



Discovering Painted Ladies

BY CHARITY VOGEL

“UM—THANKS, Gram. I guess.” I was twelve. My grandmother had handed me the cardboard box like it was a casket of gold doubloons, a priceless treasure chest. I had lifted off the top gingerly, catching my breath. What would rest inside? With one finger, I poked tentatively into the tissue paper nestled in the box.

Under my fingertip I felt a smooth, rounded shape. I grasped it and lifted it out, holding it up for inspection.

A ceramic figurine, shaped to look like a woman's neck and head—wait a minute, a head?—but bigger than a good-sized grapefruit, and painted with elaborate care

“It's a vase,” my grandmother said proudly. “She's a vase!” Yes, I was now the owner of an antique ceramic head vase.

Maybe you've seen one of these (and even snickered at it—feel free to admit it). In their heyday, back in the 1940s through the 1960s, these objets d'weirdness were seen as chic and serviceable, a favorite of florists, shopkeepers and housewives alike. My grandmother Estelle, who in her younger days had operated a small ceramics and gift shop on Buffalo's Polish-American East Side, made her own head vases, which she sold in her shop for a dollar. (I know, because the vases she gave me still have prices written on the bottom.)

Now, these painted ladies show up at garage sales, estate sales and in upscale antique emporiums, as well as on the Internet, where passionate collectors—people who think a couple of hundred Betty Grable-esque heads perched in the living room make for a cool conversation piece—fork out hefty sums to scoop them up. Avid

collectors, in fact, have driven up the value of these vintage heads on eBay and in antique shops to as much as \$800 for a pristine head made by one of the more sought-after ceramic artists, and sometimes more than \$3,000 for a rarer head—such as the much— [continued on page 38]

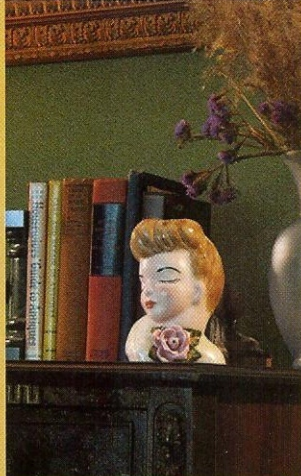
But I was still curious.
What's the deal with these heads? Do people actually like them? What gives? To satisfy my curiosity, I decided to contact one of the country's bigger head-vase aficionados.

to give the impression of cherry-colored lipstick, heavy blue eyeshadow, blushing cheeks, and mascara. More puzzling still, there was a hole in the top of her head, exactly where the bun at the top of her elaborate up-do hairstyle would be.

HEAD HUNTING: COLLECTING CERAMIC HEAD VASES

Ceramic head vases are fun to collect, because they're both accessible and tantalizingly elusive.

You'll find some basic models—like the “Glamour Girls” shown here—at garage sales, estate sales, antique shops, even thrift stores. Expect to pay anywhere from \$35 to \$100 for a basic head vase; the price will vary depending on how



ornate it is. But you'll have to hunt a lot harder for the rarer antique heads, including any models made by Betty Lou Nichols, a highly prized head-vase artist, or any of the vintage heads modeled after female celebrities of the 1950s and 1960s—Lucille Ball, Marilyn Monroe,

Carmen Miranda, Jackie Kennedy and the like. Those vases can cost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars.

Still, there have been wonderful success stories among head collectors. You might luck into a flea-market steal for a couple of bucks—you never know!

“A woman I know found one at a garage sale for two dollars, and it turned out to be a Betty Lou Nichols,” said Bonnie Wood, the Arkansas expert. “I had never even seen that one before. She ended up selling it for \$3,800.”

One warning: there are

currently lots of fakes out there, mass-produced cheaply in Japan and other countries and sold to unwary collectors on sites like eBay, as well as through some less scrupulous private online vendors. Be sure to inspect a head in person before you buy it, inspect online photographs closely, or ask for third-party verification. Cheap fake heads generally look cheap, so you should be able to tell the difference—especially after you've handled some of the true vintage ones.

RESOURCES to get you started are listed on page 40.

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prized vases depicting female movie stars and celebrities including Carmen Miranda, Lucille Ball, Mitzi Gaynor, Marilyn Monroe, and Jackie Kennedy.

I didn't know all that on the day my grandmother handed me her prized head, of course. And so I thanked her—rather dubiously, I'm sure—and tucked the little ceramic figurine back into her box, which I put high up on a closet shelf and promptly forgot about . . . —until I bought a home of my own, that is, some fourteen years later.

Scrounging through my old closet, I came across the faded cardboard box and the painted head—Gertrude, I've since named her—and decided she had to fit into my new décor scheme. She was a family heirloom, after all! And I couldn't very well exclude her on the grounds that my taste is too mainstream or high-end for her. Do I not decorate with antique and thrift-store finds, as well as newer stuff? Do I not own a collection of mismatched old chairs, half of which I've found curbside and "fixed up"? Did I not recently clamber through a junk-pile of construction debris to rescue a World

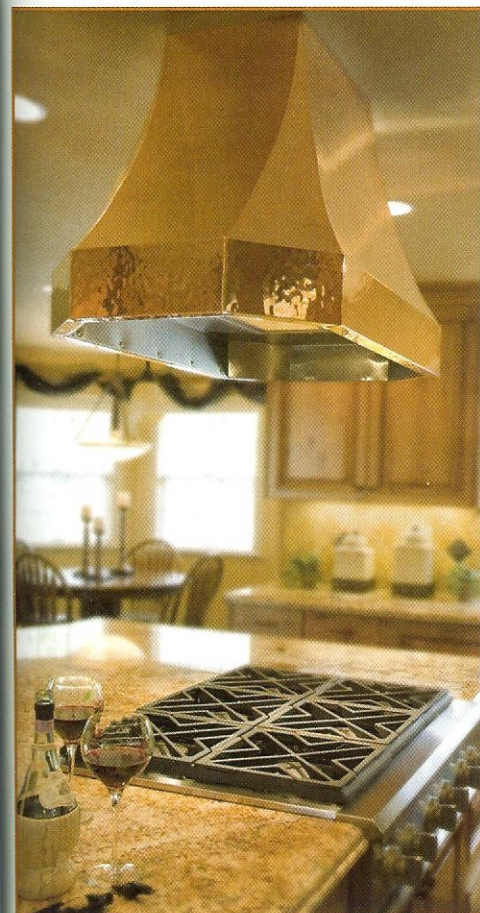
War II-era poster, when the American Legion down the street was getting renovated?

I do, I do, and I did. My house, an 1898 Victorian in a small rural village, boasts about as eclectic a decorating scheme as you can find. And so Gert and Sadie—the other head my grandmother gave me, a swanky brunette in a tight orange sweater—went onto a shelf in my kitchen, where they add an undeniable dash of style and glamour to the day-to-day proceedings.

But I was still curious. What's the deal with these heads? Do people actually like them? What gives?

To satisfy my curiosity, I decided to contact one of the country's bigger head-vase aficionados, Bonnie Wood. Wood, who runs the website antiqueheadvases.com, has 300 heads in her private collection, which she keeps carefully displayed inside custom-built cabinets in her Pine Bluff, Arkansas, home. She also deals in vintage heads on her website—selling specimens for as low as \$35 and as much as \$3,500. (The latter sale price was for a rare Monroe head she recently sold.)

Head vases are a big deal, Wood told me, and after



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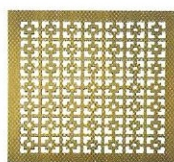




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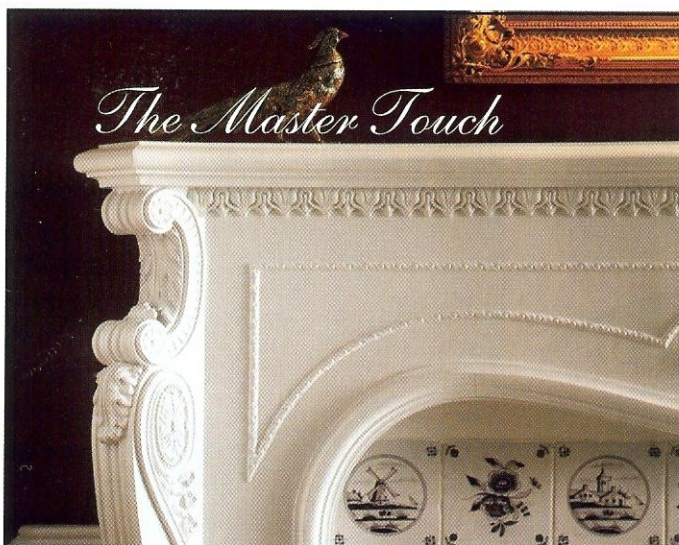


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START YOUR COLLECTION

- **EBAY.COM** Search under "head vases" for a tour of the types of heads available and their price ranges.
- **ANTIQUHEADVASES.COM** Bonnie Wood's website (all guaranteed authentic heads).
- **Head Vases, Etc: The Artistry of Betty Lou Nichols**, a book by Maddy Gordon, one of the country's foremost experts on head vases, from Schiffer Books, **SCHIFFERBOOKS.COM**
- **Headhunters** newsletter, also by Maddy Gordon, available by writing P.O. Box 83 H, Scarsdale, NY, 10583
- **The Encyclopedia of Head Vases**, by Kathleen Cole, also from Schiffer Books, **SCHIFFERBOOKS.COM**

a few decades out of fashion in the 1970s and 1980s they're now exploding again in popularity. Thousands of people collect them, paying hundreds or thousands of dollars for prize models. Every year, Wood said, there's a big head-vase convention in Kissimmee, Florida, which draws hundreds of people. "A lot of people run across them at garage sales," she said. "And a lot of people start collecting them because the heads were handed down to them. Once they get in your blood"—Wood laughs gently at this—"you just can't resist them. You want every one you see."

Well, maybe, but maybe not. Two seem good enough for me, to tell you the truth. They spice up my kitchen, but anything more might be a bit—over the top?

Wood told me that my grandmother's head vases are classic examples of the popular "Glamour Girl" heads of the 1950s and 1960s. Those ceramic head forms were sold as unfinished pieces in mass lots, she said, and then the heads were painted and fired by shop owners and florists, who sold them for a couple of bucks or put flowers in them. "They're usually not worth as much," she said apologetically, "mainly because so many people made them."

That's just fine with me. My painted ladies aren't going anywhere.

Every time I glance at them, these days, I think of my grandmother, who is now 92 years old and frail. Sometimes I wonder: did she really think these painted ladies were the height of style, the epitome of chic? Or did she enjoy them with a twinkle in her eye, her tongue firmly planted in her cheek?

Back then, at age twelve, I never thought to ask. Now I wish I knew. ✦