper Deck commissioned Fiorentino to create more than 70 paintings for the Fiorentino Collection. The cards were inserted in Upper Deck Legends products for baseball, football, basketball and hockey.

“They were all black-and-white watercolor paintings and will always be one of my best sets,” he says. Fiorentino says he’s currently working on a set for Topps to release in 2021 that features card-size paintings. “This will be the first time I am working card-size for an original painting, and I’m really excited about it!”



“ They were all black-and-white watercolor paintings and will always be one of my best sets.”

James Fiorentino, artist of the Upper Deck Fiorentino Collection



Paying Tribute to the Kings



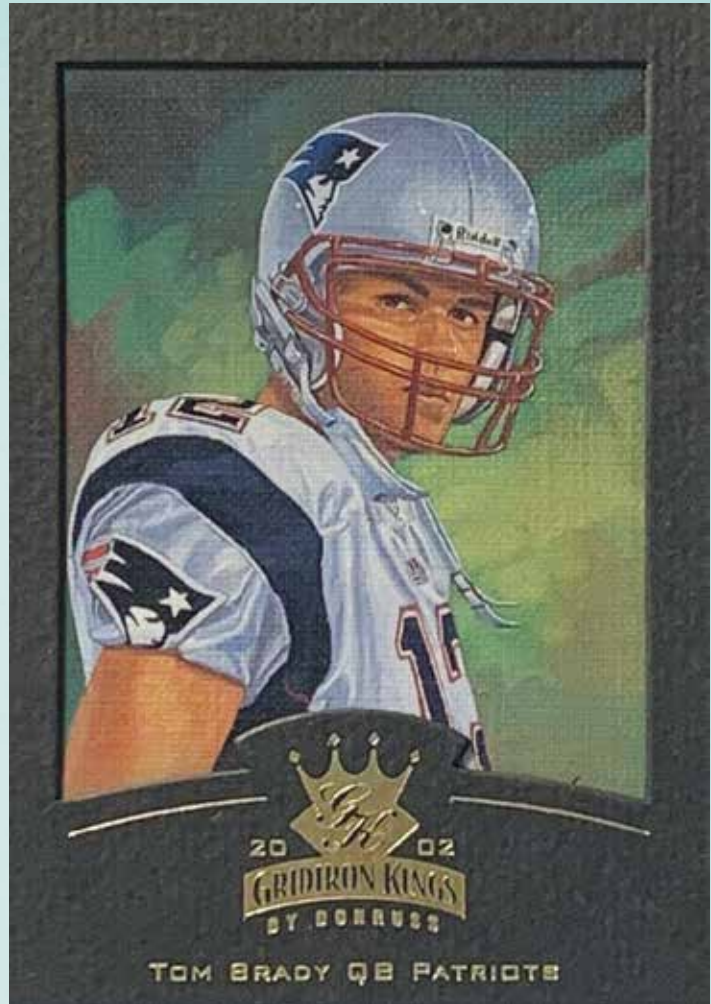
Two of the longest-standing art card programs are baseball's Diamond Kings and football's Gridiron Kings. Diamond Kings dates back to the second Donruss set in 1982, featuring more than 20 painting cards with a portrait and action illustration of the featured player. The theme has been used in Donruss products ever since and even launched a full Donruss Diamond Kings product in 1992. Canvas-style card stock, elegant border frames, autographs and memorabilia swatches have been added over the years.

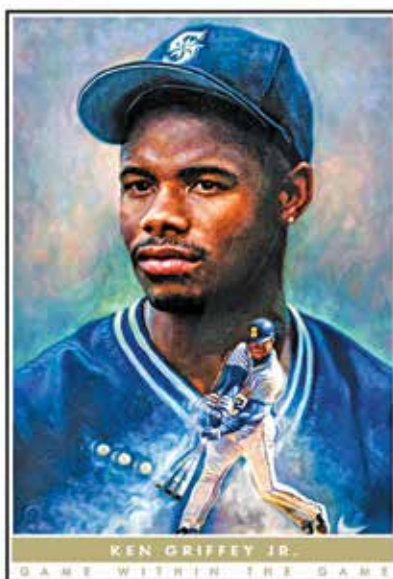
It took more than 10 years for the theme to jump to football. Gridiron Kings appeared in 1999 Donruss football as inserts of more than 30 stars, legends and rookies. A few legends, such as the Walter Payton, Johnny Unitas and Jim Brown autographed a limited run of their cards. Gridiron Kings, in some form, has been produced in most years over the past two decades.

Topps Art Projects



In the spring of 2020, Topps launched a unique program partnering with 20 of the most talented artists in the world. Painters, graphic designers, tattoo artists, and even jewelry designers participated in Project 2020 to reimagine 20 iconic Topps baseball cards dating back to 1952. Each artist recreated all 20 cards for a total of 400 cards. Two cards were unveiled each business day and available for purchase for 48 hours. The print run of each card was determined by the number of sales.



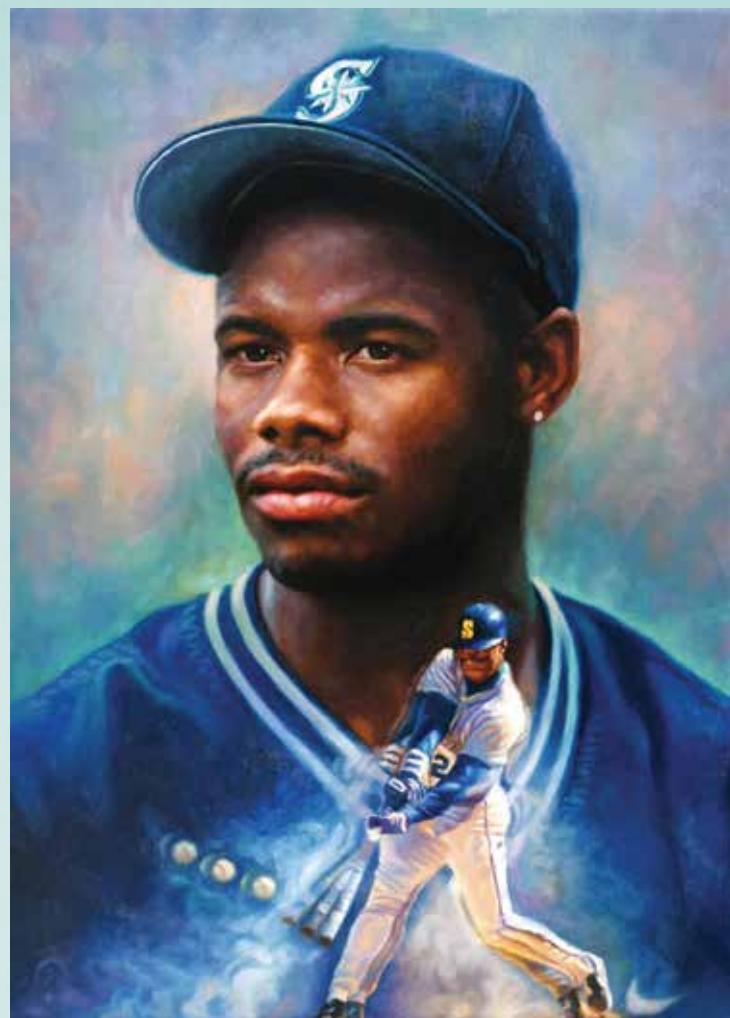


Project 2020 quickly caught on, creating a frenzy of online activity, especially when most people were stuck at home during the COVID pandemic. The creative expressions of so many different artists gave collectors new ways to appreciate the cards. Jewelry designer Ben Baller's recreation of Mike Trout's 2011 Topps Update card sold nearly 35,000 copies. The artists also promoted their work to their followers, further boosting the appreciation for artwork and cards.

For the Game Within The Game project, Topps partnered with portrait artist Paul Jennis to create paintings featuring baseball stars in action in the foreground and a larger portrait image in the background. A new creation was released each month in the form of a trading card, 10-by-14-inch print numbered to 99 copies, and a print hand-numbered to 1.

“As a portrait artist, I’m paying tribute to the player and the baseball card. I think it’s added value.”

Paul Jennis, artist of the Topps Game Within The Game project



Jennis says the unique attraction to marrying artwork and cards is being able to collect the player and the artist. “To me, it becomes more valuable than just a static photograph,” he says. “I want you to enjoy the essence of that player. I don’t want it to be more about me than the guy I’m trying to portray. As a portrait artist, I’m paying tribute to the player and the baseball card. I think it’s added value. You can do so much more with the art to expand on the honor [of the player] or take a point of view.”

Artistic sports cards may be more popular than ever. MLB.com writer Michael Clair describes baseball cards as “little portals to baseball history” and “souvenirs of the years we’ve lived and the games we’ve watched.”

They may just be ink and paper, but for fans and collectors, they can be priceless.

When Sports Cards Create ART

Traditionally, art is used to create sports cards. But some artists are using cards to create their art. Tim Carroll is considered one of the most unique sports artists in the industry. Essentially, he slices up trading cards to create mosaic artwork resembling iconic cards. Carroll recreates even the smallest aspects of the original card, such as borders, logos, signatures, serial-numbering, and sometimes even a graded card slab. One piece can require thousands of cards and take 100 hours or more to create.

Carroll has recreated iconic cards such as the T206 Honus Wagner, 1952 Topps Willie Mays, 1986-87 Fleer Michael Jordan Rookie Card, and even a T206 Ty Cobb in a PSA slab. His piece styled after 1955 Topps Sandy Koufax hangs in the Shoebox Treasures baseball card exhibit at the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Laine Harper, owner of When It Was a Game Sports Art, found a way for collectors to enjoy their favorite sports cards by creating watercolor paintings of cards. The idea began when she painted a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle for her boyfriend. Now she paints and sells her original work at sports card and memorabilia shows.

“Sports cards are art themselves,” Harper says. “It starts with the photographer capturing the athlete at his or her best, and then the process of selecting and editing that photo. Then there is the design process to create the card. It’s all an artistic process. When I paint, I try to bring movement to my paintings while also showing the athlete in the best portrayal possible.”

