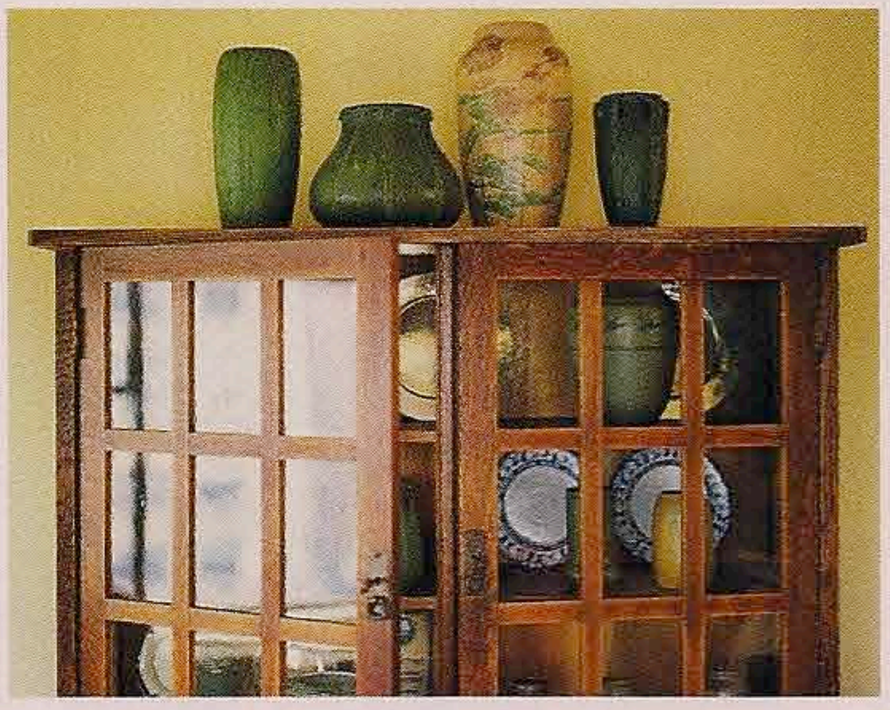
DISPLAY CASES

HOW FIVE PASSIONATE COLLECTORS TURNED THEIR TREASURES INTO THE WORLD AROUND THEM.

BY AIMEE LEE BALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN KALLINA

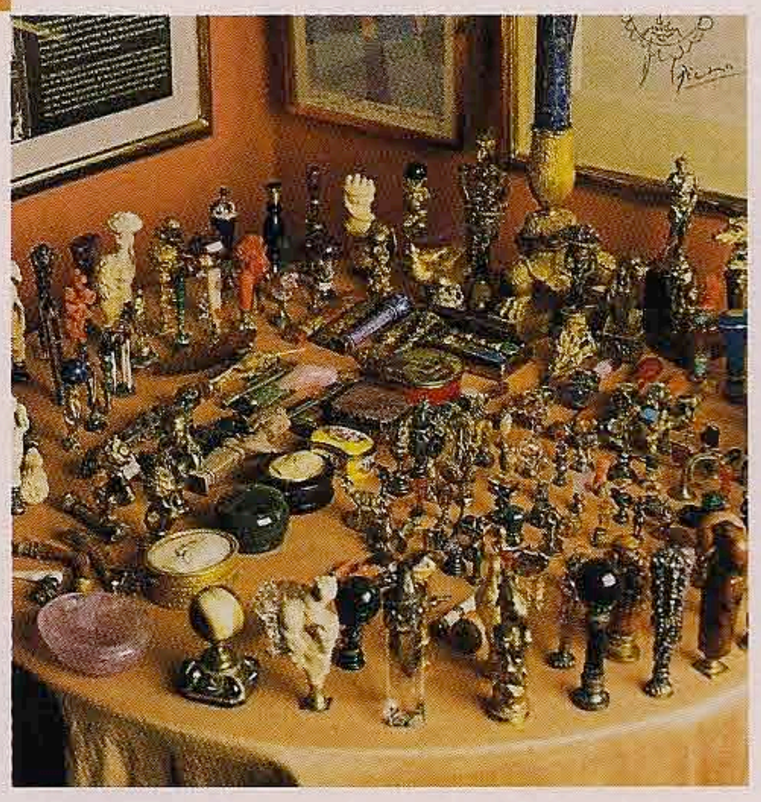


THE ONLY THING IN NANCY MCCLELLAND'S HOME THAT DOES *NOT* date from the American Arts and Crafts period is the bone her dog dropped on the rug. This is Mission Control, a pristine collection of oak from the turn-of-the-century studios of Gustav Stickley and his brothers. (The Stickleys' work is commonly known as "Mission" furniture, but should not be confused with that of California's Spanish missions.) McClelland and her husband had access to color chips from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so were able to paint their apartment an appropriate "Frank Lloyd Wright tan." They added Arts and Crafts accents, such as Teco pottery, and wedged a Stickley table and chairs into the tiny New York kitchen—purists even at breakfast.

For a certain breed of collector it's not enough to hunt and gather, to store baseball cards in a shoebox, china in a sideboard, jewelry under lock and key. Each of the five collectors featured here has turned

Nancy McClelland's New York apartment has rigorous stylistic integrity. The L. and J.G. Stickley china cabinet (above), ca. 1912, holds nothing but Arts and Crafts objects: Three of the vases on top of it are from Boston's Grueby Pottery, which was closely associated with the Stickleys, while the delicate floral-pattern vase is by the Overbeck sisters of Indiana. All the furniture in the dining room (opposite)—including the hanging lanterns and wall sconces—is by Gustav Stickley or his brothers. The Teco vase on the table was designed by Chicago architect W.J. Dodd.

When Sue Railey installed a mirrored ceiling in her New York living room (left), she doubled the size of her large and eclectic collection. It includes a group of Russian icons on the wall and a pyramid of miniature portraits with elaborate paste frames. The 19th-century table seals (below) were used to make impressions in wax—which suggests an unkind simile where the rows of cookie-cutter profile portraits hanging in her entrance hall (opposite) are concerned. Products of the French Directoire (1795–99), they are presided over by a livelier character from the period, a clock whose head moves.



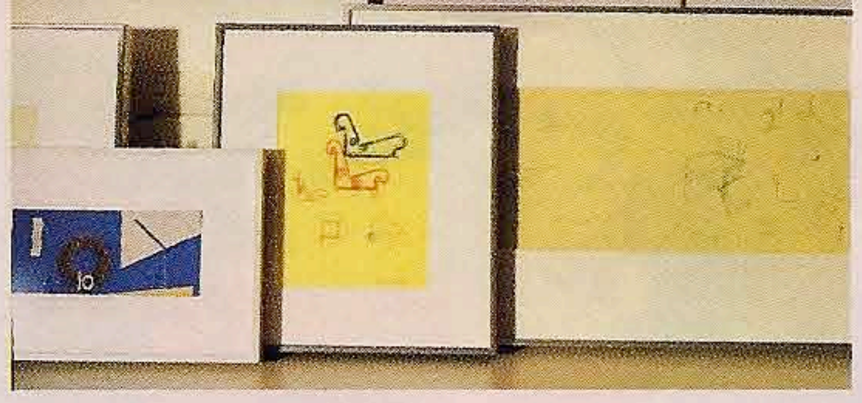
a collection into a stage set, a mise-en-scène built in equal parts of scholarship and zeal. (Some choose anonymity, fearing a security breach that could jeopardize their cherished objects.) It might be hyperbole to say that collecting is their whole existence, but it is their clarion call, and they won't relegate it to a corner of their life or home.

An informed collection demands an arrant passion. "If you've got to look at a picture a dozen times before you make up your mind," said renowned art patron Joseph Hirshhorn, "there's something wrong with you or the picture. You've got to buy what you believe in." Collectors may be the spiritual descendants of the ancient Egyptians, who amassed possessions in an attempt to deny the transitory nature of life. Or perhaps they're just born to shop. "Greed is such a nasty word," writes Bob Rau in *The Collectors*, a companion book to the 1989 PBS series of the same name. His suggested euphemism is "an advanced stage of acquisition." Yet objects of the caliber shown on these pages mostly change hands prosaically—at auction or through dealers.

In the paradigm of a collector's home, the possessions/obsessions claim preeminence, exacting attention, defining the space. Nancy McClelland married into an established Stickley collection, but the almost monastic style is the perfect foil to her daytime life as international head of the 20th-century Decorative Arts department at Christie's. "One deals at auction with a large number of things that are very elaborate," she says, "and I think there's great serenity in American Arts and Crafts. It's not unlike some of the Oriental arts in its striving for simplicity." The World According to Gustav extends to her weekend house, from floor (Stickley "druggets," felted wool rugs) to ceiling (Stickley lighting fixtures), although it is McClelland's husband who scouts the antiques shops. The Teco pottery was designed by William Gates and the Chicago architects and sculptors who were his luncheon companions. Such pottery is simplicity personified: green glaze, with undertones of black—known as charcoaling—marking the most desirable pieces. McClelland is especially fond of Overbeck pottery, the output of four sisters from Indiana who fired it in a tiny garden kiln.

McClelland organized Christie's recent sale of Barbra Streisand's Art Nouveau and Art Deco collections—a life's work

There are over 200 pieces of Le Verre Français in this Manhattan loft (left and far left), which was designed 12 years ago by Carmi Bee of Rothzeid Kaiserman Thomson & Bee. The huge, light-filled space deliberately evokes the salon of an Art Deco ocean liner—in direct stylistic response to a spectacular view of the 1931 Empire State Building—and the room's cool, clean lines complement the feverish colors and swirling shapes of the popularized Art Nouveau glassware. What could have been an overpowering conglomeration—the collectors only acquire; they've never sold a piece—is instead airy and playful, like a flight of brilliantly hued tropical birds in a limpid sky.



dispersed in one fell swoop—but she has no plan for a similar switching of gears. She still takes pleasure in this one period, documented in her back issues of *The Craftsman*, the magazine Stickley published about his work. That's part of the appeal for McClelland. "It's a philosophical movement," she says, "more than just a style. It has underpinnings of hearth and home."

Putting a Teco jardinière to its intended use—as a plant pot—may take guts, but it announces that this is a *home*, not a museum. "The objects whose utility, beauty, and quality have caused people to collect and save them were created first to be used and enjoyed," writes Timothy Trent Blade in *Antique Collecting: A Sensible Guide to Its Art & Mystery*. "Most were not meant to be put in locked drawers, behind bulletproof glass, or in vaults. Along with the thrill of their discovery, *living* with antiques is the greatest pleasure they give; they should be a source of joy to their owners, and not an encumbrance. This fact does not prevent some collectors from being so consumed by the preciousness of their possessions that paranoia controls their lives."

But there is no paranoia in the New York loft of one collecting couple where children and pets roam around shelves holding French art glass. "Touch wood," says the wife, "we don't talk about it too much." Their original collection of Daum and Gallé reflected the husband's French heritage, but when it was stolen they developed a new interest in Le Verre Français, cameo and etched glass produced by a factory in Nancy in the 1920s. The neglected stepchild of Art Nouveau glass, it was almost unknown in this country, although the couple found some in Canada. "The colors are much stronger than the typical Art Nouveau, and the images are much more exciting," she says. "Most of the motifs are from nature—scarabs, seedpods, butterflies. In its day it was quite ordinary—an 'ugly.' I found the first piece in my mother-in-law's bathroom—a purple-flowered vase stuffed with cotton balls or something. It merited not a second look."

Nearly 200 pieces stand in counterpoint to the loft's Art Deco feeling (partly determined by the views of the Empire State Building), with Chinese rugs echoing the colors of the glassware. The fragile glass seems to defy the craggy urban backdrop glimpsed out the windows, as well as the casual family life—cat hair on the armchairs, siblings throwing basketballs across the living room. Few pieces are unloved and relegated to storage, although the wife does admit to the odd mistake. "You see something in a catalog and bid without seeing it," she ex-

The apartment as art gallery: A profusion of architectural and furniture drawings stacked against a wall (top left), including a 1920s study for a rug by Eileen Gray and a Frank Gehry sketch for a corrugated paper chair. Swiss architect Mario Botta's first thoughts about a chair appear in the drawing on the 19th-century French music stand (far left), next to their final realization in perforated metal. The large drawing on the wall is of an unbuilt arcade by Mary Ann E. Crawford; it was done in 1929, when she was a student at M.I.T. A radically different domestic aesthetic—that of 19th-century American folk art—governs this Pennsylvania library (right): An important collection of 18th- and 19th-century hand-colored frakturs hangs above a Connecticut Windsor bench, while a New York State country tea table sits on a geometrically patterned hook rug from New England. The eagle stretching its wings is a fine example of the work of the German-born carver Wilhelm Schimmel, who traded his animal carvings for food and drink in 19th-century Pennsylvania.

plains. "But you only do that once." And since this couple is always traveling, there is the serendipity of finding "their" glass in unexpected places, like downtown Caracas.

"If you are really going to be a successful collector, you must be willing to make the emotional investment," writes John L. Marion, the chairman of Sotheby's, in *The Best of Everything*. "There are simply too many people out there—your prospective competition—who are obsessed by their 'hobby.' . . .Those who are in it just for the money will always be at a decided disadvantage."

That was the canon of one notable collector of American folk art and Pennsylvania German artifacts who shall remain nameless. Her collection of redware, dower chests, Savery chairs, and smoke-painted tables was bought without a profit motive. "I've always known that this was an extra in my life," she says, acknowledging that she had no intention of building up an estate or of making money. "It's gotten so out of proportion now," she adds, referring to the value of her collection. "This presentation plate was more than the price of my first house, which is nuts when you think about it." She was a contemporary art major who wanted to live with Bauhaus, and her husband was a computer consultant who wanted to come home to antiques, not IBM. "We're both very big," she says, "and sitting on little breakable New England furniture wasn't going to work." Their venture into folk art was a compromise that became a passion. She even went to Europe with a specialist in Pennsylvania German art history to learn more about her charming hand-colored frakturs, 18th- and 19th-century ornamental manuscripts that documented events like births, deaths, *(continued on page 156)*

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baptisms, and marriages. She came by her stone crocks when she heard of a house sale in a family with an important Quaker name. "God forbid I should go in the morning," she says, still chastening herself. "I waited until carpool time, and the house was stripped." The only thing left was the stoneware, and she had to take all or nothing. "So there I was with fifty crocks and six kids. I would deliver a child home and say to the mother, 'Would you like a crock for a dollar?' I sold off all the lower end on the way home."

This woman is a decorator by profession, sure in her sense of style but with a self-deprecating wit, and she is drawn to the playfulness and small pretensions of a culture normally assumed to be dour. The Pennsylvania Germans loved trick books (a snake pops out of the spine with a sharp pin for a tongue) and puzzle jugs (with holes that must be covered when drinking)—ar-

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Okay, what's hot and what's it worth? For the collector concerned with investment value, the whimsical antiques and fine arts market is a roller-coaster ride. "If the battered, cracked and broken stuff our ancestors tried to get rid of now brings so much money, think what a 1954 Oldsmobile or a 1960 toastmaster will bring," wrote John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley* more than 30 years ago.

Really nothing much about collecting (except supply and demand) changes over time, says Christopher Burge, chairman of Christie's in America. He explains:

"The Industrial Revolution spawned a group of rich people who became collectors according to the old rules—trying to make their surroundings more cultivated, following the example of the great aristocratic houses of Europe. That's had a profound effect on the market. But now we are looking for obscurer and obscurer areas of collecting because they are the last refuges. So much has been picked or has gone into institutions."

Some fields tend to be more obscure than others because they present "learning obstacles"—reading Japanese, for example, or understanding the iconography of certain old masters—that tend to limit the number of collectors, according to Burge. And vice versa: "Frankly a great deal of knowledge is *not* required to be a top collector of Impressionist paintings," he says. "That is one of the joys of Impressionism: It brings our surroundings directly to us." That didn't preclude only half of the Impressionist and modern works from selling at a recent Christie's auction—the worst showing since 1981, according to *The New York Times*.

Many things affect the market, say Ralph and Terry Kovel, authors of a national collectors' newsletter and more than 60 books, including *Kovels' Antiques & Collectibles Price List*. "Tiffany iridescent gold glass got its first kick because it was featured in *My Fair Lady*," says Terry Kovel. "Dog portraits became hot because horse portraits got so expensive. Cats outsell dogs two to one, but there weren't a lot of cat portraits in the nineteenth century." New enthusiasts can propel an area of collecting out of flea markets into the auction house—prices are soaring now for photography, original comic art, and illustrators' art (war bond posters, pulp magazines, *Saturday Evening Post* drawings).

"There are people who never sell anything," says Kovel. "We know people who have been supported in the nursing home by their collections. But when you realize you're sitting on several million dollars of assets that could go in an earthquake or fire, you may get nervous and switch to another period or object. And if you have been collecting the best, you don't want anything that's not the best."

This explains why a couple who sold their folk art collection at Sotheby's was seen at a modernism show in Florida buying fifties furniture. "Probably the hottest area we see now is the fifties," says Kovel, "like Italian glass by Venini or Barovier & Toso. Another hot section is American art pottery from the centennial to 1920. The very hottest is Ohr—so offbeat for its day that no one took it seriously—and Rookwood, bought up by the Japanese because some of the best Rookwood artists were Japanese and it had an Oriental look." Georgian silver serving pieces were priced high in the eighties, dropped when the silver market dropped, and are coming back. Taste has grown fussier in this country, according to Kovel. "Some psychologist could tell you it has to do with cocooning or nostalgia, and all this curlicued Victorian stuff is what some people think of as the good old days. But I'm sure that in the year 2010 they're going to get back into plainer furniture."

Twentieth-century design (Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts) is desirable now, according to Alan Boss, who runs specialty antiques shows ranging from African–American memorabilia to Victoriana. Another area is antique textiles: One dealer recently displayed four 19th-century cashmere shawls, ready to be draped over sofas, for $35,000 to $95,000.

Boss thinks of the weekend flea market that he operates on 25th Street and Sixth Avenue in New York as an outpatient ward for the deranged and possessed, from Andy Warhol, who came by limousine looking for vintage cookie jars, to the designer who buys paintings at 5:30 a.m. by flashlight. "One woman arrived at the market," he says, "and paid the dollar admission—followed by three guys with skinny ties and sunglasses asking, 'Do we have to pay? We're with her.' I said, 'Who's she?' 'That's Sophia, queen of Spain.' She bought a ton of sterling silver, went back to her car, and sent her lady-in-waiting to pick it up. You can call it passion. It's an addiction. I know what it is—I'm one of them."

Contemporary art will always be important, says Christie's Burge, because it is the only supply that remains relatively constant, and because popular taste has moved up to the present day. "There is a much wider acceptance now of people buying works by young artists," he says. "Collectibles have become very much a part of our life, and you can be sure that in the nineties several new areas that nobody's thought of will suddenly become highly collectible." He mentions a sale of surgical instruments in London. "Things that were purely functional but are now obsolete or obsolescent suddenly acquire a beauty of their own," he says.

Then Burge takes a deep breath and grimaces. "We've even had a sale of Pez dispensers."—A.L.B.

guably the antecedents of whoopie cushions and dribble glasses. Every morning she is greeted at the foot of her stairs by the portrait of a plain maiden boldly wearing gold-leaf jewelry. "They knew this was going to be a record of them, and damn it, they wanted to look better than they really were," she says. "Listen, when you have your picture taken, you spend more time on your hair and makeup."

Another collector delved into a field so esoteric that there *were* no auctions. An art historian who enjoyed the company of architects, she started buying the drawings of Frank Gehry, Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, and other distinguished names in 20th-century American architecture. About 150 of these drawings coexist in her New York duplex with architectural objects such as an elevator door from the Chicago Stock Exchange designed by Louis Sullivan.

The furnishings reinforce the theme of contemporary design, with some surprises, such as a pool table for dining and metal garden chairs in front of the fireplace. One wanders through the apartment as through a gallery, coming upon the drawings interspersed with modern art—Gerhard Richter, David Smith, Sam Francis—until reaching the study, where they are stacked four-deep against the wall.

The owner enjoys the intimacy of architectural drawings, seeing in them the seed of an idea becoming something tangible. She visits the buildings themselves, creating a kind of symbolic collection, but of course she can't collect actual edifices. So she has developed a side interest in sketches of architect-designed furniture and *does* bring the real things home whenever possible. Her drawings also now include 19th-century and European works. "People find out about your interests, and you're offered material that you might not have known of before," she says. "That's the stimulation of collecting—to expand your horizons, to try not to limit yourself."

In *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger compares the ardent collector to Don Juan: "The intricacies of the find; its discovery or attainment; the sometimes clever ploys utilized to effect an acquisition; the fortuitous circumstances of the lucky strike; the energy expended in obtaining the object, and occasionally the waste of time; the preoccupation with the challenge, with rivalry and jealousy—all these emotions are shared by devoted collectors and Don Juans alike."

In Muensterberger's view, collectors are trying to satisfy an emotional hunger that has its roots in childhood. A child's earliest tangible possession—perhaps a doll or a blanket that provided a palliative or sense of protection—becomes in adulthood another special object that offers the same kind of comfort. Like a child in a world of make-believe, the collector creates a "private cosmos" built on fancy and illusion. "We see," says the good doctor, "how collecting has become an almost magical means for undoing the strains and stresses of early life and achieving the promise of goodness."

Sue Railey has no truck with such theories. Her only criterion for collecting is: "It must be very interesting." Her father collected the icons that still hang on her living-room walls. But she's moved on with a vengeance, and it would be hard to define an underlying motif for her eclectic mix: African sculpture, Directoire profiles, 19th-century table seals (once exhibited in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), decorative boxes, and paste frames encasing miniature portraits of Bonaparte wannabes (displayed on wooden pyramids she has made on Long Island). The apartment stands as testimony to the leisure hours of a lifetime.

"I've always collected," she says matter-of-factly. "I lived in Paris for thirty-three years, and I was obsessed by the flea market. I was out there every weekend. I can't say there is any theme in my buying. I just feel sort of cozy with all my things."

Railey is an elegant woman of a certain age, perfectly coifed, impeccably dressed, who lives improbably close to a Gap store. When she was widowed she moved back to New York; she now gives dinner parties for Christie's, entertaining well-connected people who might become clients of the auction house.

The apartment provides the perfect ambience for collecting conversations. Carpet and curtains are the same terra-cotta color—"so nothing takes away from the objects," Railey says. After leaving behind a Paris duplex with 24-foot-high ceilings, she felt claustrophobic in New York, until she covered every inch of the living-room ceiling with mirrors. There is method in this madness. "Now," this passionate collector says with a smile, "I have twice as many of everything." ■

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