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Is Collecting Also Creating?

By Eric Ernst

Although we tend to think of serious collectors and collecting as existing solely within the domain of the popular visual arts, there is always the suspicion that those who accumulate artwork do so more out of dedication to current styles or for material gain than for purely altruistic reasons.

Beginning with the Medicis and accelerating over time, too many collectors of fine art have seemed to be driven by more of an acquisitional imperative that is a product of narcissism and ego, rather than out of a transcendental relationship with art itself. All too often, whether in Paris or Palm Beach, the underlying and unspoken attitude of many important collectors forcefully echoes Charles Saatchi's refreshingly arrogant admission: "I primarily buy art to show it off."

Thankfully, for those seeking affirmation that this type of superficial commercialization and objectification is primarily limited to the rarefied confines of the art world, the Parrish Art Museum is currently featuring an exhibition entitled "Finders Keepers: The Obsessions of Passionate Collectors."

Focusing on collections of objects that one might be more likely to locate on eBay than at Sotheby's or the Guggenheim, the exhibit illustrates a purity of motive for collecting that far transcends investment or slavish devotion to fashion. Instead, while expressing an undeniable measure of eccentricity in the types of objects chosen to collect, their true value becomes magnified by their sheer simplicity, unadulterated sincerity, and the maniacal energy it took to accumulate them.

This is especially true of the collection of canes and walking sticks amassed over the years by Stuart White, who here is exhibiting more than 50 from a total collection of approximately 4,000. White was first drawn to them due to a childhood fascination with the television western hero Bat Masterson, who himself always carried a walking stick. They are constructed and carved in a varied array of styles and motifs, from American folk art to art nouveau and illustrate a diversity and inventiveness that is completely absorbing.

Their sculptural elements can be of singular interest as in the "Full Figure Lincoln Cane," while others highlight aspects of American history, as in the canes carved with the names and campaign slogans of William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley.

Proving a sense of inventiveness matched with necessity, one glass case holds what might appear to be regular walking sticks, were they not exposed to reveal themselves as ingenious repositories for music stands, swords and even a gun.

My favorite, however, is a late 19th century walking stick with an ivory carved head of a Chinese gentleman, who, when his pigtail is turned, spits water out of his mouth. In all likelihood, it is perhaps the world's first functional squirt gun.

The writer Marjorie Chester offers two rather intriguingly divergent interests in her collection of costume jewelry and a wall installation consisting of antique farm implement seats. The latter is particularly noteworthy for its elements reminding us of our agrarian past, as well as for the visually dynamic qualities that are apparent in their elaborate pre-industrial design.

In a completely different vein, Alvin Chereskin presents his collection of sheep constructed of varied materials and appearing as doorstops, piggy banks and funerary statues, among many other manifestations. First drawn to sheep as a collectable item due to a career association with wool producers around the globe, the objects are interesting, although the element of kitsch is hard to overlook.

Eric Woodward's collection of local postcards, on the other hand, offers a view of our region that is part historical, part nostalgic. Featuring images dating back to the end of the 19th century, when penny postcards were popular, it is extremely diverting to realize that, despite the extent of physical transformation this area has undergone, it's surprising to see how much has

remained unchanged.

Of all the objects displayed in the Parrish exhibit, perhaps those that one would most likely find in a museum is the artist Steve Miller's remarkable collection of Neolithic Chinese pottery. Indicative of that culture's remarkable artistic and social development at a time when Europeans were still in loincloths and animal skins, their presence alone is worth making the effort to see the exhibition.

Having said that, their presentation as part of a display that is dominated by Mr. Miller's own paintings is a bit anachronistic and distracting, in view of the tone of the rest of the exhibition. While, admittedly, together the paintings and ceramics create a truly impressive visual display, they unfortunately tend to blur the exhibit's curatorial rationale—all of a sudden, it is as much (or more) about Mr. Miller's artwork and less about the pottery objects themselves.

This could also be said of the photographs of Adam Bartos, who offers playfully ironic images taken at East End yard sales over the years. While the works themselves are quite entertaining, somebody displaying an actual collection of bizarre objects found at these backyard sales would be much more appropriate within the context of the exhibition's stated theme.

Also featured are a number of Japanese prints from the museum's vaults, as well as some Renaissance panel paintings from Samuel Parrish's founding collection.

The exhibit "Finders Keepers: The Obsessions of Passionate Collectors" continues through December 31.