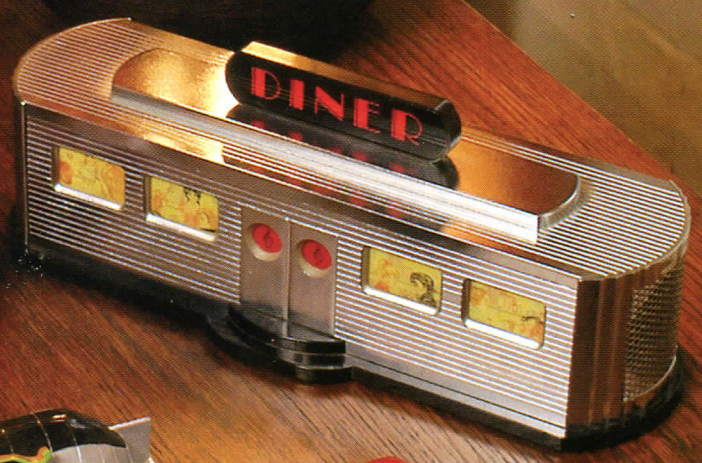
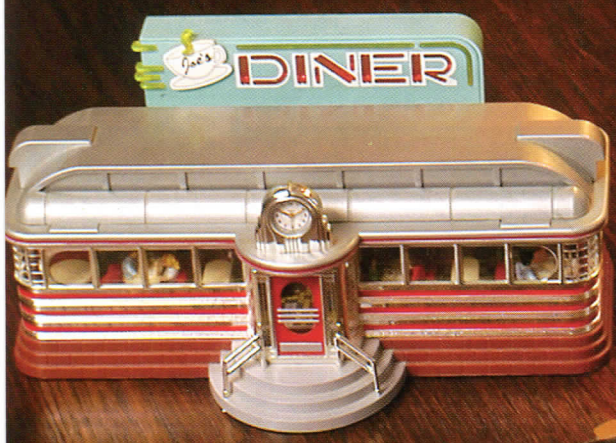
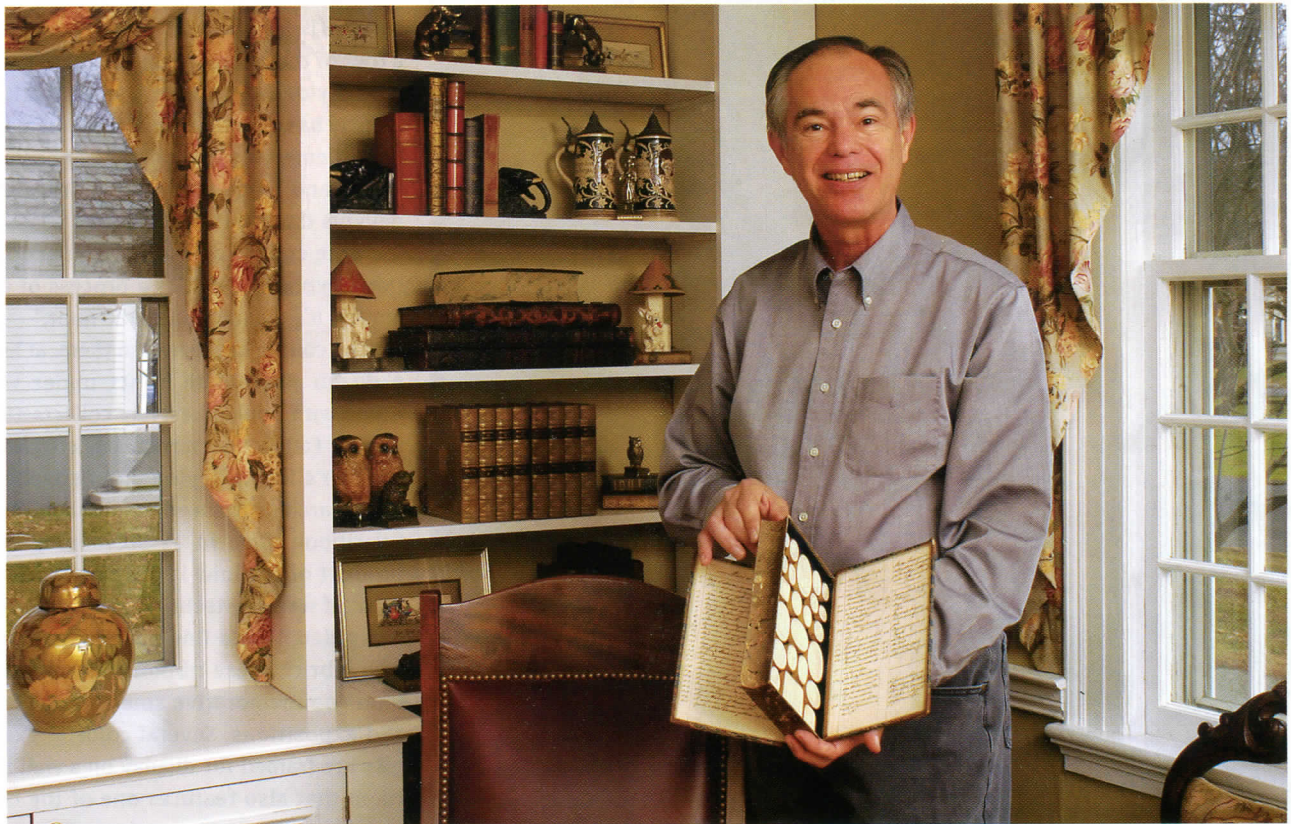


Diner collection, clockwise from top left: Joe's Diner hides a telephone, and was a gift from Ray's late father; a diner radio that lights up when turned on; a diner salvaged from a Lionel Train Set; a likeness of the actual Collins Diner from Canaan, Conn.; and the Zep Diner, probably just a fantasy model for enthusiasts.

On facing page, Ray Boas in his "bookalike" room, holds one faux book containing a collection of medallions, probably purchased on a grand tour of Italy in the mid-19th century.

Photos by Mark Corliss





# The **Art** of the Collection

Often, interior decoration involves a fresh start, but for true collectors, an emotional link to their belongings is the main ingredient for a beautiful home. **By Rick Broussard**

The light and airy front room of Ray and Cathy Boas' 200-year-old Georgian Colonial home in Walpole is what you might expect from a couple who operate a successful bookshop catering to antiquarian and special interests. Every shelf and table displays the bindings of volumes and sets and stacks of what appear to be fine first editions. In fact, not a single book can be found in the room.

"I call them 'bookalikes,'" says Ray, lifting what looks like a large dictionary from its floor stand and then cracking it open. Inside it's hollow, filled with advertisements for its

original content, tins of sardines. On shelves are other slender volumes that conceal cigarette boxes, liquor flasks, and one that serves as a Bausch & Lomb display case with four pairs of spectacles inside.

Ray and Cathy have been collecting bookalikes for 14 years, gathering about 85 so far. It may be the only such collection in the world, but collectors can be a secretive group, preferring not to display or publicize their loot.

To Ray, what distinguishes a true collector from a mere accumulator of things is that a collector shares his passion



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with the world. Using that definition, Ray and Cathy are collectors in the grandest sense. Their bookshop is remarkable and a tour of their home reveals that practically every dish, statue or framed work on display has a connection to other items, or to a theme or a period that appeals to them, and every item has a story that delights them in the telling.

"True collecting is not about acquisition," explains Ray. "It's a process of discovery. It's the passion of the hunt."

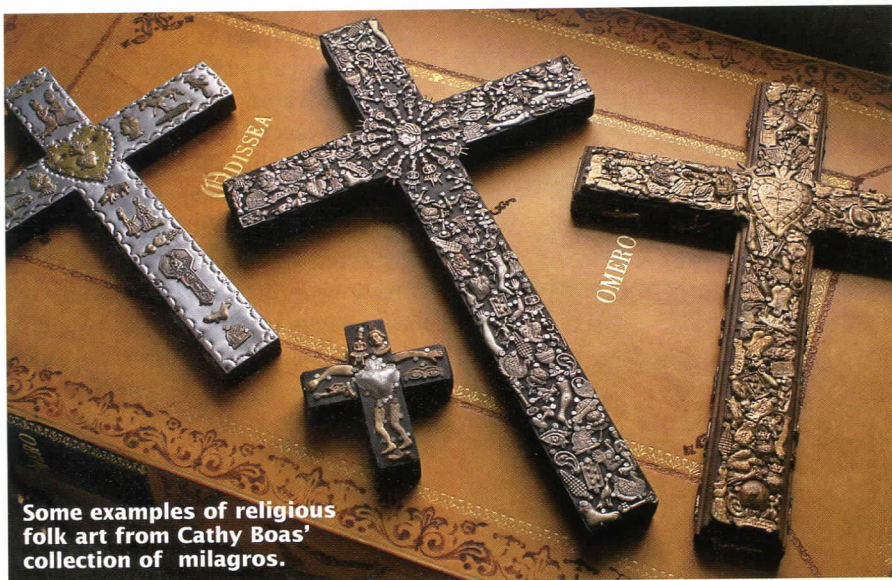
The couple has, between them, at least a dozen passionate hunts under way. Along with bookalikes, Ray collects 1939 World's Fair items, particularly effigies of the Fair's iconic Trylon and Perisphere. This search introduced him to the beautiful ribbons known as Stevengraphs, a product of the mid-19th century refinement of weaving technology that allowed sharp details and fine print to be woven into fabric. These ribbons became common commemorative souvenirs at fairs and expositions. Several colorful examples are framed for display on a wall in a room that also features one of the couple's latest passions: trench art. Brass candlesticks and vases made from empty shell casings are one of the more unusual and collectible byproducts of WWI.

Cathy collects dog art — statues, prints and novelties — her favorite subject being caricatures of West Highland terriers (she and Ray happen to have two "Westies" as beloved pets). She also collects the costume jewelry creations of Kenneth J. Lane, the "living legend" of jewelry. His work, in a medium that was once considered gauche, became a fashion statement for the likes of Jackie Onassis and Barbara Bush and is now a chi-chi accoutrement, even showing up on the trend-setting necks and bosoms of the women of HBO's "Sex and the City."

On one wall hangs a curious crucifix, encrusted with small medals, creating a mosaic of hands, hearts, feet and eyes.

"Milagros," says Cathy. She explains how these little potmetal charms were arranged for display by a southwestern artist, but then she opens bags containing hundreds of individual milagros, noting that each one is an image of some body part in need of healing, or a symbol of a loved one engaged in war or travel. Each one was blessed and prayed over by someone seeking divine assistance.

She has one of the largest collections of milagro in the world, and recently pur-



Some examples of religious folk art from Cathy Boas' collection of milagros.

chased the bulk of another large collection. It's a fascination that she can't explain, but one that is shared by many artists who have turned the handcrafted tokens into jewelry and other keepsakes. "I especially like the ones that are body organs," says Cathy. "Not body parts like arms and legs, but lungs and livers. I find those fascinating." She holds up another favorite of hers depicting a group of people in a church. "Only the person who made the milagro would know the purpose of that one," she says.

She has collected milagros for years, but sometimes the collector's urge comes in sprints. Cathy says she went on a cicada binge for about a month, collecting cicada-shaped pins in all materials and styles until the passion faded after gathering 31 of them. These are now neatly stored in separate cells of a plastic craft box, awaiting either a new spark to the fever, or perhaps some perfect way to display them.

Both Ray and Cathy admit to being scrippophiliacs, i.e. collectors of old, and usually worthless, stock and bond certificates. These are frequently quite beautiful and often possess images or associations that appeal to collectors of other items, for instance, Cathy notes, a railroad model collector would cherish a stock certificate from an early railroad venture.

Ray collects models of diners and displays them in the top shelves of an upstairs library. Some are "made-collectibles" of landmark eateries for the legions of diner fans, others are "found-collectibles" he has acquired from numer-

ous sources, such as a Lionel train set, a diner-shaped telephone, or a replica of Connecticut's Collins Diner, where Ray has actually eaten.

It's an example of how a collection can be an attractive decorative touch, and provide a window into the mind and personality of the collector, because you just have to ask, "What's with all the diners?"

"I've always liked them," says Ray. He used to eat at diners in the '50s with his folks. In 1957, he was picked to be on a children's TV quiz show called "The Giant Step," which was hosted by Bert Parks. During the show, Parks asked Ray what he wanted to do when he grew up. "The only thing that came to my mind to say was, 'I want to own a diner,'" remembers Ray. He did OK on the quiz show, by the way, but missed a question on the fifth level of the game. "What was the first car with headlights in the fender?" asks Ray, as though the question still hovered before him. "It was the 1912 Pierce Arrow," he says. "I should have known that, since my father loved cars."

Even this memory leads back to the collector's art as he recalls his father's love for old Ford Model Ts. "A collectible old car today is from the 1970s to 1980s — something that those who are young now grew up with. You can't give away Model Ts now, because most of those who grew up with them have died off."

And this principal holds true for most collectibles. In spite of the impression that "older is more valuable," meaningful associations trump mere age for wise collectors. "People think that older things are worth more, but I discourage collect-

"We've,  
waited  
forever..."



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ing as an investment. You are probably going to be buying at retail and, unless you're a dealer, you'll be selling at wholesale so you'll always need a great increase in value to exceed your investment."

Perhaps nothing illustrates the line between collecting and accumulating better than the downstairs bookshop that constitutes the center of the universe of collections in the Boas home. Books are often objects of beauty, and individual volumes can be filled with significance for their owners. They also group or mix in just the kinds of arrangements that make other collectibles attractive to the designing imagination. Here also, the challenge is to narrow the focus.

"It's very difficult to throw books away," says Ray, a fact that he's especially aware of, since he is often called to examine estate sales or box lots of old tomes. Ray says a large percentage of the books published, once they have been read, should be recycled to make more room for new ones and for better preservation of the valuable ones. "I can tell when I look at a wall of books if it's an accumulation or a collection where there is focus. Typically there might only be a few things in there worth saving for future generations."

"It's a process of refinement," he says. "I've been doing this for 25 years, separating the wheat from the chaff. As a book-

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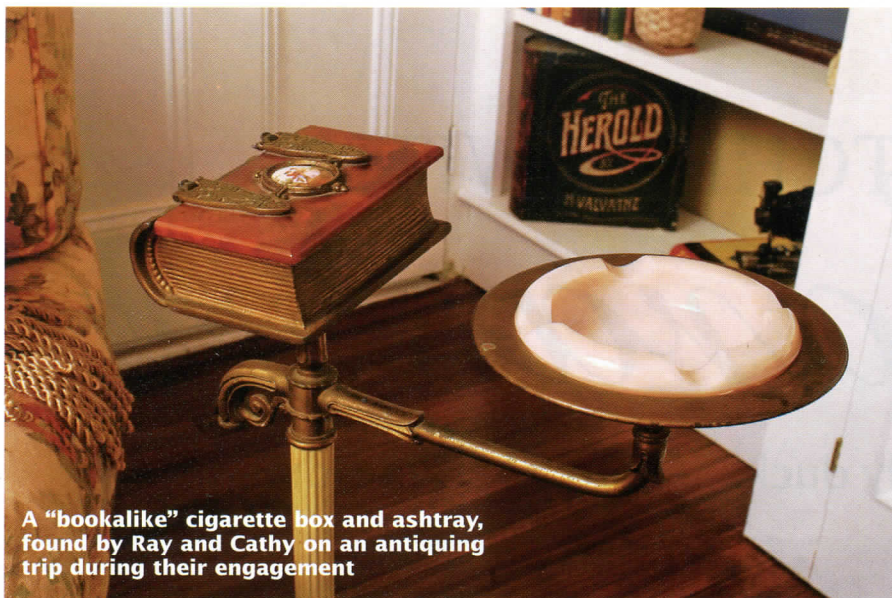
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seller, I'm the repository between a place where a book was loved and a place where a book will be loved."

Ray says there is an infectious quality to collecting, one that he encourages. "Our literature says we run 'a unique and memorable book shop.' I want to make it that for people," So Ray uses another collection of his — old country store items and display cases — to safely display books, and to create an evocative mood for shoppers, even ringing up their purchases on a 1914 cash register.

He's often asked about good practices in collecting. "You really have to go with your heart and collect what makes you feel good. And then you have to



A "booklike" cigarette box and ashtray, found by Ray and Cathy on an antiquing trip during their engagement

educate yourself on the subject of the field you're going to collect," he says. "To find the focus that makes a collection interesting."

People looking to display a collection in their homes have to first consider what space they have to work with, explains Ray. For instance, with a large kitchen they might collect cookie jars. Once a collection is begun they can start to collect based on certain designs, types of pottery, colors, or periods, looking either to create groupings or eclectic mixtures.

"There is a life cycle to a collection. Things are collected then large collections are broken up and sold, usually purchased by collectors looking for very specific areas of interest," says Ray. "We're custodians of this property, to preserve it for a period of time. Collections are built, then they get dispersed into other collections." And collectors are always upgrading their collections. "When you start off you collect everything but when you narrow your focus you start looking for the more unique. When Cathy and I find something we've never seen before we have to have it."

But such intense questing can make it difficult to come up with gifts for one another. Cathy once saw a handmade sign on the wall of a little shop in Tarpon Springs, Florida, that seemed like the perfect gift for Ray. It read, "Whoever dies with the most junk wins." The owner told Cathy it was one of a kind and not for sale, but like most things, it had a price. She produced \$25 and the owner pulled the sign right off the wall.

"Probably, after you left, he pulled another one out from under the counter," says Ray, with an affectionate chuckle.

Usually their gifts reflect the mixed interests of the couple and the ongoing process of discovery. For instance, one of Ray's cigar box booklikes once held Barry Lyndon cigars. Cathy happens to collect Barry Lyndon-related objects.

Ray points out that writing on the side of the box indicates that at some point it had been used to store someone's tax receipts.

Is it possible there's a set of people who collect boxes that have once been used to hold tax receipts?

"It's likely," says Ray, "People do collect the strangest things. I remember a busy postcard swap meet in Rhode Island where there was this one man walking around, shouting, 'Jackasses and outhouses! If anyone sees any jackasses or outhouses, let me know!'"

So, somewhere in Rhode Island, there's probably a home decorated in just that theme? "It's not what you collect that's important," says Ray. "The most important thing is you can't force this, you have to have a love for it." After all, many things that are now hot collectibles, from Depression glass or tin toys made in Japan, were once considered tacky.

"I always say people could have a collection without even realizing it," says Ray. "If you have two or three of something unique or remarkable, you have a collection."

And if you can display those items in a way that reveals your passion to others, it is then, says Ray, that you become a true collector. **NH**

*"The timing's perfect..."*



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