

Contemporary Collectibles: Museums of buttons, beads and barbed wire

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

I recently came across an account of a new museum opening in Amsterdam devoted solely to handbags. The Museum of Bags and Purses has an inventory of more than 3,500 bags, vintage items that illustrate the history of the woman's purse in Western culture. This got me to thinking about other similarly small, specific museums in this country that would be of particular interest to collectors. Here are a few:

BARBED WIRE

More diverse and more collectible than you might think, barbed wire - aka "devil's rope" - is seen in several thousand varieties at the Kansas Barbed Wire Museum in La Cross. And if you don't get your fill here, you can move on to The Historical Museum of Barbed Wire and Fencing Tools in McLean, Texas, which exhibits some of the first examples used by ranchers in the Old West.

BEADS

The bead museum in Glendale, Ariz., has a serious mission: to foster "the appreciation and understanding of the global, historical, cultural and artistic significance of beads and related artifacts." Its permanent exhibition presents a timeline of original examples from the prehistoric to the contemporary, the oldest of which are the ostrich eggshells, found in the Rift Valley of Kenya, dating back almost 40,000 years.

BEER AND SODA CANS

The Museum of Beverage Containers and Advertising in Millersville, Tenn., holds a vast collection of more than 3,600 cans and 9,000 bottles, as well as promotional items from trays to match covers, bringing the total to about 250,000 objects. Started by the father-son team of Paul and Tom Bates, it includes such rarities as camouflaged beer cans sent to U.S. troops during World War II.

BUTTONS

The Keep Homestead Museum in Monson, Mass., displays its large collection of antique and vintage buttons on a rotating basis. Some of the featured categories are mosaic buttons, art nouveau buttons, opera and storybook buttons, military and political buttons, pottery, black and iridized glass, Kate Greenaway and Beatrix Potter buttons, and advertising examples.

COMBS

The Miller Comb Museum in Homer, Alaska, (a little off the beaten track), has one of the largest collections anywhere of ornamental hair combs and other related accessories, at least 3,800 items dating from 300 B.C. to 1940. The fascinatingly eclectic assemblage was formed by Ralph and Betty Miller.

FUNERABILIA

The National Museum of Funeral History in Houston makes an appeal to our more morbid instincts. Here you will find such funereal vehicles as horse-drawn carriages and sleighs and an ornate Japanese hearse, dioramas of mourning apparel and an early embalming room complete with instruments. Oddities include a casket built for three (must be an interesting story there), a glass coffin and a fantasy coffin in the shape of a KLM jumbo jet.

MUSTARD MEMORABILIA

The Mustard Museum of Mount Horeb, Wis., features, in addition to a collection of almost 5,000 prepared mustard jars, bottles and tubes from all 50 states and more than 60 countries, a selection of antique mustard pots and vintage mustard advertising.

PEZ

Located just south of San Francisco is the Burlingame Museum of Pez Memorabilia, which has an example of every Pez candy dispenser ever made - 550 of them have been produced since 1950, from Bullwinkle to Bob the Builder, Mickey Mouse to Miss Piggy, plus the world's largest Pez dispenser, standing 7 feet 10 inches and weighing 85 pounds.

YO-YOS

Yes, yo-yos. The National Yo-Yo Museum in Chico, Calif., displays the collection formed by the family who ran the Duncan Yo-Yo Company from 1928 to 1965. It was Donald F. Duncan who bought the right to market the toy in America from Pedro Flores, a Filipino who had introduced it here a few years earlier. The museum displays advertising and marketing material used to popularize the yo-yo, as well as many unusual examples.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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