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A Book Review

In Pursuit of History

by Lita Solis-Cohen

“H. Richard Dietrich Jr. loved to collect,” writes his son, H. Richard Dietrich III, in *In Pursuit of History: A Lifetime Collecting American Art and Artifacts*, the book about his father, who was “driven by an abiding love of history” and “a thirst for discovery.”

H. Richard Dietrich Jr. (1938-2007) was part of a generation of like-minded men and women who supported antiques dealers, auctioneers, shows, symposiums, museums, historical societies, historic houses, and collectors’ clubs devoted to Colonial American art and artifacts. He lived toward the end of the golden age for Americana and was one of major players in the history of collecting it.

Dietrich collected books, manuscripts, maps, fraktur, paintings, furniture, silver, ceramics, and scrimshaw slowly and quietly over a period of 40 years. He created the Dietrich American Foundation to make sure he could share the collection with museums and historic sites.

He was a founding member of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s American Art Advisory Committee when it was established in 1969, and he became a member of the board of trustees the following year.

His delight in the acquisition of exceptional works and his pleasure in sharing them is the subject of this handsome illustrated book, filled with essays by his son and specialists who chronicle a collector’s pursuit of the tangible political, military, and social history of Colonial and early Federal America, especially in Philadelphia and its environs.

As Morrison H. Heckscher points out in his foreword, the book is more than a composite portrait of a collector and the markets for books and decorative and fine art: “it is an introduction to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American history through objects.”

Dietrich III writes the family and mercantile history. After completing his B.A. at Wesleyan University in 1960, followed by a year at Columbia Business School, Dietrich Jr. returned to Philadelphia to take over the management of the family business after his father’s death at age 54.

His father and uncle had bought Luden’s, a cough drop company, in 1927. In 1958 they acquired Nan Duskin, a high-style specialty shop in Philadelphia. Richard and his two brothers, Daniel (1941-2015) and William (1942-2010), lost their father in 1962 and their mother in 1963. Richard was 25, Daniel, 22, and William, 21. Richard served as president of the Dietrich Corporation until the family sold Luden’s, which had grown into a large candy and cough drop company, to the Hershey Company in 1986. They sold Nan Duskin years before it closed in 1995.

Dietrich was just 25 when he decided to build a collection of Americana. He began with books and manuscripts and then went on to buy objects to illustrate the historical record.

In the 1960s he depended on a handful of trusted advisors. Chief among them were Elinor and Horace Gordon in nearby Villanova, Pennsylvania. Horace Gordon continued to buy and sell for Dietrich throughout his lifetime at auction and through dealers. The collections were generally warehoused at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA); the books and manuscripts were at Wesleyan University.

William S. Reese, dean of American

Dietrich collected books, manuscripts, maps, fraktur, paintings, furniture, silver, ceramics, and scrimshaw slowly and quietly over a period of 40 years.

bookmen, finished the chapter on books, manuscripts, and maps shortly before his untimely death in 2018. Historian Philip C. Mead, chief historian and head of curatorial affairs at the Museum of the American Revolution, finished the catalog entries for Reese’s essay.

Reese came into the book and manuscript business too late to sell much to Dietrich, but he became a trusted friend and later an advisor to the Dietrich American Foundation. Reese writes about Dietrich’s discovery of books at Sessler’s book shop in Philadelphia when it was presided over by the legendary Mabel Zahn, “one of the most remarkable figures in American rare-book dealing for most of the twentieth century.”

Zahn went to work for Charles Sessler in 1906 when he opened his store at 1308 Walnut Street in Philadelphia. She was 15. She became the principal with the passing of Charles Sessler’s son Richard in 1955 and ran the store until 1975. Miss Zahn, as she was known in her later years, was Dietrich’s agent at auction, and when Dietrich created the Dietrich American Foundation in 1963, Zahn advised and encouraged him.

Reese tells how Dietrich acquired his single most important item in the sale of books and manuscripts from the collection of Henry and Helen Flynt, who incorporated Historic Deerfield in 1952 and then decided to sell some books to establish an endowment.

In 1964, on behalf of the Flynts, Sotheby’s offered George Washington’s personal copy of *Acts Passed at a Congress of the United States of America* (New York, 1789). It is the first printing of the laws passed in the critical first session of the federal government. The volume, bound in elegant gilt-stamped calf by Thomas Allen, the most accomplished bookbinder in New York, the front stamped “President of the United States,” has Washington’s personal bookplate, his signature at the top of the title page, and some annotations to the text of the Constitution pertaining to the presidency. Sessler’s purchased it for Dietrich against stiff competition. When the Dietrich estate sold it in 2013, *Acts Passed* realized \$9.8 million, then the highest price ever paid for a printed book at auction. It is now at the library at Mount Vernon.

Other things from the Flynts’ Heritage Foundation sale were kept, including a superb copy of *The Federalist* in original paper boards and a first edition of the *Articles of Confederation*. According to Reese, “Dietrich assembled one of the greatest collections of books and manuscripts brought together in the second half of the 20th century,” taking advantage of the sales of duplicates from the Heritage Foundation, the Thomas Streeter collection, and the Library Company as well as items offered by dealers. While the heart of the collection was acquired in the first seven years of collecting, Dietrich continued to add significant pieces over the next two decades.

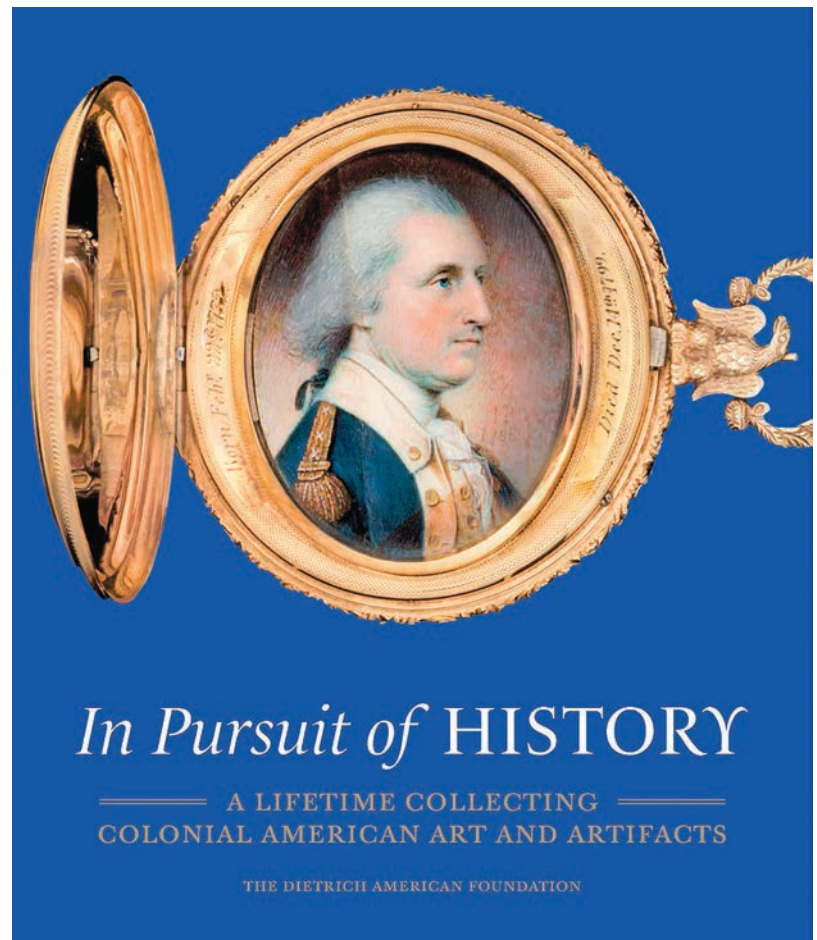
Edward S. Cooke Jr. takes the baton from Reese to discuss some of the finest furniture

In Pursuit of History:

A Lifetime Collecting Colonial American Art and Artifacts

edited by H. Richard Dietrich III and Deborah M. Rebeck

The Dietrich American Foundation, in association with Philadelphia Museum of Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2019, 304 pages, hardbound, \$50.



collected by Dietrich, 125 pieces predominantly from eastern Pennsylvania collected to furnish his houses, largely on the advice of Horace Gordon. Dietrich lent or gave some premier examples to historic houses and museums. His first significant purchase was a bombé desk, a form found only in Boston or the North Shore of Massachusetts, purchased from John Walton and recently attributed to the Salem cabinetmaker Nathaniel Gould.

Cooke points out that Dietrich’s taste was for bold sculptural forms and expressive carved decorations. He liked works signed by the makers in order to connect them with people of the past. In 1970 he purchased the ornately carved Cadwalader card table that is one of a pair and depicted in Charles Willson Peale’s 1772 portrait of the John Cadwalader family. It was one of the key parts of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s 1996-97 exhibition of the Cadwalader possessions.

In 1986 Dietrich sold a Philadelphia side table, a Newport desk, and a Philadelphia desk to Israel Sack in order to have funds to make significant purchases the following year. Among them was the purchase of the Cadwalader easy chair, which sold at Sotheby’s for \$2.75 million, a record at the time (1987) for any piece of furniture. Made by Thomas Affleck, the chair, with carving by Martin Jugiez and Nicholas Bernard, was linked to the commode seat chairs made by Benjamin Randolph and carved by London-trained John Pollard. Dietrich gave the easy chair to the PMA for its 125th anniversary in 2001.

Dietrich, along with his close friend Robert L. McNeil Jr., found many ways to advance Colonial American art at the PMA. For 35 years Dietrich served as the chairman of the American Art Advisory Committee and helped strengthen the PMA’s American furniture collection. At his death he had 33 pieces on loan to the PMA, and he also had made significant donations. He sold a William Savery high chest to help the museum purchase a Thomas Tufft high chest that was a superior example. After his death his estate sold the Stevenson piecrust tea table he had purchased at Christie’s because the museum already had a comparable one.

Pennsylvania German decorative arts are one of the largest portions of the Dietrich collection. Lisa Minardi points out that Dietrich was a seventh-generation descendant of German immigrant Adam Dietrich, who arrived in Pennsylvania in 1768 and by 1779 owned 130 acres in Berks County. He was a successful farmer and acquired additional land in Kutztown. Early in his collecting Dietrich purchased fraktur, and in the 1980s he lent the collection to several museums, including the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center in Williamsburg, Virginia. By then he had met Pastor Frederick Weiser, who advised him. Even before he began to collect fraktur he bought rural Pennsylvania furniture. An outstanding Lancaster high chest, once attributed to the Bachman family, is now attributed to Michael Lind of Lancaster because its rococo carving is similar to a chest signed by Lind that is in the Diplomatic Reception Rooms in the Department of State in Washington, D.C.

In 1966 at the sale of the collection of Stanley Todd, Dietrich bought a painted chest with a pair of rampant black unicorns in the central panel, one of the best chests of this iconic group. At the same sale he also purchased two pieces of Mahantongo furniture with designs based on fraktur motifs. One of the earliest dated examples of Pennsylvania German furniture is the tall clock he purchased in 1998 toward the end of his collecting. It relates to a group of furniture dated between 1762 and 1775, with inlay of pewter, wood, bone, and sulfur. It was made for Daniel Besore, and the clock movement was signed by George Hoff of Lancaster. The date 1768 is inlaid in the spandrels above the arched bonnet door.

Although silver is one of the smallest categories in the Dietrich collection, it has some of the most significant holdings, writes David L. Barquist. Dietrich's most important purchase for the PMA was the hot water urn made by Richard Humphreys, with engraving by James Smither, that was given to Charles Thomson by the Continental Congress in appreciation for his service as secretary. Made in 1774, it is the earliest piece of American silver in the Neoclassical style, in addition to being a historic relic.

Richard Dietrich and his brothers had helped fund the acquisition and restoration of Harriton, Charles Thomson's house in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and Dietrich had acquired several important Thomson manuscripts, including the minutes of the Continental Congress.

As with all his collections, Dietrich was continually evaluating and refining his holdings in silver. In 2007 he placed the Dietrich American Foundation's silver collection on permanent deposit at the PMA, formally integrating it with the museum's holdings and enabling its inclusion in Beatrice B. Garvan's catalog. In addition to such Philadelphia rarities as a tazza by Johannes Nys (1671-1734), made for the second wife of French-born victualler Nicholas Gatteau, a rococo coffeepot by William Hollingshead, and a cann made by Richard Humphreys for George Emlen IV, there is a Paul Revere Jr. sauceboat and teapot, the teapot a close match to the one Revere holds in his portrait by John Singleton Copley. The collection also includes a New York brandywine bowl by Benjamin Wynkoop (1675-1751), a sublime apple-shaped teapot by Joseph Richardson Sr., and much more.

Kathleen A. Foster writes that Dietrich was only 26 when he bought John Singleton Copley's portrait of six-year-old John Bee Holmes posing with his squirrel. He lent it to the White House during the Johnson administration, and then he brought it home and hung it above the desk attributed to Nathaniel Gould. The Dietrich American Foundation collection includes about 50 oil paintings and 130 watercolors and drawings and 100 examples of Pennsylvania German fraktur. Early in his collecting career, Dietrich bought paintings in the following subject categories: naval battles, ship portraits, whaling scenes, Philadelphia scenes, Native American,

and China trade views. Foster says the best painting is John Singleton Copley's portrait of the middle-aged Josiah Quincy in its splendid original carved rococo frame. Purchased in 1971 when Dietrich was 33, it demonstrates his "sophistication and ambition."

In 1966 Dietrich bought James Peale's miniature portrait of George Washington painted from life. First installed in a snuffbox, the miniature was purchased from the Peale family by the Artillery Corps of the Washington Grays of the City of Philadelphia. In 1843 they enshrined the portrait in a gold case, which opens at the back to reveal a lock of Washington's hair. It is pictured on the dust jacket of the book.

Deborah M. Rebeck, who has been curator of the Dietrich American Foundation since 1983, tells how Dietrich attended a lecture by Elinor Gordon on Chinese export porcelain in 1963 that led him to a new area of collecting and a lifelong friendship and mentorship. She also explains how Elinor Gordon and her husband, Horace, acted as advisors in all areas of the collection until Horace Gordon's death in 1983. Horace acted as agent, buying at auction and arranging transport, payment, and other details. Virtually every piece of porcelain that came into the collection until the 1990s came through the Gordons. The history and romance of the China trade captivated Dietrich. The Gordons also arranged for 50 pieces of porcelain from the C.K. Davis collection to go to Dietrich and the foundation.

Porcelain made in China for the American market was Dietrich's first interest, especially pieces owned by George Washington. He had a keen interest in Washington's letters and books and collected prints and paintings of him. He purchased 19 pieces from the 302-piece dinner service the Washingtons used in the first presidential residences in New York and Philadelphia. They are decorated with the insignia of the Society of the Cincinnati. He acquired two different tea services decorated with the Cincinnati insignia that were owned by William Eustis (1753-1825), who served as vice president of the Society of the Cincinnati. Later Dietrich bought a cup and saucer from the Cincinnati service owned by Henry Knox, and he finally acquired a cider jug with the Cincinnati emblem owned by Samuel Shaw, who had commissioned Washington's Cincinnati service. He also bought Washington memorial custard cups and a pair of Masonic jugs, because Washington and other founding fathers were Masons. He bought a hong bowl early in his career, and in 1990 he finally bought one with an American flag on it. He collected paintings of hong merchants, supercargoes, and Chinese ports and ships. Of the over 500 pieces of Chinese export porcelain Dietrich purchased, about half remain in the collection. Many services on loan to historic houses were deaccessioned, with several pieces from each service retained as examples. The collection contains porcelain from 47 different families and examples with the coats of arms of New York, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. His

interest in naval history led him to collect porcelain owned by naval officers, and many examples are decorated with ships.

The chapter on whale trade objects by Michael P. Dyer, curator of maritime history at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, is a terse summary of the art of 19th-century whale fishing, the occupational art of the whalers, with a special focus on scrimshaw. Dietrich began to collect whaling arts in the 1960s, and the collection grew to more than 200 pieces of scrimshaw, 20 paintings and prints, and over 100 pieces of equipment, including harpoons, boarding knives, blubber hooks, shoulder guns, spades, and other gear. On sperm whaling voyages to the Pacific Ocean on the ship *Susan*, Frederick Myrick engraved 30 sperm whale teeth. Dietrich acquired two of them, engraved with Myrick's name, the date, the vessel, the name of the master, ship portraits, and patriotic motifs.

Dyer also points out how the motifs on scrimshaw created a vernacular language peculiar to whalers. These motifs are also found in watercolor paintings and drawings in large formats and in smaller versions on the pages of whalers' journals. Panbones were sometimes engraved, and they were also sawn into wide thin strips and steam bent into ditty boxes, sometimes engraved on the outside, and with fancy overlapping finger joinery fastened with copper or other metal pins. One of the masterpieces in the collection is a ditty box attributed to Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, whaling master Captain Manuel Enos with a freehand copy of a masthead view of Boston harbor, a figure of a woman on horseback, two Greek muses, two stylish women with head scarves, and two fashion-plate models.

One watercolor in the Dietrich collection is a source for whaling history. It is Joseph Shoemaker Russell's watercolor view of his own lamp oil store at 55 Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. His business remained at the Chestnut Street location until the mid-1850s. He painted at least two views of the shop; one of the interior is in the Smithsonian, and the Dietrich version is of the exterior. In a footnote Dyer explains that sperm oil is in fact a liquid wax that burned cleanly for interior lighting and also was a good lubricant. Right whale oil or "common train oil" also had many industrial uses, including exterior lighting, metalwork, heavy machinery lubrication, and soap manufacture.

From its creation in 1963, the mission of the Dietrich American Foundation has been to collect and then share the objects with museums and other public institutions. About 100 loan locations are listed at the back of the book with a statement that "The Foundation continues to make objects available for loan and welcomes requests from museum's historical society, historic house and art galleries."

An exhibition, *A Collector's Vision: Highlights from the Dietrich American Foundation*, opened on February 1 and had been scheduled to continue until June 7 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



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