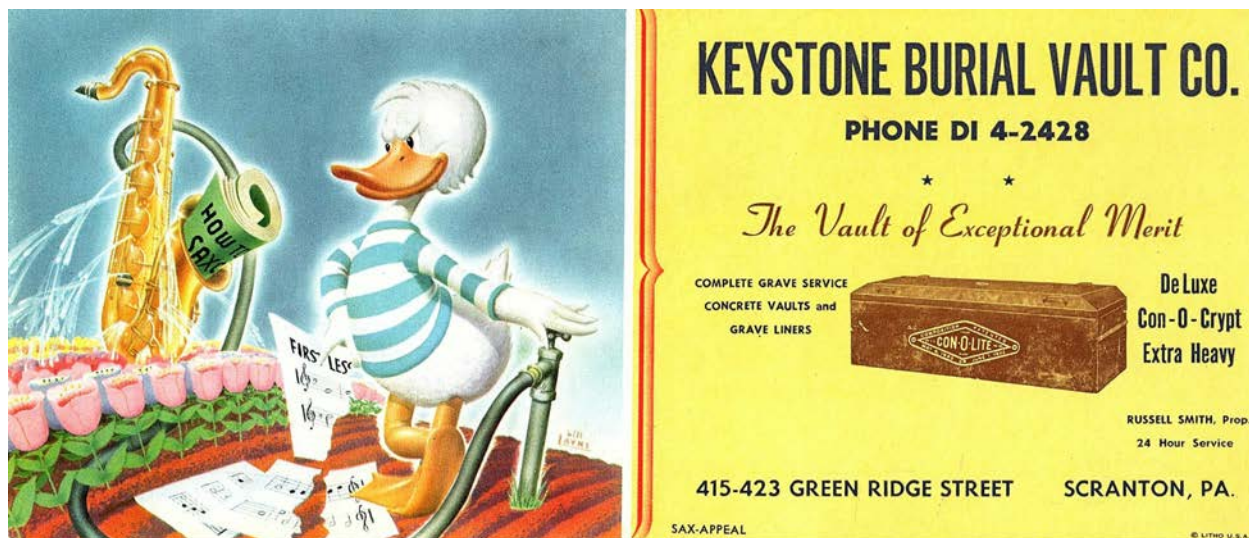


## Beyond a Disney Background Painter: The Ephemera art of Bill Layne

By David A. Bossert



(One in a series of advertising ink blotter for KEYSTONE BURIAL VAULT CO. titled *SAX-APPEAL* that featured a cartoony illustration by Bill Layne. Note the dimensional duck character that has a Disneyesque quality reminiscent of Donald Duck with an angry expression.)

I am guilty of regularly falling down a rabbit-hole when it comes to collecting ephemera. Maybe you have similar inclinations in your collecting. Not long ago, I came across an advertising ink blotter for the Keystone Burial Vault Company that had a cartoon illustration of an anthropomorphic duck. The image had a somewhat familiar feel to it—a Disneyesque quality if you will. It was signed “Bill Layne,” which sent me on a research excursion dropping the work I was supposed to be doing at the time.



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THE PARADE

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FROSTY FROLICS

(Two more in the series of advertising ink blotter for KEYSTONE BURIAL VAULT CO., the top one is titled *THE PARADE* and the bottom one is *FROSTY FROLICS* which feature cartoony illustrations by Bill Layne. *THE PARADE* and *FROSTY FROLICS* each feature anthropomorphic animals doing rather cheery activities considering they are for a burial vault company. Courtesy Private Collection)

My feeling was spot on. Layne was in fact a background artist for the Walt Disney Studios in the 1940s for several years before embarking on a robust free-lance commercial art career. He returned to the Walt Disney Studios in 1958 to paint backgrounds on Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and all the subsequent features through *Robin Hood* (1973) including

the Winnie the Pooh featurettes that eventually became *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977).<sup>i</sup>

It is important to know that many of the Disney Studios' artists engaged in free-lance work for no other reason than to make extra money. Often the free-lance jobs paid much better than the salaried positions at the studios. The free-lance work also offered a change of pace and style from working on a feature film, which often could last several years depending on one's discipline. Free-lance jobs gave the artists satisfaction of seeing their artwork produced in a final form such as a calendar, ink blotter, or other ephemera.

I speak from experience in that I did an enormous amount of freelance work during my 32-year career at Walt Disney Animation Studios. The unspoken Cardinal rule was not to work on anything that was competitive to the Studio. In other words, don't work on another studios animated feature if you were working on a Disney animated feature film. That was easy for me as much of the free-lance was for non-competitive commercials, television shows, documentary, or education films.



(Walt Disney's Make Mine Music (1946) film poster. Courtesy Heritage Auctions, HA.com)

William "Bill" Layne was born on March 25, 1911, in Berkeley, California. After graduating High School, he received his art training at California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. From there, Layne moved to Chicago where he began his commercial art career in a display studio.<sup>ii</sup> Three years later, he moved to Los Angeles where he started his first stint working at the Walt Disney Studios as a background painter. Layne was uncredited on Disney's *Make Mine Music* (1946).

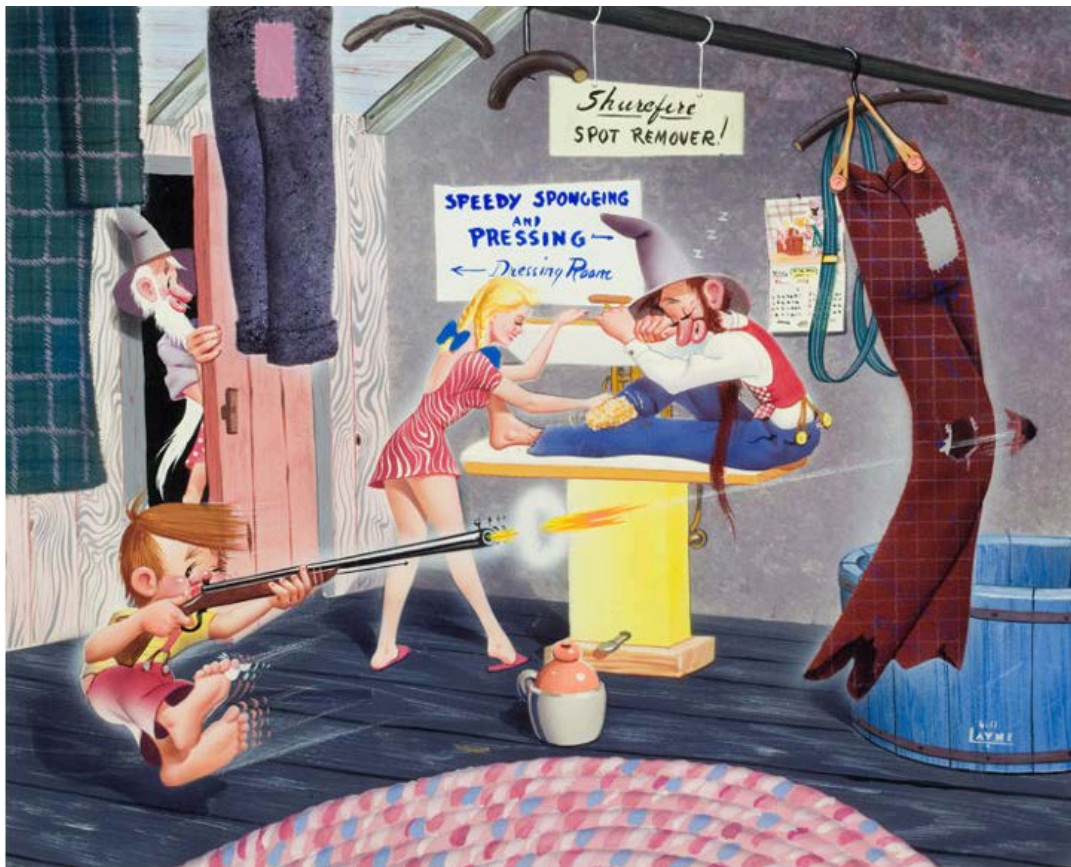
Layne left the Walt Disney Studios several years later to pursue a robust free-lance career. He did numerous illustrations on advertising ink blotters, it was during this period that he did the bulk of his illustrations for Brown & Bigelow, one of the largest publishers of calendars and other promotional products.



(A pin-up girl illustration by Bill Layne from a Brown & Bigelow calendar in the 1950s. Notice how Layne creates movement with his subject by strategically adding motion lines complemented by a button popping off the lady's shorts. The clean silhouette of the subject matter adds to the appeal of the image. Courtesy Private Collection.)

Brown & Bigelow began an annual tradition in 1925 by publishing a calendar for the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). This first BSA calendar featured illustrations by Norman Rockwell. Brown & Bigelow went onto publish a variety of calendars including many with illustrations

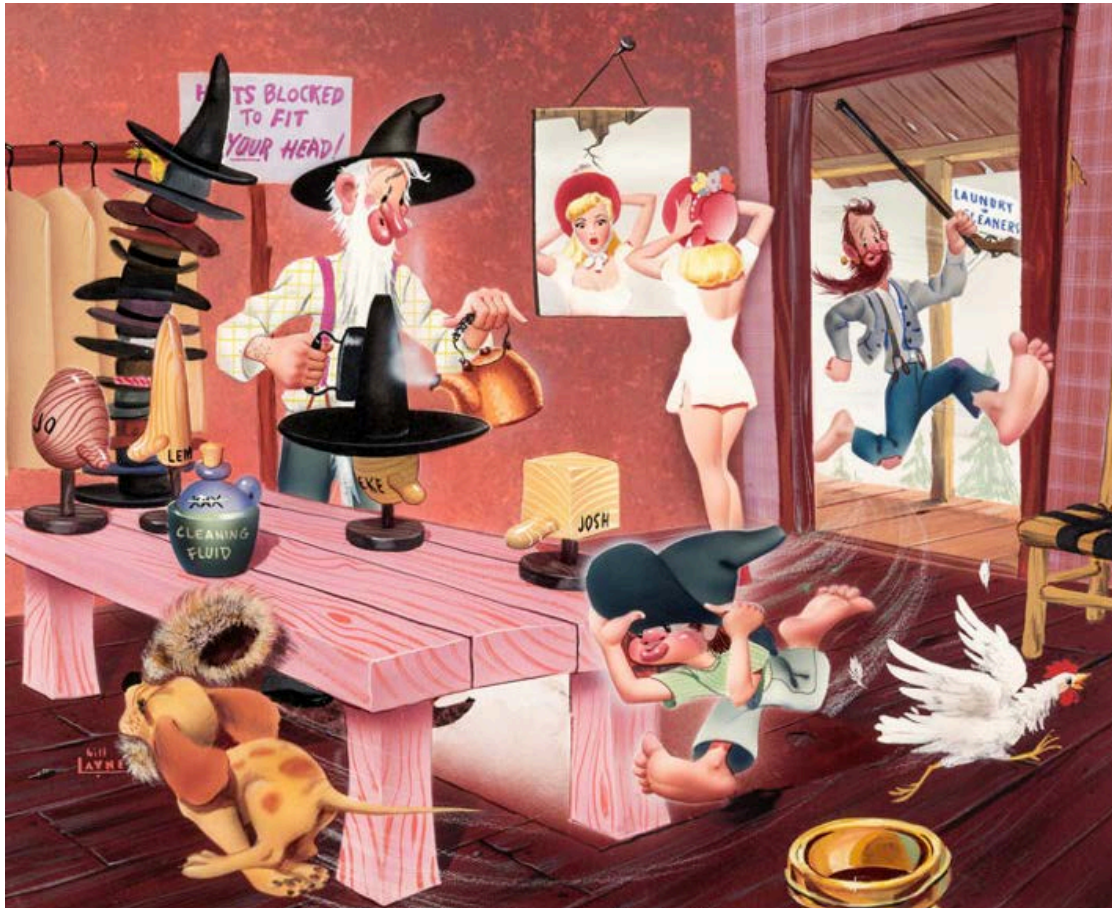
painted by Bill Layne that featured pin-up girls and fantasy creatures like mermaids, elves, and gnomes<sup>iii</sup>. Layne himself, estimated that he painted more than 650 illustrations for calendars alone and many more for ink blotters, puzzles, and other commercial purposes from the late 1940s through the 1950s.<sup>iv</sup> Even after he rejoined Disney as a background artist on *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Layne continued doing freelance illustrations throughout the rest of his career.



(This painting titled *Speedy Sponging and Pressing* by Bill Layne was painted in gouache on board and is part of a series of Disney's *Make Mine Music* (1946) *Martins and the Coys* calendar illustrations for Brown & Bigelow in the 1950s. Courtesy Heritage Auctions, HA.com.)

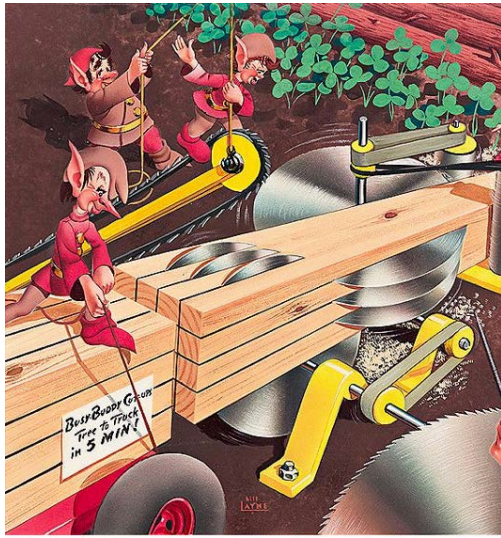
A popular series of paintings Layne created was inspired by *The Martins and the Coys* sequence from Disney's *Make Mine Music* (1946). The Disney version featured the popular radio vocal group The King's Men who sing about the ubiquitous Hatfield's and McCoy's feud.

The feud is eventually broken up when Grace Martin and Henry Coy, two young people representing each family, fall in love.<sup>v</sup>



(This is one of Layne's gouache on board paintings, *Hats Blocked to Fit Your Head*, for a 1950s Disney Calendar that depicts the Martins and the Coys from the feature film *Make Mine Music* (1946). Note the Daisy Mae Scragg like female character looking at herself in the mirror. Layne was noted for his pin-up girl images. Courtesy Heritage Auctions, HA.com)

*The Martins and the Coys* Disney sequence featured characters inspired by Paul Webb's darker more unglamorous *Mountain Boys* series of cartoons for *Esquire* magazine. Layne took his version of *The Martins and the Coys* to a funny and more tantalizing place that made light of hillbilly life. His central female character was likely inspired by Al Capp's Daisy Mae Scragg, from the comic strip *Li'l Abner*.<sup>vi</sup> These Brown & Bigelow calendars featuring *The Martins and the Coys*, licensed from Disney, capitalized on the hillbilly humor craze of that period.

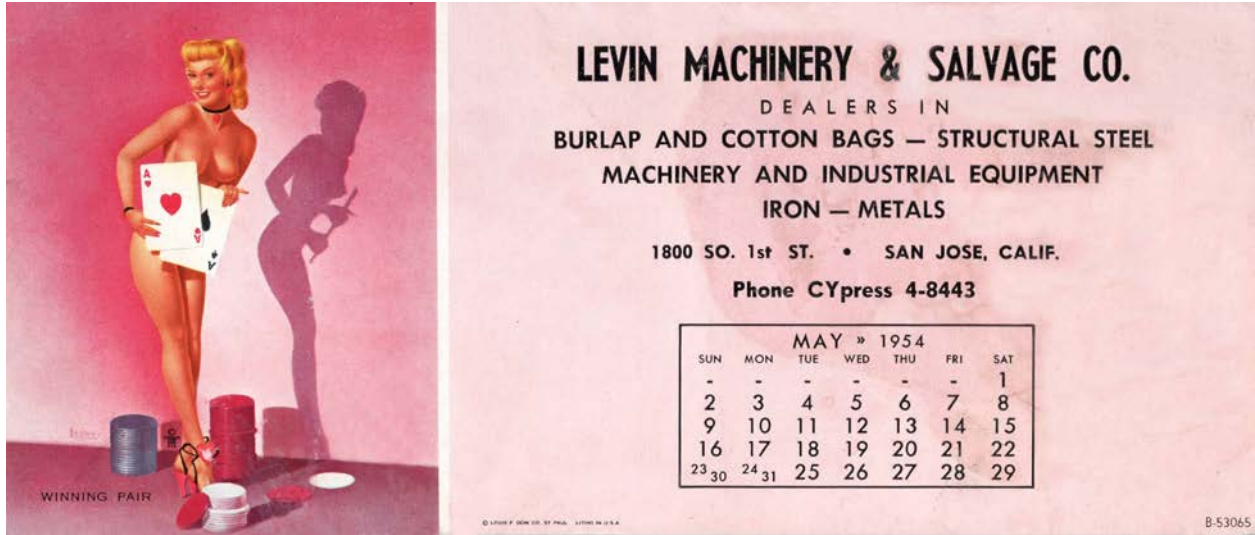


(Two of Bill Layne's popular elf illustrations for a Brown & Bigelow calendar in 1956. His characters use manual labor to power the circular saws in these construction related scenes. Courtesy Private Collection)

A series of elf characters doing carpentry and construction work were also very popular images created by Layne in the 1950s. His elves and the settings he created all display action and movement that allow the viewer to use their imagination to envision the scenes coming alive. Layne's characters have an intrinsic appeal to them, which is one of the hallmarks that made Disney's animated characters so popular. Many of these elf calendars were used as marketing and promotion for businesses, especially in the home and building trades.

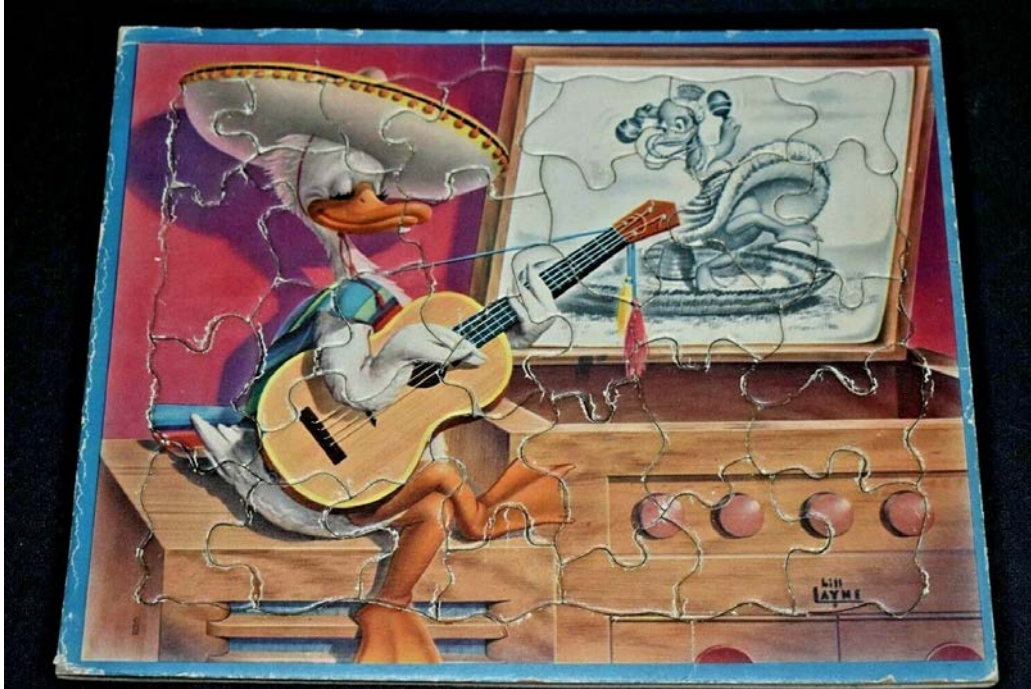
Layne clearly incorporated his knowledge of animation gained at Disney to add the sense of dynamic motion in the tableaus he painted. The use of motion lines, characters in mid-action, and the use of props and effects such as sawdust flying off a buzzsaw or a button popping off clothing all contributed to bringing the scenes to life. He applied many of the 12 Principles of Animation to his illustrations including staging, solid drawing, exaggeration, and of course appeal.<sup>vii</sup>



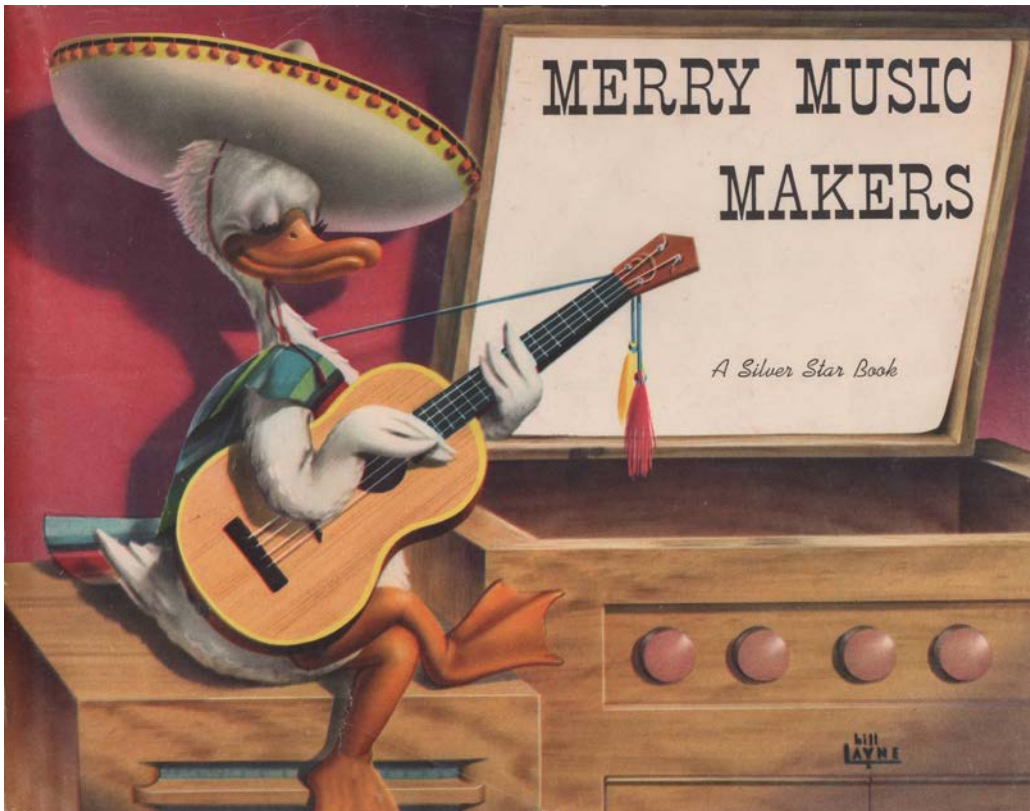


(An advertising ink blotter for the LEVIN MACHINERY & SALVAGE CO. featuring one of Bill Layne’s pin-up girls from 1954. The painting shows his command of the human figure along with excellent staging and visual appeal. Courtesy Private Collection.)

Appeal is often a quality that a viewer feels more than they can explain. It is best described as a combination of pleasing design that simply and effectively communicates the essence of the image or scene and its charm, which is the power to evoke a magical quality that resonates with the viewer. Layne’s illustrations check all those boxes. His illustrations, whether on an ink blotter, puzzle, calendar, or in a book are delightful to view for their whimsical characters and enchanted environments.



(A vintage Bill Layne illustration of a Duck playing a guitar printed on a cardboard puzzle. This same illustration, slightly modified, also appeared on the cover of the children's book *Merry Music Makers* by Elizabeth Sherman (pictured below) in 1952. The duck character is very reminiscent of the KEYSTONE BURIAL VAULT CO. ink blotter at the head of this article. Courtesy Private Collection.)





(*Ocean Crashing Waves* in oil on a 9" X 12" Masonite board by Bill Layne is one of many seascapes he painted in his later years while pursuing "serious" easel painting in his home studio. Courtesy Private Collection.)

By the time Layne left Disney in 1973, he was the head of the background department. By then, he wanted to pursue "serious" easel painting at his home in Studio City, California.<sup>viii</sup> Layne was known for his "distinctive way of handling his... paintings, taking advantage of the inner light and individual qualities of the subjects" he was painting.<sup>ix</sup> His fine art paintings and illustrations collectively show his technical skill as well as his range of styles, mediums, and techniques.

Layne had several closed showings of his artwork while he worked at the Disney Studios and his few public shows in later years were limited to the De Vaux Gallery in Carmel and the

Copenhagen Gallery in Solvang, both in California.<sup>x</sup> His original paintings are collectable and do come up in auctions on a somewhat regular basis. It is also reasonably easy to acquire ephemera bearing Layne's illustrations whether it is advertising ink blotters, calendars, or other ephemera, all of which will delight viewers.



(One of Bill Layne's mermaid illustrations titled *Pearl Garden* painted in gouache on board from a Brown & Bigelow Calendar in the 1950s. Courtesy Private Collection.)

That brings me back full circle to those original Keystone Burial Vault Company ink blotters that I happened upon because the illustrations caught my eye. It is a facet of ephemera collecting that I truly enjoy—the discoveries when you least expect them. Those advertising ink blotters with Bill Layne's illustrations led me to his calendar art, puzzles, and book illustrations.

All of that helped in my research to expose the ephemera art of a talented and unsung Disney Animation, commercial, and fine artist.

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Layne (1911-2005), IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0493546/>

<sup>ii</sup> askArt, Facts About Bill Layne, [https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill\\_Layne/123731/Bill\\_Layne.aspx](https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill_Layne/123731/Bill_Layne.aspx)

<sup>iii</sup> Bill Layne, The Martins and the Coys (1950s), Howardlowery.com

<sup>iv</sup> askArt, Facts About Bill Layne, [https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill\\_Layne/123731/Bill\\_Layne.aspx](https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill_Layne/123731/Bill_Layne.aspx)

<sup>v</sup> Bill Layne Make Mine Music-related "Hillbilly" Calendar Paintings Group of 2 (Disney Productions/Brown & Bigelow, 1950s, Heritage Auctions, HA.com

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Thomas, Frank; Ollie Johnston. *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. Hyperion. pp. 47–69. ISBN 9780786860708.

<sup>viii</sup> askArt, Facts About Bill Layne, [https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill\\_Layne/123731/Bill\\_Layne.aspx](https://www.askart.com/artist/Bill_Layne/123731/Bill_Layne.aspx)

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

### **Author BIO**

David A. Bossert is an award-winning artist, filmmaker, and author. He is a 32-year veteran of The Walt Disney Company, where he contributed his talents to Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988), The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993), The Lion King (1994), Fantasia/2000 (1999) among many others. Bossert is considered an authority on Disney art and animation history. As an inventor, he was awarded a U.S. Patent in 2018 for his invention, Parallax Based Monoscopic Rendering. In 2020, he received an additional U.S. Patent for Varying Display Content Based on Viewpoint. He continues to explore transformative, immersive experiences in book publishing. Bossert is the author of numerous books, liner/program notes, and dozens of articles on animation. Learn more at [www.davidbossert.com](http://www.davidbossert.com)