

Southern California LIVING

Sculpture With a Spout



Sonny and Gloria Kamm have acquired thousands of teapots—and not because they like to drink tea

By LESLEE KOMAIKO
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Shortly after Sonny and Gloria Kamm moved into their sunny, tri-level 1950s San Fernando Valley home, Gloria, a docent at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, made a casual comment—an observation, really—that would end up changing the course of their lives. She and Sonny, an attorney for a securities firm, were wondering what to display on the narrow glass shelves behind the bar. “You know,” Gloria says, “we have a number of teapots.”

The Collectors

■ One in an occasional series

In fact, they had about 20, not that anyone was keeping count. After all, they had purchased them as fine examples of contemporary glass, just like the Dale Chihuly sculpture that sits on their living room table. These, says Sonny, just “happened to be in teapot form.”

The teapots worked well on the shelves and as a group. And this was the first time the Kamms really looked at them as teapots: sculptural objects with a common denominator of handles, spouts and lids. The form agreed with them. There was just one problem. There

Please see Collectors, E3

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A significant part of the collection is artist-made teapots, including a work by Sergei Isupov.

Collectors

weren't enough teapots to fill out the shelf space. They needed to add a few more. That was 1985.

Today, the Kamms' teapot collection numbers more than 6,000, filling closets and drawers, a nearby condominium the couple purchased for storage, and invading--happily--their children's homes. This figure doesn't include the several hundred items the two classify as teapot paraphernalia or "go withs," such as teapot-shaped sink stoppers, teapot clocks, teapot T-shirts, teapot pins, "I'm a Little Teapot" books, or the rear license-plate frame on Sonny's car, which reads: "He who has the most teapots wins." (The front frame declares: "Teapot man strikes again.")

"A lot of this is revisionist," says Sonny, "After you get into it, you realize how much you like the form. The teapot is a complicated form in a sense. In the ceramic world in particular, it's one of the most difficult forms to create. It has to have balance, a spout, a

lid that doesn't flip off. It has to be a conductor of heat. The form has intrigued people who are not only artists, but architects and designers."

"You have a very international component as well," adds Gloria. After all, she says, "after water, tea is the most popular beverage in the world, and where you find tea, you find teapots."

The segment of their collection dearest to them—a collection unto itself—is the artist-made teapots. They have about 1,000 of these. Few are functional, and in any case, neither Sonny nor Gloria are big tea drinkers. Some look like teapots. Many do not.

There is, for example, Peter Grieve's "Porcupine Teapot," a winsome creature with a tin body and bristle tail; Margaret Wharton's elegant "Caddy," crafted out of a found book; Michael C. McMillen's nearly 8-foot-tall architectural "Teapot Tower Sculpture"; and Rose Misanchuk's naughty ceramic interpretations of Blue Boy and Pinkie. There are also teapots by notables Beatrice Wood, Keith Haring, Cindy Sherman and Roy

Lichtenstein.

"It's a very significant collection," says Adrian Saxe, a ceramist and professor of art at UCLA. "It has a lot of depth. And it's interesting that they came to this quest here in L.A. because the tradition of collecting that kind of thing, you think of it as English. Maybe toys in L.A., but not teapots." (The Kamms own about a half-dozen Saxe teapots, as well as other works by the artist.)

Nearly 250 of the artist-made teapots comprise a show currently on view at Copia: the American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts in Napa. Titled "The Artful Teapot: 20th Century Expressions From the Kamm Collection," the show runs through Sept. 2 and will travel to five other North American locations, including the Long Beach Museum of Art in the summer of 2003. Garth Clark—author of numerous books, including "American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present" and "The Eccentric Teapot," and owner of the Garth Clark Gallery in New York—selected the teapots for the show. He also authored "The Artful

Teapot," the exhibition catalog, which is published by Watson-Guptill.

Most of the artist-made teapots were purchased from galleries. As former partners in Kurland/Summers on Melrose, a contemporary-glass gallery that closed in 1992, the Kamms are firm believers in the gallery system. They also have bought at student art shows, which makes for interesting groupings, says Sonny; a \$20,000 piece by an established artist often will be displayed next to a student work.

The Kamms have commissioned many artists as well. "Having been collectors of different things," says Sonny--among them rubber duckies, sundials and antique baby cups--"we didn't want our collection to be like everyone else's. So we formed the idea of having artists who had never done teapots do one for us."

Los Angeles artist Peter Shire has done several projects for the Kamms. Currently, he is working on a sizable stainless-steel teapot mailbox/sculpture for the pair. "We have always tried



Leopold Foulem's creative kettle is among the couple's 6,000 teapots.

'If we were just amassing wonderful stuff and not going to the next level—the book, the museum show—I might get bored. We want to push this further.'

SONNY KAMM

Right, in his Encino home with wife Gloria and "Halcyon Tea" by Michael Sherrill.



to be very invisible from the front of our house," says Gloria. "But we thought this one thing would be a fun adventure."

Over the years, the Kamms have loaned out teapots and other selections from their extensive contemporary art collection to dozens of museums and welcomed countless arts and education groups into their home. There have also been two local shows dedicated to portions of their collection: one in early 1997 at Cal State Northridge called "All Figural" and, later that year, an exhibition of about 80 of their teapots at L.A.'s Craft and Folk Art Museum. But the current show, says Gloria, is the first to travel. It's also much larger. In fact, the collection has almost doubled in the last five years, primarily due to Sonny's enthusiastic flea-market outings, during which he often will "inhale teapots," along with the acquisition of several private collections. In 1999 alone, the two bought more than 1,000 teapots. And if anything, says Sonny, the numbers are understated.

Despite the appearance of buying for the sake of buying, there is a certain matter-of-factness about the Kamms' pursuit. Even when they discuss recent scores, such as a handsome Russian samovar, their enthusiasm is restrained.

"We're not maniacal about it," says Sonny. "It's just interesting. This is not a deep, burning thing that has to be done."

Both Sonny and Gloria say they are thrilled about the Copia show. It's been a lot of work however. The evidence is all around them in the empty spots on shelves and remnants of adhesive museum wax where a prized teapot once stood.

The Kamms also have antique teapots dating back to the 18th century, many of them purchased through the major auction houses; children's tea sets; and

salesman's samples, like a tiny blue elegant Wedgwood design.

Many 'Novelty' Finds at Flea Markets

The bulk of their teapots fall under what Sonny calls the "production" or "novelty" heading. Many of these he purchased on those aforementioned flea-market forays.

"I kind of dress like a beggar and go around and find stuff," he says.

This group includes teapots shaped like politicians, cars, fruits or elephants and Mickey Mouse teapots. "I could probably do a 50-foot display of elephants alone," says Sonny, who doesn't worry much about duplication, especially if something is a good value. "I could use them maybe for trading," he says. Never mind the fact he's never traded a single one.

Gloria is less enthusiastic about this particular area of the collection. Several years ago in fact, on a day when Sonny was out on one of his shopping binges (he's since slowed down a bit), she made a sign featuring a teapot with a red slash across it that she hung in the garage, front and center. "It's been up there like 10 years. And you see what good it did!" she jokes.

"The reality is," says Sonny, "if we were just amassing wonderful stuff and not going to the next level—the book, the museum show—I might get bored. We want to push this further in terms of exposing it and learning more." Sonny has even penned a detailed proposal for a foundation that would serve as a home and lending library for their own collection and those of other collectors.

In the last several years, the Kamms have noticed an increased interest in teapots. Programs such as "Antiques Roadshow" and a renewed interest in collecting in



GEORGE WILHELM / Los Angeles Times
The couple's antique teakettles, some dating to the 18th century, include Wedgwood salesman's samples.

general have no doubt fueled the trend, they say. EBay, too, has had an effect. "On any given day, there are over 7,000 teapots for sale," says Sonny. Despite the teapot's arrival as popular collectible, people don't always get it when they learn the Kamms collect them. "It's like when we began collecting contemporary glass in the late '70s," says Gloria. "People would hear contemporary glass and smile and say, 'Those sweet little animals they do at Disneyland?'"

"When you say a word, like anything, people have a mind's-eye about what it must be," says Sonny. Of course, when people actually see the Kamms' collection, or even a small portion of it, all bets are off. "Their typical comment," says Sonny, "is they can never look at a teapot the same way." ■