If you apply the familiar concept “you are what you eat” to television – and it becomes “you are what you watch” – then TV critics are in trouble. We watch more television than you do, no matter how much you watch, and, unlike you, have to keep watching the bad stuff once we decide it’s no good.

And if you accept Malcolm Gladwell’s concept of the “10,000-Hour Rule,” that it takes 10,000 hours working in a specific field before a person can be considered an expert, then, by that yardstick, I’m about four experts. I’ve been a professional TV critic for almost 40 years – and a TV viewer for 60.

The exhibition Bianculli’s Personal Theory of TV Evolution attempts to explore and merge both of those concepts. As a TV historian, I connect television past and present, using video clips, still photos, and other means, tracing the evolution of such themes as “Single Working Women on TV,” “Animation on Television,” and “Superheroes Throughout TV History.” And as a lifelong TV viewer and fan, I identify the programs and events that most impressed, shaped, and even warped me a little.

I’m taking the Personal part of the title very seriously. As a TV critic, some of the connections I make, and some of the video snippets I showcase, are highly personal indeed. Who else would insist upon making room for both Ernie Kovacs and Dennis Potter, or approach The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show and the Red Room on Twin Peaks with equal reverence? Even more personally, I’m exploring, explaining, and confessing my own lifelong relationship with television. I enjoy being a TV critic. It’s a job that always changes, that demands you flex different muscles on different days, and that occasionally rewards you with brilliant, wonderful programs, some of which can enrich, and even change, your life. I’ve said for decades that sooner or later, everything I care about shows up on television, giving me the opportunity to write about music, theatre, politics, literature, comedy – anything telecast by anyone is fair game.

As I began gathering items for this gallery exhibition, I finally realized that the key was to approach this event the way I approach my work as a critic and as a professor: I take what I do very seriously, but don’t take myself very seriously. So anyone attending this exhibit in person, I want you, and expect you, to have fun. If the first few things you examine don’t spark any smiles, musings, or memories, keep going – something else, on another wall, in another part of the installation, is bound to strike your fancy.

Show up, and you get to witness, up close and personal, Saint Clare the glow-in-the-dark patron saint of television, and the actual snow globe from the controversial finale of St. Elsewhere – a valuable item lent to the exhibit by a private collector, just like a real piece of art at a real curated museum exhibition. Which, I have to keep reminding myself, this is.

As they say on late-night TV, “But Wait! There’s More!” For example, one of my favorite elements in this exhibition is a giant blow-up of a video still from a 1961 edition of The Ernie Kovacs Show on ABC. What you see is a man in a horse costume pointing a gun that’s tied to an outstretched hoof – without any idea what it’s connected to apexart's exhibitions and public programs are supported in part by the Greenwich Collection, a foundation committed to contemporary art, and with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Bianculli’s Personal Theory of TV Evolution

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later, I spend time interviewing the Smothers Brothers, and Mason Williams, and so many other wonderful artists from that show, and end up writing a book about them. This exhibit contains some very rare (and very cool) items from TV history, lent by artists I admire greatly or their families. One of Rod Serling's private notebooks. Original scripts by Ernie Kovacs. Poetry and artwork by Mason Williams. Ken Burns' private Civil War talisman. And among all the other cool stuff lent for the exhibit, Vince Gilligan has provided his original handwritten screenplay for the one-time-only TV movie in which he starred as the first TV vampire. But next to it plays an endless loop of the eight-minute film of my father, as they present entertainment aimed at bridging the then-widening Generation Gap. Decades after I watch my father, as they present entertainment aimed at bridging the then-widening Generation Gap. Decades after I watch the first episode of NBC's Saturday Night Live, which premiered in 1975. That's 15 short years from Mary Martin to Chevy Chase, and from writing for myself to writing for print. And while this exhibit is open, NBC will televise another live version of Peter Pan — drawing yet another link to TV's past, and to the version I saw performed live in 1960. In another corner is the TV confessional. The question is, “Who were the first TV personalities or characters to awaken your sexuality when you were young?” My answers to that question may be embarrassing, but they're also intensely true — and cover not only Diana Rigg as Emma Peel in The Avengers and Julie Newmar as Catwoman in Batman, but even a Swedish woman selling shaving cream. I'm just as interested, though, in your answers — so if you visit the exhibit, be prepared to enter the confessional and unfurl your secret TV loves.

One constant theme in my TV criticism over the years — whether for newspapers (such as the New York Daily News), radio (National Public Radio's Fresh Air with Terry Gross), or books (starting with 1992's Teleleterary: Taking Television Seriously, and continuing through my current project, Doubleday's forthcoming The Platinum Age of Television: An Evolutionary History of Quality TV) — has been my argument that the best of television should be considered art and treated as such. So I wanted to show some of my own TV art treasures. Not stuff I've drawn — that doesn’t exist — but, rather, TV-related artwork that I’ve collected over the years, that my own TV criticism has paid for. For this show I’ve commissioned special TV-related pieces from artists and friends of mine who meld their specific talents with my particular, if peculiar, visions. This exhibition also shows a small part of my extensive TV collections. It starts, literally, with a TV collection: a few of my vintage TVs, led by the first television my family ever owned — my father’s 1947 Raytheon, which looks to me, like an early undersea diving helmet. It also includes a small-scale gravestone from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, a blackboard from The Simpsons, and a replica of an I Love Lucy “Vitameatavegamin” bottle from TV Land. There are autographed scripts, pieces from various sets and costumes, occasional bobble-heads… and much, much more.

In the 1979 movie Being There, Peter Sellers’ character of Chance the gardener embodied author Jerzy Kosinski’s exploration of the “You are who you watch” concept. Chance had led an entire life cloistered in the same house, never venturing outside, and learning everything from television. He was a very simple man, but when Chance proclaims unexpectedly, “I like to watch TV,” I knew exactly what he meant.