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 958 words

LADY FACE VASES

GRACE BAIR - COLLECTOR

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

Let the unimaginative collector use the prosaic term "head vases." Grace Bair of Urbana, Illinois, calls her collection "celebrity lady face vases" or "celebrity lady heads." Corner shelves in one room of her home display a special selection of vases that remind her of the beautiful women Americans have admired during the Twentieth century. She has made name tags to identify them all.

Bair was the principal of Washington Elementary School in Urbana, Illinois. After her retirement, she and her husband traveled to area flea markets and antique shows as a hobby. Since his death, she has further developed a second career as an antique dealer. She displays her wares in two rooms in Second Hand Rose, an antique mall in Urbana.

She remembers when she saw her first head vase in the 1950s. "I picked one as a container to send a bouquet to a sick friend," Bair says. Made out of bisque china, it was a reasonably priced novelty.

As far as we know, manufacturers first made head vases in the 1940s and 1950s for floral arrangements. Since the vases were so small, a florist could not make much money selling a flower arrangement in such a vase. Consequently, they became dust collectors in flower shop workrooms and closets. In fact, if you want to collect head vases, you may be lucky enough to find a well-established floral shop that still has some that have been forgotten in the stock rooms and that you could arrange to buy at a reasonable price.

Many of them were made in Japan and imported to this country. Some may also have been manufactured here. Many of the

vases have marks on the bottom that enable one to determine the approximate time of manufacture and the dealer or importer.

However, many have no marks at all, which makes it difficult or impossible to determine their origins. Lefton's and Napco are two names commonly seen on labels but not much else is known about them. Some vases carry the same marks but are different in details and even sizes. Perhaps we will never be able to learn everything about the origins of these collectibles.

"I remember selling some that looked like Marilyn Monroe before I became interested in collecting them myself," Bair says. "You could buy them then for fifty cents at flea markets and second hand shops. Now an ordinary head vase may cost \$12.00 and nicer ones may cost \$20.00 or \$30.00 in the shops.

Bair has almost forty head vases in her collection, but the ones she likes best are those that look like famous movie stars.

"Because of copyright laws these vases weren't advertised as likenesses of famous women," Bair explains. "Some of them, however, such as one that resembles Jackie Kennedy, are obvious portrayals."

This category of collectible is not yet listed in most antique encyclopedias and price guides. Kathleen Cole has written a book called "Head Vases Identification and Values,"

published in 1989 by Collector Books, describing her collection of over 1,000 vases. They range in size from two inches to eleven inches tall and come in all styles - religious, clowns, animals, orientals, blacks, Indians, men, women, and children.

If you are interested in collecting head vases, you may want to confine your purchases to a specific category, as Bair does. Collectors who are interested in memorabilia of only one person may be able to find a head vase resembling that person to round out a collection.

So far, Bair has fifteen "celebrity vases" including those that look to her like Angela Lansbury, Ginger Rogers, Donna Reid, and others. "If I ever sell my collection, I would want the new owner to be someone who would buy it all and keep it together," Bair says.

Once you start looking for them, you will find some examples on every one of your outings. Become acquainted with prevailing market prices before you buy so that you will not pay too much for nondescript examples. You should buy only those that you like and that are in good condition. It is hard to resell defective ones, Bair advises.

Do not be afraid to buy duplicates if you can find them at a bargain. You can always trade with other collectors or dealers.

If you fall in love with a special vase that is truly unique, buy it even if it is not a bargain. You may be happier with one wonderful vase than two commonplace ones.

You will recognize a glazed white china head vase in the Art Deco style as truly representative of the Art Deco period. (See slide #6 - left hand vase). A friend of Bair's, who is also an antique dealer, uses it as a logo for her business and on her business cards.

Bair is happy that so many people are becoming collectors. "Many things were thrown away that should have been kept. We are preserving our heritage for our children and grandchildren by savoring and treasuring items from our nation's past," Bair says.

What are we throwing away now that will become the collectible of the future? Bair agrees with the movie, "The Graduate," starring Dustin Hoffman. Plastics is the place to be. Bakelite radios are hot sellers at area flea markets. "I sold an old plastic necklace by a famous designer for \$300.00 and I could sell another one for more than that if I could find one," Bair says.

Bair still hopes to add to and upgrade her collection of celebrity lady face vases. Who knows what treasures next week's garage sales may yield!

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