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## Eccentric Collections

*Luke Honey*

Man is a collecting animal. Most of us at one time or another have had the inexplicable urge to hoard objects with no intrinsic use for no reason other than that they capture our imagination or move us in some way. For some people collecting becomes a dangerous, almost lunatic, obsession threatening to disrupt their lives or bankrupt them into buying a bigger house with more space to display their prized possessions. However, don't let this put you off – collecting for most people is great fun and relatively safe.

Weird and wonderful collections have been made from airline sickness bags, antique American barbed-wire, banknotes, biscuit tins, Barbie dolls, buttons (the Duke of Windsor was a collector), cigar bands, cigarette lighters, corkscrews, fans, golf balls, ice-cream memorabilia, lawnmowers, lavatory paper, light bulbs, milk bottles, plastics, prams, Swatch watches, and salt and pepper shakers.

Tastes change over the years. During the 'tulipmania' craze of the late-17th century, tulip bulbs exchanged hands for extraordinary amounts equivalent to many thousands of pounds at today's prices. The Victorians were almost as nutty about ferns. And the 18th-century bibliomaniac, Robert Heber, became so obsessed with book collecting that, by his death, he owned two houses in London, a family house in Cheshire, and houses in Paris, Brussels,

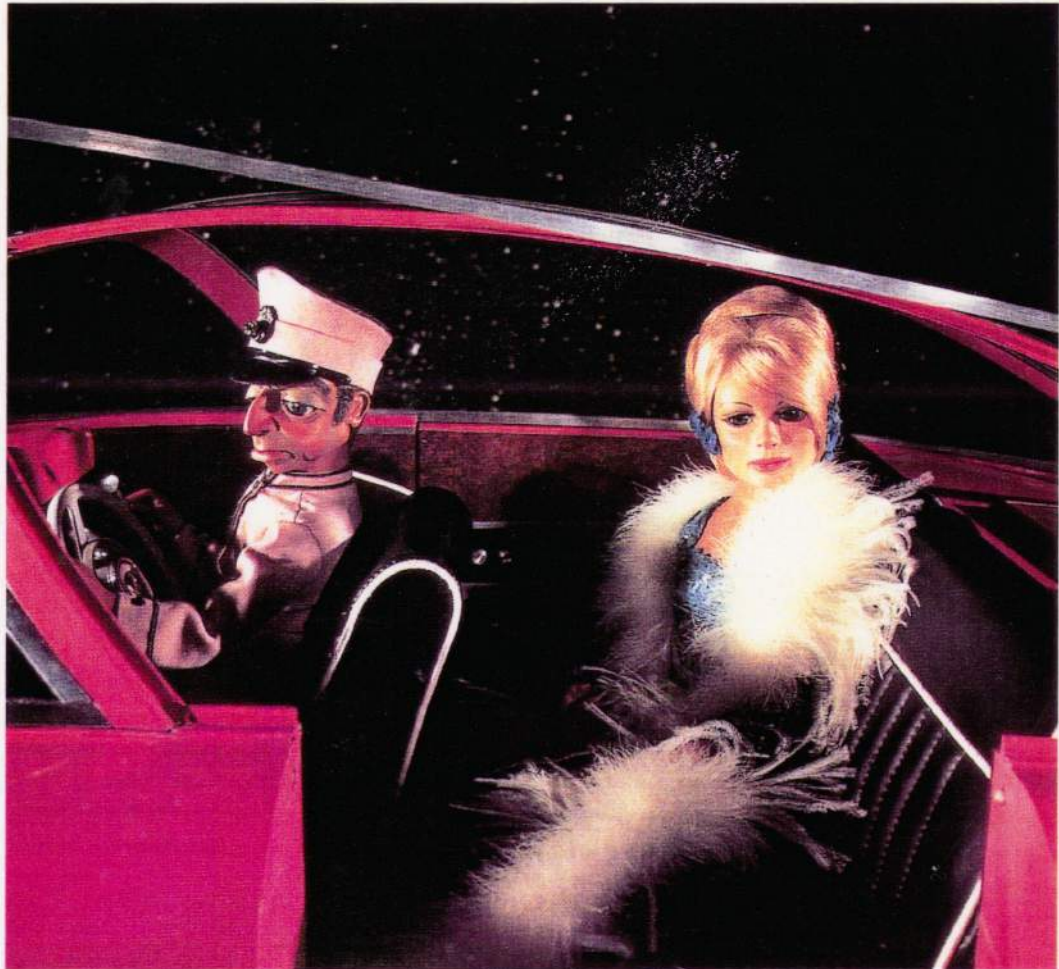
Antwerp and Ghent – all completely full of books. He once bought an entire library of 30,000 volumes in Paris, and it was said that he would think nothing of travelling 500 miles to look at a curious book he had been told about.

### *Current Collectibles*

Film mementoes and rock and pop memorabilia are two fun areas of collecting that are growing in popularity. Recent nostalgia for the more kitsch television programmes of the 1960s has led to staggering prices being paid at auction. The Phillips Toys and Dolls sale, in December 1995, included several puppets from Gerry and Sylvia Anderson's *Thunderbirds* television series. The glamorous Lady Penelope puppet, one of only two surviving original puppets



*This rare Baird Televisor, the first to be mass-produced by Logie Baird, fetched £5,400 at a Phillips sale*  
Source: Phillips, London



*Lady Penelope and her chauffeur Parker, two surviving original Thunderbirds puppets*

Source: Phillips, London

that were known to have been used in both the British television series and the 1968 film *Thunderbird 6*, fetched £34,000 against an estimate of £15,000 to £20,000. FAB 1, Lady Penelope's shocking-pink Rolls-Royce, was bought by a collector for £23,000 at the same sale. The restored nine-foot model was the only one ever built and featured steerable

front wheels, working headlamps and opening doors and boot.

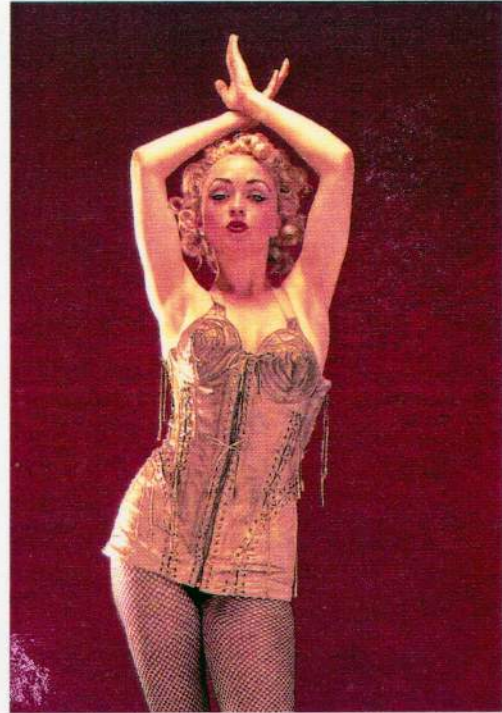
A further unique opportunity for *Thunderbirds* freaks was the chance to buy the original puppet of Parker, Lady Penelope's faithful Cockney chauffeur, whose 'Yes m' lady' was a popular catch phrase of the time. Dressed in his original driver's uniform

of jacket, striped trousers, black shoes and peaked cap, the puppet was signed by actor David Graham, the 'voice' of Parker.

Enthusiasts of rock and pop memorabilia – often Japanese and American fans – tend to collect for love rather than money. Not surprisingly, Beatles material commands a premium. The first ever rock 'n' roll sale, held at Sotheby's in 1981, set a standard, with Beatles gear fetching the highest prices. Paul McCartney's piano made £9,000 and a collector paid almost £3,000 for John Lennon's moped. Four years later, Beatlemania hit the London salerooms once more when John's hand-painted psychedelic Rolls-Royce Phantom V sold for a phenomenal £1,768,000. A latter day icon of pop, Madonna, saw her Jean Paul Gaultier bodice (in gold lamé with a flesh-coloured elasticated lining 'showing evidence of much wear') fetch as much as £9,000 at Sotheby's London, in August 1992.

The game of chess has, for centuries, fascinated and stirred the imagination of players and historians since its beginnings in the Ganges valley nearly 5,000 years ago. Collecting chess sets is an unusual but established market which appeals to a small group of dedicated collectors (usually male, and often bearded German and American intellectuals), and includes well-known grand masters as well as non-players. Chess auctions are a regular event at both London and New York showrooms.

Would-be members of this select group should note that prices for sets vary. An attractive, but by no means rare, 19th-century ivory Cantonese export set, consisting of intricately carved figures in traditional



*Madonna's gold bodice designed by Jean Paul Gaultier fetched £9,000 at Sotheby's in August 1992*

Source: Sotheby's, London

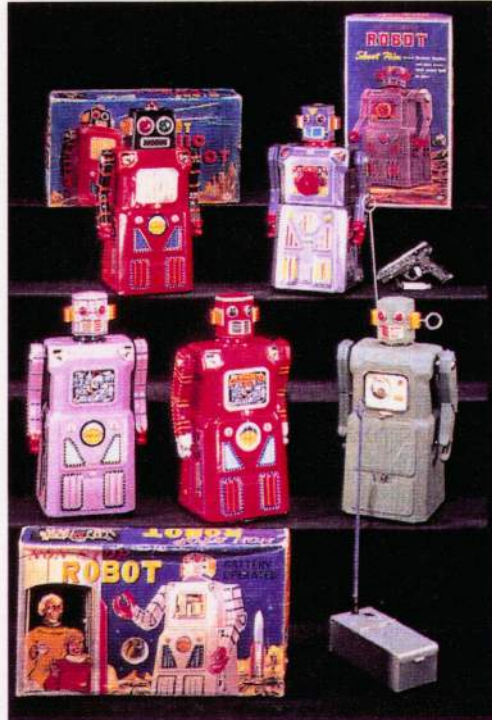
Chinese dress, might be bought for as little as £200. On the other hand, a post-war porcelain 'sea-life' set from the Meissen factory, designed by Max Esser, fetched £6,200 in November 1995. A modernistic silver and silver-gilt chess set consisting of interlocking geometric pieces which was made in 1972 by Cy Endfield (director of the film *Zulu*) to commemorate the epic Fisher-Spassky match, reached £900 in the same auction. Novice chess set buyers are advised to reject sets in poor condition with missing or replaced pieces and to bear in mind that good-quality 19th-century 'Staunton' sets,

made by Jaques of London, may well see a rise in value.

Two of the most bizarre sales in recent times were Sotheby's two Russian space-history sales, held at their New York branch in 1993 and 1996. Up for grabs was an interesting relic of the Cold War – a spy satellite from the 1978 Kosmos mission that sold for US\$112,500 to a private American collector. The satellite had been consigned to space by the Investment Economic Association of Moscow during the Autumn of 1988. In the same sale was a rare prototype 'canine high-altitude suit and helmet' (a dog space-suit to you and me) which fetched US\$25,300 against an estimate of US\$10,000–US\$15,000. (During the 1950s the Soviet Union had begun to study the effects of space flight on living organisms and carried out a series of experiments on a succession of unfortunate dogs.) A collection of lunar rock specimens was also bought for more than US\$440,000 by an anonymous buyer.

Old television sets have been causing a stir among collectors recently. Two years ago pre-war sets were demanding crazy prices but now, as the novelty wears off, prices have stabilised. Exhibitions such as *TV is King*, held at Sotheby's in 1994, have helped to clarify the state of the market. Considering the influence and effect that television has had upon 20th-century life, it seems amazing that the collecting of television sets has taken so long to pick up.

TV specialist Tony Jones says: 'Buy to your own taste, and buy the best you can afford. Go for the pre-war sets made by good manufacturers such as HMV, Marconi and Cooser. Early televisions do not



*A selection of mass-produced robots from the 1940s*  
Source: Sotheby's, London

necessarily have to work to be valuable.' A Baird Televisor, with painted aluminium casings, 30-line scanning disc, neon tube on mahogany baseboard and components booklet fetched £5,400 at Phillips. This was an extremely rare television set, the first to be mass-produced from Logie Baird, who is remembered as the man who invented television. Post-war sets, such as the trendy 1960s' Zazrth transparent globe television, might be bought at auction for around £800 and can be highly collectible. The market is still at a relatively early stage and could well be worth looking into for investment potential.

*Question: When is a biscuit tin not a biscuit tin?*

*Answer: When it's made for Huntley & Palmer.*

With the invention of offset lithography in 1875, the path was cleared for sophisticated colour printing to be applied to a greater variety of differently shaped tins. And we're not just talking about any sort of old biscuit tin. Leo and Nathalie Scheer's wonderful collection of more than 400 tins, probably the most comprehensive in the world, includes novelty tins in the shape of ocean liners, steam locomotives, trams, roulette wheels and crocodile handbags. One of the star tins in the collection was a Gray, Dunn & Co. motorcycle-combination biscuit tin, made in Glasgow in 1925. The tin, in the shape of a uniformed postman driving a motorcycle and sidecar, exchanged hands for £5,700.

And finally, with the approaching millennium, there has been a resurgence of interest in aliens, unidentified flying objects and the more weird aspects of science fiction. Anne Lury is Sotheby's expert in Japanese tin robots. 'The market for toy robots is strong,' says Lury. 'The first robots were mass-produced in the 1940s for export to the West and these examples are highly desirable. Condition is important and, as with all toys,

having the original box will increase the value.' An average mid-1960s plastic robot might be bought for a few hundred pounds, but potential robot collectors tempted by the earliest tin robot, the 'Robot Lilliput', will have to do some serious saving up. If you're lucky enough to find one, expect to pay at least £5,000 at auction, and considerably more from a dealer.

If you do decide to take the plunge and join the ranks of budding collectors, remember above all to collect what you like, rather than what you're told to like, and never take your collecting too seriously. Collecting should be fun, even if you find your wallet forlornly empty on occasion and the shiny new car you promised yourself remaining only a dream. \*

*Having started his auction career at Bonhams, Luke Honey is now a specialist in the European Works of Art Department at Phillips Fine Art Auctioneers in London. He has held antique chess set sales in London and New York, and in 1996 he organised an exhibition of English chairs from the Frederick Parker Collection, which was shown to the public for the first time. He has published articles on fine art, antiques and collecting.*