

Forrest L. Merrill has made a mission of sharing the objects he loves.

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Collector with a Cause



Forrest L. Merrill sits in his book room and communes with a few favorite objects: a stone-ware head by Ken Dierck, an antique Gouda lamp from the Netherlands, a 1930s earthenware plate by Glen Lukens, and a Satsuki Annino bowl made of micaceous clay.

■ ■ ■ ■ Merrill's collection has grown in real time.

"I discovered some of these wonderful artists as they were creating, and we evolved together."

SOME COLLECTORS ARE DRIVEN by a desire to own beautiful things and keep them close. Forrest L. Merrill is not one of those collectors. Although the Berkeley, California, resident does possess a messianic appreciation for hand-wrought vessels – and the artists who throw, carve, forge, enamel, glaze, turn, weave, and sculpt them – he is seized with an equal zeal to share his trove with the public. (Around 4,000 objects have already been catalogued, with almost as many waiting to be documented.)

Merrill was in high school in 1950 when he bought a slumped-glass salad set by ceramist Glen Lukens for \$40. Since that first artistic foray, he has not only elevated collecting to an art form, he has loaned thousands of pieces to some 110 exhibitions around the country, with five more in the works as of this writing. "It's not just about getting something into LACMA," he says. "Yes, I've had pieces there, and that's great. But it makes me happier to think how many more people we've reached at the minor museums, the state colleges, the airport exhibitions – places that aren't in the cultural forefront."

At the SFO Museum in the San Francisco airport, Merrill and curator Tim O'Brien are working on their fourth collaboration, an exhibition of pottery by Marguerite Wildenhain and the history of Pond Farm (opening in December). "With millions of people passing through every year, the airport is an ideal place to reach large numbers of people and whet their appetite for art and design," says O'Brien. "Forrest not only shares that mission, he's an involved and passionate partner."

"If a show can turn even two kids on to the possibilities of what art can bring to their lives," echoes Merrill, "that's a great accomplishment. It will have made everything worthwhile."



ABOVE: Merrill has been a longtime collector of the work of Sausalito enamel artist June Schwarcz. The pieces here (left to right) date from 2014, 1988, 1978, 2012, 2014, and 2000.

LEFT: Sculptor David Gilhooly, a leader of the Bay Area funk art movement, made these papier-mâché peccaries in 1968. They lounge atop the armoire in Merrill's living room.

LOWER LEFT: Self-portraits by ceramic sculptor Ken Dierck (left) and printmaker Roi Partridge (right, 1907) flank a portrait of potter Rex Mason painted in 1949 by Don Wiggins.

OPPOSITE, FAR RIGHT: A Clyfford Still painting (1949) overlooks a Laura Andreson porcelain pedestal bowl (1973), Merry Renk's brass *Petals*, Knud Kyhn's stoneware monkey (1927, made as a prototype for Royal Copenhagen) and a Steuben Glass lamp.



FROM TOP SHELF, LEFT TO RIGHT: Earthenware vessels by Liza Riddle, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and Linda Haggerty; porcelain bowl by James Lovera, June Schwarcz dish, and Thomas Hill wire bird sculptures; a pair of ceramic and turned wood vessels by Victor Ries and another Natzler bowl; a Mark Goudy earthenware vessel with an enamel-on-copper dish by Rex Mason; Renee Adams wooden seed pod, with ebony and honey locust turned vessels by Bob Stocksdale; and, last but not least, a Stocksdale turned teak bowl.

RIGHT: Standing 28 inches high, this forged steel and parchment lamp was made by Carl Jennings in 1964.





Merrill has made a priority of lending to small institutions so that everyone, not just the crowd at major museums, has access to art.



What was the first exhibition you contributed to?

I was approached by Lloyd Herman, a curator at the Renwick Gallery, for a show on Otto and Gertrud Natzler in 1973. But loaning out work is even more important now. Art programs have largely been defunded from our public education system, which is tragic. When artists create, they produce a demand for materials, they work on the cutting edge of creativity, they change how people think; to take that away is just an outrage. And that's why I've put a lot of effort into lending things to small arts centers in addition to major museums. My own eyes were opened at a small museum in Pasadena, before it was the Norton Simon. For me, it didn't translate into making things with my hands – but I've tried to make something with my heart.

Thinking about how young you were when you made your first artistic purchase put me in mind of Ronald Lauder, who reportedly bought his first Egon Schiele at 13, with funds from his bar mitzvah. What inspired you to spend your lawn-mowing money on art?

Well, I do recall someone suggesting I should buy a baseball mitt. And it never once occurred to me to buy a baseball mitt. I was in high school, and I had this wonderful art teacher who had studied with Lukens. Her class changed my life by showing me the possibilities of what art could do and how it could impact the way you think about the world. So that was part of it. Fortunately, I bought something I really like, even to this day. And it gives me a great sense of satisfaction that I didn't discover the '50s aesthetic in the 1980s, with a checklist of things to buy. I discovered some of these wonderful artists as they were creating, and we evolved together.



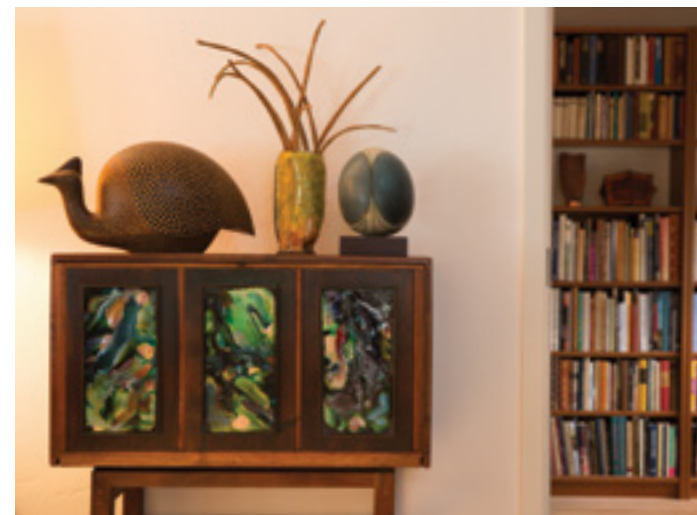
LEFT: Studio potter and sculptor Mary Lindheim's *Atomic Nightmare* (1955).

RIGHT: The stoneware bowl, plate, and bottle-form vase are by Peter Voulkos, all from the early 1950s. The orchid is set in a porcelain vessel by Lana Wilson. The crater-glazed lamp is by Gertrud and Otto Natzler.



ABOVE: Kay Sekimachi vessels wrought from leaves and paper (including antique Japanese paper), made between 1985 and 2012.

RIGHT: Arthur Espenet Carpenter created this wooden cabinet, with enamel inserts by Ree Mantz, in 1962. It is home to an English holly and ebony guinea fowl by Emile Norman (1959), a June Schwarcz enamel vase (2013), and a stoneware egg form on a rosewood base by Harrison McIntosh (1972).





Merrill feels fortunate to have given his collection

a public life, but, he says, “it’s the friendships that have really come back to bless me.”

You collect the work of so many artists: June Schwarcz, Kay Sekimachi, Bob Stocksdale, Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, Rex Mason, Art and Tripp Carpenter, Toshiko Takaezu, Ralph Bacerra, Simon Levy, Ron Kent, Mary Lindheim, Anne Hirondelle, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and Merry Renk, to name just a very few. As you walk me through your home – telling stories about many of the objects and the artists – I almost have the

sense of looking at someone’s family photos. There is such intimacy, not only between you and the objects, but you and the artists, many of whom are your dear friends.

The associations that I have been able to form with the people who make these objects are very valuable to me. I feel fortunate that I’ve had an opportunity to give these things I love a public life through exhibition. But it’s the friendships that have really come back to bless me and

enrich my life. And to me, that’s where the value really is.

You seem to make new discoveries every week – during your travels, meeting friends of artists, and attending clay and glass shows. As you acquire, do you ever divest?

I do occasionally sell something because I have a duplicate, or I have a changed interest. For a while, I got quite interested in English ceramics. And then I thought, who is going to look

to me to borrow a piece of English ceramic? I don’t think anyone will knock on my door for that. So I found new homes for my pieces by Hans Coper and Lucie Rie, and I kept the potters such as John Ward, Mary Rogers, and Jacqueline Poncet, because I thought I had selected some great examples of this second tier, and maybe that could be useful to someone.

That makes me curious about your approach to collecting,

which is somewhat idiosyncratic. Tim O’Brien remarked that you have no interest in anyone else’s idea of what a comprehensive collection should be, which he finds such a refreshing way to approach art.

I do like to collect in depth, but really, you can have three Natzlers, and have a good Natzler collection if they’re the right three pieces. But I have never wanted to be confined to an artist’s so-called iconic or expected work. I’ll

give you an example. I was visiting Ron Kent in Hawaii, on Oahu. As we talked, I noticed these pieces across the room on a cabinet that I thought were probably Scandinavian. But no: He said that he had made them and that no gallery wanted them, because they were not his “iconic” work. He had added texture to the outside of these bowls because in most cases they had been repaired. And so he had salvaged something and made a beautiful object of it.

Well, this excited me. I said, How many do you have? I would like to acquire them all. When you take the time to focus on an artist’s work, you have the liberty to go where they’ve been, or follow little exciting adventures that they have explored. And that’s the kind of journey that interests me very much.

Out of all of your treasures, how do you decide what to keep close, and what to store?

Well, some things just have a lot of personal meaning. And it depends upon what shows are coming up. I brought another one of Ralph Bacerra’s animals home, because I’m shipping some out for a retrospective at the Otis College of Art and Design, and I wanted them to get to know each other. Wait, I’ll put them together so they’re nose to nose. There! Now that has a lot to say right there.

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ABOVE: Wire fish by Thomas Hill swim over a James Haggerty earthenware bowl (2015), a red bottle-form vase by Gertrud and Otto Natzler with a copper reduction glaze (1965), a burl-wood bowl by Bob Womack (2002), and a 1950s Natzler lamp.

RIGHT: A fitting message – Merrill holds *Art Works* by ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson.



RIGHT: Still life with the collector: Merrill cradles an earthenware bowl by the Natzlers, who also made the blue vase with crystalline glaze and the vessel with the flowing crater glaze. The slumped-glass plates are by Glen Lukens. Behind Merrill are a large vessel by Vivika and Otto Heino, and a row of turned bowls by Bob Stocksdale.

