



Newsstand Rate \$1.75

Published by The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, Connecticut

INDEXES ON  
PAGES 66 & 67

## Magic Max



From Chinese antiquities to American paintings, toys and mechanical banks to scrimshaw, the collections of Max N. Berry, here relaxing in Nantucket, are legend and, in some instances, unsurpassed.

### His Charmed Life Aside, Passion And Persistence Explain The Success Of Collector Max N. Berry

BY LAURA BEACH

NANTUCKET, MASS. — Max N. Berry, the Washington DC lawyer and patron of the arts, is a brilliant storyteller of the old school. At 78, having lived a rich and eventful life, he simply has more to say than most people. His meandering tales spool out in a leisurely fashion and, having reached their subtle denouement, reveal a man wise in the ways of power but appreciative of others, essential traits for a consummate dealmaker.

On a lazy August afternoon in Nantucket, at the artfully conceived summer house that he and his late wife, the journalist Heidi L. Berry, built on an enviable spit of land overlooking the entrance to the island's principal harbor, Berry is recalling his childhood in Oklahoma where his father and uncles were "old-time oilmen," as he puts it.

"I was 6 or 7 and had some money in my pocket from selling fireworks with my brother to baseball fans at Oiler Park. I bought the first spinning rod and reel in Oklahoma and asked a pro from the local sporting goods store to take me out onto the middle of the lake and teach me how to use it. Soon I was casting my small, light lure three times farther than my brother's," Berry recalls. Into everything — he was a regular at Wilson's Stamps and Coins Shop in downtown Tulsa — Berry was already honing the skills that have made him a prominent collector in an array of fields. From Chinese antiquities to American paintings, toys and banks to scrimshaw, Berry's collections are legend and, in some instances, unsurpassed.

Some collectors care nothing of beauty and relish only the deal. Others are drawn to beauty but know nothing of history. A few — having no deep engagement with beauty, history or the art of the deal — delegate their collecting to advisors. We venerate collectors too much,

on the whole. After all, what is inherently noble about acquisition? But if material culture is appreciated as the aggregate expression of a people in the artifacts they make and use, then collecting, as practiced by Berry, is intellect and imagination made palpable through objects.

After completing law school in 1960, Berry moved to Washington DC, serving in the US Army Judge Advocate General's Corps at the Pentagon and at the Treasury Department's Office of the General Counsel. In 1964, he opened his own practice in international trade law, his specialty for more than four decades. Shortly after their marriage in 1963, the Berrys began collecting, their shared passion for art and history eventually filling residences in Washington, New York and Nantucket.

"Max is a very astute collector but one who also appreciates whimsy. We met when Heidi was alive, as two collecting couples, both interested in the American field. We were members of the William Cullen Bryant Fellows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art together and had many good times. Max loves the stuff the way we do. We love to tell stories about how we found it, researched it, connived to get it. We enjoy the camaraderie of collecting and liked working together on the renovation of the Met's American Wing," says Lulu C. Wang, vice chairman of the museum's board of trustees.

After summering in Nantucket for three decades, the Berrys bought property on Brant Point in 1997. To hear locals tell it, the brilliant acquisition was classic Max Berry, who heard from a friend that the property would soon be for sale and was the first of many interested parties to see it. After clearing the site, the Berrys commissioned Washington DC architect George E. Hartman to

( continued on page 12C )



Berry had only been collecting toys and banks for a year when he found an ultrarare example of the Clown Bust bank by the English maker Chamberlain & Hill, Ltd, in London's Camden Passage market. The bank was the envy of the preeminent collectors Ed Mosler and Wally Tudor. The latter finally convinced Berry to part with it.



The Christmas Morning bell toy by Brass Pattern Manufacturing is thought to be the only complete example of its kind. Previous owners include Edwin H. Mosler Jr and Al Davidson.



Some regard the Ives Cutter Sleight of circa 1893 as the finest toy ever made. This example, which measures 19½ inches long and is the only one known with its original seated figure, descended in the Hegarty and Perelman collections. It was the late collector Donal Markey's favorite toy. Max Berry calls it his "Rosebud."



Works by artists and craftsmen associated with Nantucket fill one of Berry's homes. Here, one of three oil sketches in his collection that Eastman Johnson painted in preparation for "The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket," an oil on canvas of 1880 now at the Timken Museum of Art in San Diego.



Darky Fisherman mechanical bank, manufactured by Charles A. Bailey, Cobalt, Conn., circa 1880s. There are only two known examples of this bank. The lead fish was found at the Stevens Foundry.



Berry's marine collection includes such whimsies as sailors' valentines, shown here, and sand pails.



Berry's empathy for others has often made him a skillful negotiator. A Hong Kong collector who had steadily resisted selling her magnificent Sancai horse agreed to part with it after Berry convinced her that it should not be kept in a bank vault but cared for and loved as if it were alive. Also above, in Berry's Fifth Avenue apartment, "On the Hudson, Nyack," one of several renditions of the subject by Francis Augustus Silva.

# Magic Max

( continued from page 1C )

build a new house — low, shingled and appropriately understated — in the spirit of the modest dwelling that had been there before.

The residence contains Berry's collection of American scrimshaw, especially strong in canes and crimpers; a portion of Berry's extensive and related holdings of prisoner-of-war art; Chinese Export painting, porcelain and furniture; Nantucket baskets, including a nest of eight by Davis Hall, Berry's favorite maker; sailors' valentines; and, in the guest house, a playful assortment of sand pails. The assemblage summons memories of Sam and John Sylvia, Charles Carpenter, Norm Flayderman, Barbara Johnson and Paul Madden, all of whom Berry knew. In deference to his wife, who thought they were ugly, there are no scrimshaw teeth.

On August 3, at Rafael Osona's big summer sale, Berry, accompanied by his companion of recent years, Pamela Thomas, claimed works by Wendell Macy and Anne Ramsdell Congdon. The paintings joined his extensive holdings by artists who worked in Nantucket, chief among them Eastman Johnson (1824–1906), represented in Berry's collection by three oil studies for the 1880 masterpiece "The Cranberry Harvest, Island of Nantucket," owned by the Timken Museum of Art in San Diego.

"Right above and behind him is the Cliff Road," says Berry, pausing to admire Eastman's brilliant evocation of a glinting fall day, field hands at work.

The telephone rings and it is Morrison Heckscher, the recently retired chairman of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing. Heckscher is calling about a planned visit by the Walpole Society, the elite collecting fraternity of which both he and Berry are members.

"Max loves the people as much as the objects," says Jeanne Bertoia, whose firm, Bertoia Auctions, will offer Berry's renowned collection of toys and banks in three sales, the first of which is slated for November 14 and 15. Social ease and an eye for talent, not to mention a sure understanding of the marketplace, have aided Berry's pursuit. It was the late financier and collector Arthur Altschul who counted his friend's discreet collections and came up with the number 35.

Like Altschul did, Berry collects classic American art, in the main moving from the Hudson River School through early Modernism. In his Fifth Avenue apartment, glorious views of the Central Park Reservoir are matched by a tour de force of American landscape painting. There is an unsurpassed Gloucester Harbor scene by Childe Hassam and a Delaware Water Gap view by George Inness, plus the John Williams masterpiece, "View of the Port of New York." Berry once

told *Art + Auction* magazine that he and Heidi carried their first major purchase, a 25-pound Alberto Giacometti bronze, home to Washington in a paper bag on the Eastern Airlines shuttle. The couple initially hired art historian John Rewald to advise them and later worked with William Gerdtts.

In the early 1990s, the couple turned their attention to Chinese antiquities, chiefly bronzes and Han and Tang dynasty terracotta figures. "Every collecting area is fascinating, but Chinese art is among the most difficult. The Chinese are the greatest copiers in the world," says Berry, who worked closely with James Lally, Khalil Rizk and many other prominent experts to form his collection. Introduced to a Hong Kong collector at a cocktail party, Berry's great empathy persuaded her to part with a treasured Sancai horse where previous entreaties from Rizk had failed. Berry, who stretched to buy the costly figure and paid for it over a year's time, has since declined an offer on the piece from London dealer Giuseppe Eskenazi.

Berry wears his privilege well. Over the years, he has devoted time and treasure to dozens of arts institutions around the country. His twin interests in American and Asian art found a natural fit at Washington's Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian Institution's museum of Asian art. Past chairman of the Smithsonian's national board of trustees, Berry is currently engaged with the Archives of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Gilcrease Museum, among others.

Of all of Berry's collections, toys and mechanical banks may be closest to his heart. He started with marbles as a child and graduated to banks as an adult, buying a William Tell bank, his first, at a show in Pottstown, Penn., in 1967. His collection, which initially occupied a third-floor guest room in the couple's Georgetown townhouse, eventually encompassed entire walls of custom-built floor-to-ceiling shelves.

"He wanted to have every mechanical bank and nearly succeeded. Many are unique examples," says Rich Bertoia, who cataloged the November sale with outside assistance from Oliver Clark and Russell Harrington. According to Berry, his toy collection numbers 1,700 to 2,000 pieces in all, of which 700 are mechanical banks.

Berry's international practice found him frequently in Europe, where he scoured antiques shops and flea markets. He unwittingly made one of his biggest finds in London's Camden Passage, where he persuaded a harried, irascible vendor to part with a cast iron Clown Bust bank for what he recalls to have been about \$28. Berry did not quite realize what he had until Edwin H. Mosler Jr told him.

"I'd probably been a member of the Mechanical Bank



In Nantucket, an inlaid padouk wood Asia Trade sideboard formerly in the collection of Walter Beinecke Jr, considered the father of Nantucket's preservation movement, and a Simon Willard, Dorchester, Mass., tall case clock join Nantucket paintings and American scrimshaw.



Berry's Nantucket dining room mingles American and English furniture, Nantucket paintings and baskets, and Chinese textiles.

Collectors of America for about a year when I attended a convention in New York City, I think around 1968. Mosler, who had the best collection at that time, was then living at the Warwick Hotel. I went up to see him and took the Clown Bust with me," Berry recalls.

"It's an English bank and very rare. I'd like you to sell or trade it to me," Mosler said. When I declined, he asked for first right of refusal should I ever change my mind. I thought, "Why should I do that? I might want to trade it some day," Berry recalls.

He continues, "I quickly realized that to get the banks that are really important and rare you have to upgrade. If you see it, buy it. If you don't put it on your shelf, it goes into a closet as 'trade bait.' Other collectors will want your duplicates and they will perhaps have things you don't. I traded my way up — one bank for five, another bank for eight. At one point I had zero-basis in my collection. That changed when I started buying more expensive banks."

Interested in magic tricks as a child, Berry, going by the name "Magic Max," occasionally performed them as an adult at social and charity gatherings. He said he should have known that when Wally Tudor, a much-admired Chicago collector of mechanical banks, emptied his valise more rare banks were hidden away in a secret compartment. As a magician, Berry had seen that trick before.

Tudor came to Washington one year, desperate to have Berry's Clown Bust bank. "We had a quick dinner and excused ourselves. No one would want to be around to watch. We sat on the floor of the bank room. Wally pulled out four banks, one after the next. He took a fifth bank out of the secret compartment of his suitcase. The banks were probably worth \$50,000 at the time. I didn't know what to say."

After a long pause, Berry cleared his throat and asked Tudor, "All five for my clown bank?" "If necessary," Tudor replied.

I ask Berry if he ever second-guessed his decision to sell the one bank that Mosler and Tudor could not live without. "No, I'd made up my mind and had decided not to worry. Anyway, news of this bank brought others out of the woodwork. There are now more than a dozen known," he tells me.

"Max loves the camaraderie with other toy collectors. As part of the old guard, he knew many of the great ones. Collections like Berry's don't come up very often. It's one of the biggest and best regarded in many years. He has some of the rarest American mechanical banks, a world-class collection of bell toys, beautiful cast iron drawn horses and early tin toys, plus European penny toys," says Jeanne Bertoia.

The shelves of his Washington DC home now bare — or bareish — Berry has thrown himself into his current interest, Judaica. Though not overtly religious, he says that he has been fascinated by Jewish history and culture since he was a child in Oklahoma listening to news of Israel's founding on the radio. What started years ago with Israeli stamps has evolved into an important historical collection in all media that he hopes will one day go to an institution. He recently acquired a Seventeenth Century Torah shield hallmarked by a German maker in 1686. The only other example is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Beyond intellectual stimulation, collecting has offered Berry a means of connecting with others, often in unexpected ways. Once asked to host a party for visiting members of Israel's Knesset, Berry again found himself in his bank room with a guest.

"He was a giant of a man, a hero of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. He asked me about the banks with guns and I took down the William Tell bank. I told him the old story about William Tell shooting the apple off his son's head and showed him how to load the penny. There is a bit of skill involved. On the third or fourth try, he shot the apple and rang the bell. When we looked up, Heidi was in the doorway, asking us to come down to dinner," Berry recalls.

Max Berry's guest was Israel's future prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. A few years later, Rabin himself was felled by a bullet, one fired from the gun of an assassin.



In Manhattan, a selection of Han and Tang dynasty terracotta figures, many with prized blue glaze, frame "Delaware Water Gap" by George Inness.

Suffragette mechanical hoop toy by George Brown, circa 1880s, inscribed "Pat. 1872." This toy is illustrated in *The George Brown Toy Sketchbook* and was previously in the collection of Malcolm Deisenroth Jr.



Preacher in the Pulpit mechanical bank by J.&E. Stevens Company, circa 1876. One of only three known, it was previously in the collections of Dr Arthur Corby, L.C. Hegarty and Stanley Sax.



Max Berry has one of the best collections of carved and decorated scrimshaw canes.