



Baseball *time machines*

Big-league teams, hall-of-fame players and private collectors look to Sean Kane to capture their love of the game

BY CHARLOTTE PRONG PARKHILL
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Sean Kane vividly remembers his first visit to Wrigley Field, home of his beloved Chicago Cubs. The stadium, in the heart of the North Side, is surrounded by pavement.

“Then you walk up the steps and it’s this emerald green field that just blows you away. It’s overwhelming because of the contrast. That feeling – it’s so cool. I fell in love with the game at that age – five, six years old,” he says.

In what now seems like a charming holdout from the big business of Major

League Baseball, Wrigley Field didn’t get lights until 1988. The team only played day games.

“I grew up a Cubs fan. I used to watch the games at my grandparent’s house,” he says, of those kindergarten afternoons.

“That was my baseball afternoon love affair, on grandma’s floor, watching the Cubs, drawing pictures.”

Kane didn’t imagine that as an adult, he’d find his own place in baseball, as an artist sought after for his rich portraits of players, painted on gloves matching those from the time period in which they played. But his joyful and pure enthusiasm for the game,



Whether depicting the story of ‘Casey at the Bat’ or honouring the legacy of ‘Yogi’ Berra or Minnie Minoso, artist Sean Kane tracks down gloves from the appropriate era to use as his canvases.



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his curiosity for its history, and his talent as a successful illustrator led to what now seems an almost pre-ordained path.

From his Guelph home-based art studio, surrounded by vintage gloves, art supplies, and books about baseball, he regularly works with major-league teams and high-end collectors. His paintings have been exhibited at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City and at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art in Tulsa, Okla.

Recently, Kane's phone rang and he found himself talking to one of his favourite hall-of-famers, former Montreal Expo Andre Dawson.

"He called me. I just about fell off my chair. He played for the Cubs when I was in high school. He won his MVP award there. Kind of a big deal!" says Kane, who created a commissioned portrait for the eight-time all-star.

Kane's unusual career began when he painted a cartoonish image of a ballgame on an old glove and wore it in the stands during a spring training game in 2001. People loved it – and Padres player Tony Gwynn signed it – but the idea gestated for 10 years while he worked as an illustrator for magazines, newspapers and design agencies, with that first glove hanging in his office.

Then kids came along, the publishing industry changed, and Kane was looking for ways to stay busy as his client base shifted. He painted a realistic portrait of Jackie Robinson, the first African American major league player, and cold emailed a photo of it to baseball executive Dan Evans, who worked for the Los Angeles Dodgers at the time.

Evans loved it, so Kane took a risk and turned up, uninvited, to the 2012 winter baseball meetings in Nashville. He brought three completed portrait gloves – the Jackie Robinson, Ernie Banks, and Hank Greenberg.

"Within 48 hours there was an article on NBC Sports, ESPN. . . . I was up all night answering phone calls and emails, just from the buzz. So it really validated the concept

for me. It quickly snowballed," Kane says. "To get in front of baseball people and get the thumbs up was pretty exciting."

From researchers and club professionals to current and former players and dedicated fans, the baseball industry has a small-town feel. Through word-of-mouth and recommendations, Kane's work quickly became sought after.

He has visited 17 major-league stadiums, sometimes participating in events and presentations of his work. Commissioned portraits include three-time Gold Glove winner Shane Victorino and hall of famer Jim Thome of the Philadelphia Phillies; famed Baltimore Oriole Cal Ripken Jr., whose image is painted on an actual golden glove as a fundraiser for his charitable foundation; and a portrait of Houston Astros great Jeff Bagwell that was presented as a 50th birthday gift from a friend.

Ted Williams' daughter purchased a glove celebrating "The Kid," with a .406 batting average for the Boston Red Sox, and asked that a red number 9 be added to the simple but intense portrait.

Kane also carves out time to work on projects that feel personally meaningful to him, ones that often manifest as simple black-and-white portraits on vintage gloves. Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, painted on a signature-model DiMaggio glove from the 1940s, was recently snapped up by a folk-art collector who wants first dibs on Kane's next vintage piece.

That glove will likely feature Babe Ruth. Kane has been waiting years for just the right glove – a left-hander from the 1920s that's a close match for one of Ruth's real gloves, seen in the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. – and he finally has it.

For these special vintage gloves, "I don't want them to be (cluttered) like the back of a baseball card. I want there to be some breathing room, some room for curiosity. Who's this guy? Maybe I'll go look him up."

Kane sources his gloves from a few antique dealers and sometimes scours eBay. He also does extensive player and team research

and incorporates his findings into the final piece – a typeface from the 1930s, a stripe that matches one found on a uniform, a boxscore from a significant game.

"My approach is that these gloves act as time machines for me to transport the viewer to whenever that player played," Kane says.

The entire process, from research to design, painting and framing, can take anywhere from 60 to 120 hours.

Paint can't be removed from a glove, so Kane starts by creating a sketch on a computer. The main portrait is usually a photo reference, but he draws each of the other design elements – typeface, banners and flags – by hand, then scans them and places them into the sketch.

When working with a client, he can go through a few variations before settling on a final design. Then each of the elements are painstakingly hand-painted on the gloves.

Kane says clients typically pay \$3,200 to \$3,500 US per painted glove.

Kane is gearing up to put together his biggest historical research and art project to date – an exhibit in 2020 that will hang at his alma mater, Butler University in Indianapolis.

The project will allow him to explore and share the cultural influence of the sport beyond Major League Baseball, one that includes women, a rag-tag third league, and the groundbreaking work of the Negro League.

The state of Indiana doesn't have a major-league ball team, but it has a rich baseball history, Kane says. In the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League – like the movie "A League of Their Own" – Indiana had two teams. There was a Federal League for a couple of years, around 1914; and the Indiana Hoosiers were the national collegiate champions.

"The 100th anniversary of the Negro League's very first game is the month that my exhibit is going to open, and it happened in Indianapolis. The guy who wrote the music to 'Take Me Out to the Ball

Game' is from Indianapolis."

Kane has been slowly acquiring gloves that will be used to reflect these stories, some of them more than a century old. There's one glove from 1908 – it's almost completely flat and not padded, like a glorified gardening glove – but it has a richness and a history and vintage charm that almost can't be captured in a photograph.

As he prepares for the Butler exhibit, he's also still working on commissions. Kane has built a reputation as a collaborative artist, taking the lead with his artistic vision but ensuring the piece reflects the specific memories and desires of the buyer.

Jonathan Cole, an African American architect from Kansas City, Missouri, is one of those clients. His firm, Pendulum Studio, has designed 26 minor-league baseball stadiums. He has purchased two of Kane's pieces and says he is considering a third.

"What Sean's work allows us to do is tell an interesting story," Cole says.

Cole first met the artist the year Kane showed up at baseball's winter meetings. Cole was there with Buck O'Neil, a Negro League player with the Kansas City Monarchs and the first African American coach in the major leagues, and Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

"Buck O'Neil was such a quiet presence and an icon," Cole says, and he wanted that reflected in a portrait glove.

"Sean curated my thoughts," Cole says.

"I'm incredibly impressed with his skill. And as a designer – the ability to listen and the collaboration between us – he's an artist with a specific focus, and he's at the top of his game."

Dr. William Greenhill of Union, Ky., has decorated his pediatric dental office with a baseball theme. After seeing Kane's three-glove piece depicting the story of "Casey at the Bat," Greenhill commissioned Kane to create a similar piece, painted across four gloves, because he has such vivid childhood memories of the poem.

"Everything Sean does is high quality. I

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Working in his Guelph home studio, Sean Kane paints a baseball glove for hall-of-fame player Andre Dawson.

felt a real connection, and that he understood what I wanted. He's very sincere and personable," Greenhill says.

And his piece is very personalized. Kane mounted the gloves on a background reproduction of "Casey at the Bat" as it originally appeared in the San Francisco Examiner in 1888 with one notable difference: he created a vintage newspaper ad for Greenhill's dental practice and embedded it on the page.

Bob Kelderhouse, a collector from the Chicago area, has also purchased two pieces and is considering a third.

"I so respect Sean's work. He's as good as any artist I've ever seen. His work is so authentic and accurate, and he's so creative in his use of adding facts into the artwork."

As a child, everyone played baseball in the streets from morning till night, Kelderhouse says. He played second base on his Little League team, and idolized Cubs' second baseman Nellie Fox.

"He sent me his own boyhood glove," Kane says. "That was very trusting, and I felt so grateful to help cement those childhood memories with a depiction of (Fox)."

To personalize the piece, Kane agreed to Kelderhouse's request to diminish the size of Fox's ever-present enormous wad of chewing tobacco.

As Kane's reputation grows, he knows he can't scale up this kind of work. Each original piece must go through the painstaking process of research, sourcing the gloves, design and collaboration, painting, and then the final shipping or travel and presentation.

Beyond his exhibit next spring at Butler, he's got other goals. He hopes to exhibit in Japan, where baseball is immensely popular, and to achieve the Holy Grail: a piece in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Kane is still, partly, that awed Cubs' fan he was in boyhood, the one who gaped in wonder at Wrigley Field. He's been able to take his children, Felix and Sabine, into the broadcast booths of the Milwaukee Brewers and Toronto Blue Jays.

And, if he ever gets to do a presentation on the field at Toronto's Rogers Centre, he wants his children there beside him. His love of baseball loops around the bases and back home again. 🇨🇦



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