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The Human Touch

A Passion for Collecting

By Juliene Osborne-McKnight
Photography by H. Scott Heist

It's a little-known fact," says collecting expert **Harry Rinker '63**, "but one that I know to be true. There's a collecting gene in the DNA. Of course, scientists haven't looked for it yet, but it's there. And it's much more fully developed in some people than in others."

In Rinker, well-known collector, appraiser, historian and editor of the prestigious "Warman's Guide to Antiques and Their Prices," that elusive gene is very highly developed.

Rinker thinks that Americans come by their passion for collecting honestly. "We are, and have been forever, a nation of savers and collectors," says Rinker. "In every home in America, there are always links to the past."

But he emphasizes that true collectors are motivated solely by passion. "It's not about favorites; it's about love of the stuff," he says. "For me, it's not about money; it's about the objects and what they mean to me. A true collector dies with his things."

While Rinker's theory of a genetic predisposition for gathering beautiful and valuable objects might fly in the face of science, the anecdotal evidence among Lehigh alumni does seem to bear him out. There are undeniably some Lehigh grads with highly evolved collecting skills, and their passion is obvious in each of their stories.



"A true collector dies with his things," says noted antique authority Harry Rinker, pictured here in his Emmaus, Pa., warehouse.

For **Viola Fearnside '28W**, that passion arose from her love for her husband George and the idyllic life they shared together.

Viola, who was born in Pittsburgh, was a concert violinist who can boast of being the first violinist ever to broadcast a live performance on her hometown's KDKA radio. "I was a child prodigy, sitting on the lap of my teacher playing my first violin," she says.

Her musical ability not only distinguished her as a gifted young artist, it also led to a fateful first meeting with George Fearnside.

"He met me after he heard me play with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra," she recalls. "This was in the 1930s, when Fritz Reiner was the director of the symphony. I played a concert series as his soloist, and George came backstage after the performance. I thought I had never seen such beautiful eyes in a man. But I had my own radio program in New York City and I had to go back. George asked, 'May I write to you?' I said, 'Yes,' and he wrote and he wrote. We married in June of 1940."

George Fearnside was a civil engineer for the Dravo company of Pittsburgh (both Dravo brothers, French engineers and founders of the company, are also Lehigh alumni). George's 45-year career with the company included building interior ports on the Amazon River in Brazil, and, in 1962, a move to Europe, where George and Viola lived for 12 years.

It was there that they began their extensive collection of Early Master's drawings. To this day, Viola Fearnside is so fluent in French from her years of living, traveling and collecting in Europe that she slips easily into the language; she conducted most of this interview in rapid, fluent French.

"We collected several hundred drawings," she says. "We put them all over our walls when we moved back to the United States. They were the reminder of our journeys."

Together, George and Viola decided they would eventually divide the collection between Lehigh University and Duke University.

Then the unthinkable happened: Viola's "dearest" died, leaving her with only the memories of a life well-lived. Friends encouraged her to travel to ease her grief and she heeded their advice, wandering through China, Egypt, Israel and Alaska.

"I came back and saw all of the art on our walls and I knew it was time to give it away," she says about the heart-breaking decision to remove the paintings from the walls so she could sort and catalog them.

"I removed the first print from the wall and a little piece of white paper fluttered to the floor," she says. "Every picture had a little piece of white paper attached to its back. I thought that my dearest was reminding me of which picture was to go to which university, so I picked up the little notes and began to open

them. Each one was a note from my dearest."

"Never forget how much I love you," said the white-winged messengers. "Never forget what you meant to me."

Viola pauses in silence for a moment.

"To this day, I just adore him," she says.

For **Bob Zoellner '54**, the passion for amassing the perfect collection began in childhood. The president and founder of a securities arbitrage firm and Lehigh trustee found himself attracted to U.S. postage stamps when he was in elementary school. He continued collecting them until his adolescence took over, and he then abandoned the hobby for nearly 30 years.

His return began when he was attending an auction at Christie's, and happened to see a notice of an upcoming stamp auction.

"I wasn't even familiar with stamp auctions at that time," he says. "I'd always sent away for my stamps as a child. But I met the fellow who was the head of Christie's stamp department, and he thought there was a possibility that I might be able to collect every U.S. postage stamp ever issued. That was exciting; it was something that had never been done before."

Zoellner began the quest. Along the way, he says he learned a great deal not only about stamps, but about the times and the people that surrounded them. He easily launches into an explanation that there were no U.S. postage stamps until 1847. Prior to that time, mail had to be delivered by hand, by courier, or by the organized postal systems found only in larger cities.

When the U.S. postage stamps finally debuted, they were printed on a sheet with no perforations; letter writers simply cut them apart and glued them to their letters. "In fact," says Zoellner, "if letters cost less than a penny to send, consumers could cut the stamps in half and glue on half a stamp."

Of course, he adds, the country wasn't nearly as populous as it is now. Zoellner has several envelopes that are addressed by name and city that read simply, "John Dobbs, New York City." Miraculously, they found their way to the right recipient.

"Collecting is nostalgic relative to history," says Zoellner. "It's fascinating to see what the country was really like and what it was doing at the time of the issue, but there's a whole aesthetic to collecting. The colors and the designs are beautiful."

Some of Zoellner's stamps are as rare as they are exquisite. One of the more unique objects in his collection is the one cent Z-grille. When stamps were originally introduced, consumers would simply erase the cancellation and re-use them, Zoellner explains. To combat this tendency, the post office created tiny indentation grilles in stamps that would "run"

when canceled. These Z-Grille stamps were limited in both number and length of issue, and there are only two of these stamps currently in existence: One in the archives of the New York Public Library and the other in Bob Zoellner's collection.

After 1945, the post office began deliberately issuing stamps to collectors and the value of the stamps declined relative to their high number. It became the odd or unusual stamp that was worthy of collection.

Zoellner's collection isn't short on those rare finds either. It includes the now-famous upside-down candle stamp, which shows a candle burning at the bottom instead of the top. A sheet of stamps from that odd print run was purchased by the Central Intelligence Agency. Several enterprising employees correctly theorized that the stamps might be valuable one day and reimbursed the agency for the face value of the stamps. Eventually, the employees re-sold the stamps for \$15,000 a piece, which resulted in a lawsuit brought by the CIA against the novice stamp traders for a share of the profits.

Another mis-stamp in Zoellner's collection is the 24-cent inverted Jenny, which shows an upside-down red and blue airplane. One collector bought the entire erroneous print and sold it. Some of these stamps went down on the Titanic, Zoellner says. Others simply disappeared. Today, they are a collector's rarity and are worth \$150,000 per stamp.

Zoellner was successful in his quest; his collection boasts all of the rare stamps described above and many more. Indeed, Zoellner says he owns every single U.S. postage stamp ever issued. The complete collection was on display for a time at the Zoellner Arts Center on the Lehigh campus, for which Zoellner was the principal donor.

"Stamps have a sense of completion for the collector," he says, "and that's wonderful. But I was sad when I completed my collection because now it was over."

The collection of **G. Whitney Snyder '44**, is slightly less portable, but no less impressive. Snyder collects rare antique automobiles that were built before 1914. He estimates that 80 percent of his collection is on display in a beautiful carriage house at the Frick Art and Historical Center of Pittsburgh.

Like Zoellner, Snyder's passion began in childhood; he began collecting model T autos at the age of 10, and purchased his first Austin at the age of 14.

"I was just born with a wrench in my hand," says Snyder, whose appreciation for a perfectly crafted machine is reflected in the painstaking care he took in personally restoring each and every car in his collection. "They're simple if you have the tools. All cars are really the

same."

It's the fascinating history of each car that appeals to Snyder.

His 1898 Panhard-Tonneau, which is considered to be the most advanced car of the pre-1900 era, was purchased in Paris in the summer of 1900 by the son of Henry J. Heinz of the Heinz Ketchup Co. His 1909 Simplex was produced in Manhattan, and was the very same car that his mother drove in New Orleans.

"It was considered the muscle car of its day," he says. "I took it up to 83 miles per hour before I was arrested for speeding. I treasure that citation because it increased the value of the car."

Snyder says his 1909 Bailey Electric actually runs on batteries and was driven by Thomas Edison, who used the car to develop his Edison Cell. The car could go up to 100 miles on a single "charge" and moved at a whopping speed of 30 miles per hour, Snyder says. While it might be considered a precursor to today's high-performance autos, Thomas Edison simply called it "Maude."

Snyder says his Stanley Steamer is a 1911 version of the 1908 car that set the world speed record of 127 miles per hour at the Daytona Speedway in Florida. While the car actually got up to 197 miles per hour, race officials weren't able to clock that speed since the driver, Fred Mario, hit a pothole. On a full head of steam, that pothole was enough to blow car and driver into the air before crashing in the nearby Atlantic Ocean. Amazingly, Snyder says the driver lived to tell the story and the design lived on to join his collection of rare and beautiful autos.

In it, history vies for a place with personal sentiment. Snyder was able to purchase the 1911 Daimler that was given by King Edward VII to legendary actress Lily Langtry when its owners went bankrupt. But he is equally proud of his 1912 Simplex that Snyder's father received as a graduation present.

Sentiment also enhances the personal value of Snyder's 1910 Pierce Arrow - his "runabout" - which he drove all over the world. "I've driven it across the country seven times and through England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Canada and Mexico."

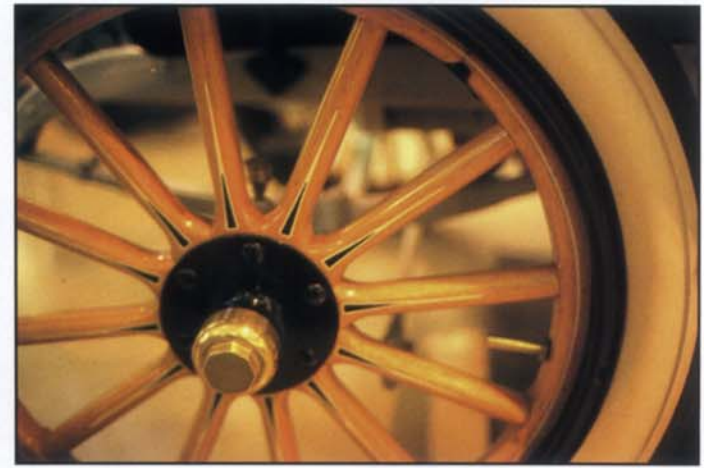
He rounded out his collection with a 1911 Penn that was made in Pittsburgh and driven by Andrew Carnegie, and a 1923 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost Town Car that was owned by his grandmother.

History, both personal and national, mark Snyder's collection. And for each of the collectors, their rare and beautiful objects are really symbols of a treasured past. Cherished memories of the circumstances that led to their acquisition often make their sentimental value exceed their monetary worth, and render those objects irreplaceable.

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"If there were a fire," says Harry Rinker, "and I could only take three things, I would grab one thing that relates to my family, one thing that relates to my strong ancestral ties to this region, and one thing that relates to my life."

It is the memories, then, that are worth keeping. Consider Viola Fearnside's fluttering white messengers of a treasured life and a

lasting love. In each of our lives, Viola, may we collect the pearls of great price that make our collections as valuable and enduring as yours. ■

Juliene Osborne-McKnight has written more than 400 articles for newspapers, magazines and literary journals. Her novel on Celtic history, "I Am of Irelaunde," was recently accepted for publication.