

Baseball card art, how did they do it in 1953?



By George Vrechek

Patrick Prickett of Los Angeles enjoys collecting vintage cards – in detail. He has written an online article about the photos used to create cards for more than one set. He calls such cards “crossovers,” like the Sheldon Jones series pictured. In the process, he also found several photos referenced by the Topps artists for the 1953 paintings including Mays, Podres, Feller, Mantle, Ford, Mathews, Jackie Robinson, Black and Reese. Six Cardinals were very close, or at least from the same photo shoot.

I had always wondered about those incredibly detailed paintings used for the 1953 Topps set. After seeing the photos Prickett found, I had even more wondering to do. Did the artists draw free hand from the photos, did they paint over the photos or did they use some other means of achieving realism? I decided to start digging a little further to figure out the 1953 artwork, but let’s look at Sheldon Jones first for a sense of the options available.



The ageless Sheldon Jones must have been camera shy since one image was used six times, left to right: 1948 through 1951 Bowman, 1952 Berk Ross and 1952 Topps

AN ARRAY OF TECHNIQUES

The Jones sequence is a good example of how card technology evolved prior to the color photography of the late 1950s.

Printing in black and white, sepia or other shades of one color, as the 1948 Bowman Jones, was the same approach used on sets like the 1939/1940 Play Balls, most E and W cards from the 1920s, Zeenuts, exhibits and Batter-Ups. The red background 1949 Bowman would fit in with a few issues like the 1941 Goudeys that ran one or two splashes of color.

However, most issuers wanted to get attention with some realistic colors added, like the 1952 Berk Ross of Jones. Coloring photos had been going on for years. Research led me back to a 1910 *American Journal of Photography* with all kinds of advice on colorizing black and white prints. There was tinting with watercolors or dyes, building up colors with successive layers of paint and adding in elements, sometimes when the prints were still wet. Japanese and British artists had been colorizing photos since the 1880s.

In 1949 Kodak came up with the more automatic flexichrome process using dyes on layers of a photo. I checked with Dave Hornish who runs The Topps Archives blog. Hornish commented, "The '52s are an odd case as I think they intentionally tried to mix things up, especially with the backgrounds, so all kinds of approaches could have been taken. The '52 Topps Sheldon Jones looks flexi to me." Flexichrome was used on some Topps cards into the mid-1960s.

Topps and Bowman argued over licensing rights. Players frequently signed with both companies, not bothering to read any fine print. Hornish found it interesting that Topps used photos in 1952, while Bowman used art, and they switched approaches in 1953.

A few issues like MP&Co from the 1940s and some of the strip cards from the 1920s look like an artist was hired to draw sketches – quickly.

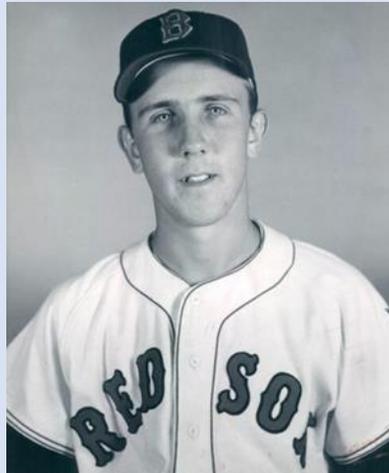
Cards that look like realistic paintings are on the higher end of the popularity scale, depending on how well they were executed. Goudeys, Diamond Stars, 1941 Play Balls and 1953 Topps especially had the artistic look. Seeing all these Jones cards together in Prickett's parade, tells you that the artists didn't stray far from the photos – if at all.

1953 TOPPS AND DVORAK'S INTERVIEW

Topps artist Gerry Dvorak (1914-1999) was interviewed in 1984 by Paul Green for *Baseball Cards* magazine and discussed the 1953 paintings. The five or six artists Topps used for the paintings were not employees. Dvorak worked for Famous Studios as an animator, where Woody Gelman and Ben Solomon worked before affiliating with Topps. Dvorak moonlighted and got \$25 per painting (about \$243 each in today's dollars).

Gelman gave the artists 8 by 10 inch black and whites and told them the uniform colors to use. While color photos would have been handier, photos available to Topps then were customarily taken in the more economical black and white. Topps wanted head shots or busts, but in the later series several full-body poses crept in. Many such paintings omitted the team name on the jerseys (Carey, Fricano, Kline, Loes, Lund, Lindell and Newhouser), perhaps to make it easier to fix, if someone were traded.

Dvorak said he used opaque watercolors on about 50 paintings. He did not paint Mantle or Mays. In some cases, artists didn't even know the players' names. They could paint whatever they wanted in the backgrounds, although if backgrounds were too plain, Topps told them to put in more detail. Dvorak spiced up his Dick Brodowski card with the unique night game backdrop.



Left, photo of Dick Brodowski (1932-2019), Photo by The Stanley Weston Archive/Getty Images; right, Brodowski's 1953 Topps card. His 6-year (9 wins and 11 losses) career was interrupted by 1953-54 military service.

Dvorak's paintings of Mathews, Schoendienst, Brodowski, Bobby Morgan, Nixon and Labine seem more detailed than others like Virgil Trucks with a 9 p.m. shadow and a bushy eyebrow group that includes Kolloway, Byrne, Garver and Dropo.

Faces painted by some artists are warmer (red) than others which are cool (whiter); compare Lepcio with Jeffcoat. You wonder how the artists would have been able to (perhaps) pick correct hair and eye colors from the black and white photos. I guess that's why they were making the big bucks.

Artists often used the same buildings and fences in the backgrounds. However, the players' faces were in great detail. No one has a funny nose, eye, mouth or even eye lash. In the photos that Prickett found, the details match almost perfectly to the cards. Following Prickett's lead, I found 15 more photos that matched the 1953 Topps artwork.



A horizontally flipped 1952 Morgan photo had to be the model for 1953. The artist just needed to get the NY logo on his hat correct.

Perhaps it was the same artist who moved around the little, "Monopoly game" house beyond the fence on all these cards.

ACHIEVING REALISM

How did they do it? Magic? Magicians don't give away secrets of the trade, and people doing realistic art don't seem to advertise their process either. Dvorak didn't comment on how he achieved such realism, nor have any of the other Topps artists or employees commented publicly to my knowledge. However, if you poke around enough, you find an answer.

My own experience tells me there are challenges in painting realistically. Painting a natural scene can be fun and creative depicting your "impression" of a photo. No one is going to notice or care that your painted tree has 20 branches rather than 25 branches in the photo.

However, when you try to paint people who are supposed to look like someone you know, like family members, it is an entirely new ball game. If an eye is out of whack by $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch, you notice it. If their nose is too pronounced, it looks funny. Even if you have the proportions right, it is hard to get details on a canvas with a lot of bumps. Watercolor paper is grainy, and a brush fills in little spots between the bumps. Painting on a smooth board can make it easier, but then the paint slides around.



Dvorak's dramatic touch is evident in the paintings of Schoendienst and Mathews.

ILLUSTRATORS' OPTIONS

What process did Topps artists use? First, they were getting paid to paint players who were supposed to look like the real thing, not some artist's impression. They weren't getting paid by the hour; it was only the results that counted. Commercial artists or illustrators worked quickly. It would have been silly not to take advantage of every shortcut. This stuff was not going to hang in museums or get auctioned off for hundreds of thousands of dollars – until, of course, much later!

Among the options available, I have learned from talking to artists and illustrators, were painting over a photograph, tracing a photograph onto another surface, transferring a photo onto another surface and projecting photos onto a surface. Kay Smith, 97, the Artist Laureate of Illinois, has painted or taught painting with watercolors since World War II. When she worked with illustrators, others used all sorts of devices to turn out work efficiently. Along with others I talked to, there were derogatory or apologetic references to any "artists" using such techniques.

OPAQUE PROJECTION

Terry Corman with Firehouse Image Center in Indianapolis has 30 years' experience in photography, printing and art. Corman took a look at our Dick Brodowski and commented on the process, "The history of the technique goes back to the original Dutch and Flemish painters using what is called a camera obscura. The technique is simply to take flat art, or in your case, a baseball photo, and project it on another flat surface and scale it to a larger size."



Terry Corman, photo Vrechek

Technology employed in camera obscuras morphed over the centuries into opaque projectors with a series of exotic names. Leonhard Euler demonstrated an “episcope” around 1756. Many were large contraptions that were not very handy.

Episcope in Museum of Science and Technology, Belgrade, Miloš Jurišić, Wikimedia commons



In 1947, Les Kouba and two partners formed Artograph, Inc. in Minnesota and came up with an opaque projector made initially out of junk shop parts. Key requirements were a strong light source, mirrors and adjustable lenses. Another projector available in the early 1950s was the Vu-Lyte by Charles Beseler Co. of nearby East Orange, New Jersey.

Projectors could be mounted vertically to project onto a drawing board or could be aimed horizontally at an easel. If the light source wasn't very strong, they needed a darkened room. Projectors allowed an artist to paint on a surface following the outlines of the projected image.

Norman Rockwell didn't advertise his technique either but acknowledged that is how he started his work – with a photograph and its projection. In a 1969 interview he said, “I call myself an illustrator because my pictures tell a story.... Of course, if someone calls me an artist, I don't argue.” Topps artists must have had access to opaque projectors in 1953.

THE DETAILS

Projecting saves time and assures accuracy, however, is not quite like painting by the numbers. When asked what the artists had to do to achieve realism, Corman responded, “The human brain, when it believes a realistic painting, believes it when everything is in proportion. Get the eyes, or mouth, or the size of the head just a little out of proportion or placement, and blam! it doesn't work.

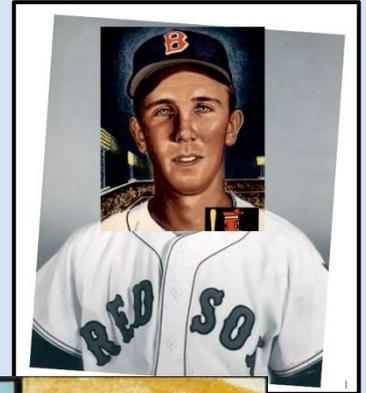
“Realism is painted in small to tiny areas to get detail, then the rest is done with loose technique to give the viewer relief from too much detail. For example, look at the eyes in a photo and the eyes in the painting. The viewer will look at the black and white, and forgive the lack of highlights in the lower pupils. But the color artist knows that for realism, he has to add highlights to the lower pupils.

“The photo of Dick Brodowski was shot indoors against a grey background, and is well done because it doesn't have dark shadows, or blown out highlights, on the face. In reviewing the painting made from the photo, you can see that he had to paint a light halo around the cap so that it would not be indistinguishable from the night sky. He also had to darken the subject, particularly the left side of the neck and face to show the direction of the lighting. The halo and the extra dark shadows are not something that an artist of realism would pick to do. But, that said, when a pack of cards was opened, and the quick search for a Mantle or a Mays began, there would be a bit of visual interest coming from contrast of the day and night game renditions.”

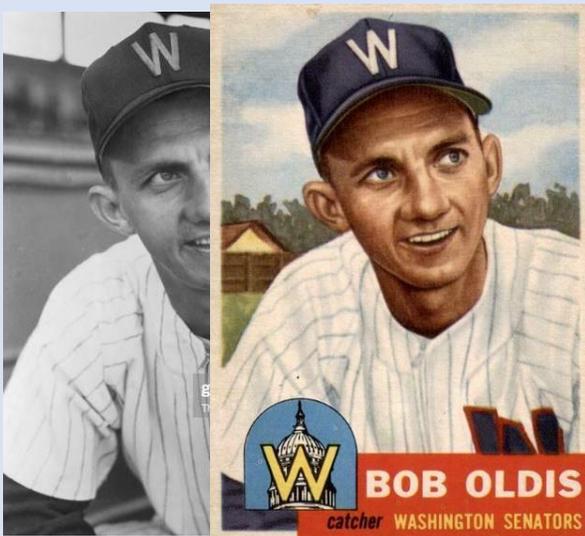


Left to right, Brodowski's face on the Topps card, the photo used for the model straightened slightly, and the painting made semi-transparent and superimposed over the photo - exactly

The artists had plenty to do even with the help of the projector. The black and white photos highlighted light and darkness, but the color selection, subtle shading and detail was up to the artists, to say nothing of the challenge to get the brush and paint to replicate what they saw. They did a remarkable, sometimes dramatic, job.



Original artwork for Newsom, Pellagrini, Niarhos, Shea and a typical back (Judson) with writing and glue residue – owner



The photo used for Bob Oldis and the resulting card match down to the eyelashes. Photo Getty Images

1953 PAINTING COLLECTOR

An avid 1953 Topps collector has acquired several of the paintings used for the cards. He took a closer look at his paintings for us and confirmed the significant detail, subtle brush strokes and layers of paint used. He commented, for example, on the eyes "which are only the size of a pencil eraser, the iris isn't just blue...it actually has the normal variations of color or fading to black and brown around the outside perimeter." He noted the surface looked like illustration board, there were no apparent signs of

penciled outlines and the backs had hand-written player names.

The 1953 set included 274 cards. Nine known unused cards were also painted. The 1989 Topps Guernsey auction included paintings of six super-stars. The 2010 REA auction of Berger's Topps paintings covered 112 more. Forty others have sold. Therefore, 58% of the original paintings have surfaced in sales - talk about a tough wantlist.

PAINTING OVER PHOTOS?

I asked Corman, wouldn't it have been easier to paint over the photographs? Corman didn't think so. He thought they were looking for a painting appearance and the free-hand background scenes added to the impression. If the artist didn't need the photo background, he would have to paint over it, wait for the paint to dry, paint another plain color background, wait for that to dry and then paint in whatever scene he wanted. He would have to be careful as he "cut around" a player's head to not have it look like the head was lifted out of the scene. It would have been easier for them to project the photograph on a smooth surface that would hold the details.

Topps artists likely took an 8 by 10 black and white photo and projected an enlarged (or reduced) image of the desired portion of the photo (usually a head shot) onto a surface that would give them a roughly a 3.25 wide and 4.75 inch high image – as required by Topps. Topps layout people added the red or black name block, team logo and produced a 2.625 by 3.75-inch card, which was then photographed and printed.

While tracing could have been an option, they would have had to work from photos that were enlarged or reduced to the right size, deal with subtle lines of shade, conceal or erase pencil lines and then continually compare their painting to the source material. Projections would have been faster.

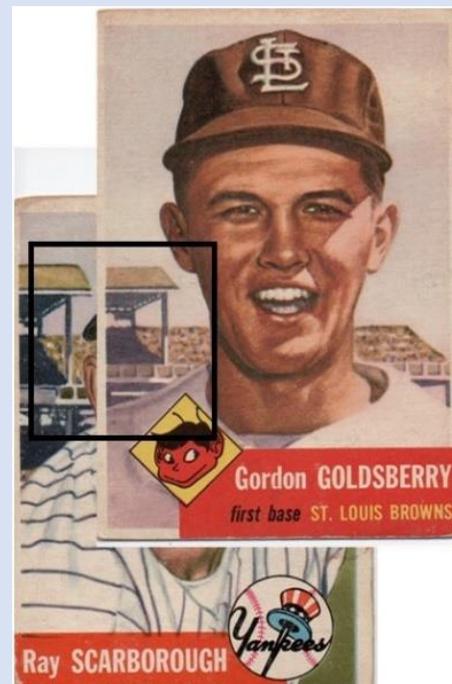
MORE CLUES

Another clue to the use of an opaque projector is in the background of Scarborough's and Goldsberry's cards. The same grandstand appears on both cards, but it is scaled differently – by different projection. Three Pirates also have grandstand elements that appear to be re-used at different scales.

The same grandstand is scaled differently on two cards.

Three Pirates pose in front of an upper deck with elements repeated.

Due to copyrights, photos of other players matching the paintings are not shown here, but if you surf the web, you will eventually find images for the players we found. Close inspection reveals little differences – Joe Black's necklace has faded, the ball in May's glove has stitching that is a little off, a button on Pellagrini's undershirt is missing, and Ford's hat doesn't cover his eyebrow.



FLEXICHROME?

For an additional confirmation, I contacted Adam Warshaw who has posted his views on Net54 as to the paint and the surface. Warshaw commented, "My guess is gouache (an opaque gum-base watercolor) on illustration board, definitely not flexichromes....The texture of the finished items (I saw some at the National) is all wrong for canvas unless the artist gesso'ed the hell out of it then sanded it, which seems unlikely for hundreds of small pictures, and the backs are wrong for canvas. Plastic would not be a medium of choice for works like this. You can turn out nice stuff on plastic but not with the textures and stokes showing on these cards at the speed needed for doing a few hundred paintings for a commercial production anywhere near as easily as on board. Oils seem unlikely. No, commercial illustrations churned out for a commercial production are most likely gouache on board."

Pellagrini and Hitchcock posed in front of the same fence painted differently.

A cartoon-like outfielder is going for a ball over Lipon's shoulder.

FUN WITH THE PAINTINGS

It was fun getting the 1953 Topps out for another look. In addition to the Topps Gum ads on the fences, I noticed the little cartoon man in the outfield behind Johnny Lipon and the same tan fence behind Hitchcock that got painted dark green for Pellagrini.

After 1953, Topps artists cleaned their brushes and went on to other projects – or shall we say other projections.

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