

I am interested in glass only from the point of collecting. I collected Royal Dalton for years (hand painted Dalton signed by the artist) and my collection was the best and largest of its type in the world, but I wasn't interested in porcelain either. It was just the fun of collecting something

I was interested in the collecting. It is very hard to explain. Once a collection is gone I have no interest basically. It's a funny thing really. Have you ever been a collector?

*No, but I have seen your contemporary Australian glass collection. It was extensive.*

Glass is very good, but it had no resale value whereas if you collect something like Royal Dalton (although I never collected it for monetary purposes), you get your money back plus. You really can't make a collection for an investment, because you will buy the wrong things. Making a collection is buying things you may not even like, as long as it makes 'the collection'.

*It's getting a set?*

That's right. We had two thousand eight hundred pieces of Royal Dalton – vases and things. Before that I collected cigarette cards. Every cigarette packet had a cigarette card. It was a vast field. They had cricketers. They had silk flags, incredible. I collected those, but the whole lot got stolen. I have always collected.

For me the collection is about getting the next piece. It is finding the next piece – hunting. You can go around for hours, days, weeks and you may buy nothing then you spot the thing [laughs]. Then you've got that and that piece is finished. You go on to the next piece. We had a much bigger place than here and was all around the house, set up in cases, all catalogued. You could not see the wall for plates.

*With glass, how would you determine what would be in the 'set'?*

I got into glass when I popped into Maureen [Cahill]'s shop. I had to buy a present for somebody. I bought a piece by Colin Heaney. That's how I started on the glass. I could have gone much further with the glass, but you have to live and you can't go on living amongst the collection.

*I imagine with Royal Dalton there would be additions, but I'm interested in what determined your choices in glass.*

No, the additions go with the printed pieces. [Goes upstairs to collect an auction catalogue with illustrations of porcelain pieces. After conversation on the pieces and the unpleasantness of a particular critic, Denis continues referring to one 1930's piece that sold for \$150,000 dollars]

*These strike me as beautifully crafted things.*

They are, but you really don't see works like these unless you go into a museum. They would be too expensive to buy now days. You have to have an eye for it to start with. As you progress your eye gets better and you go for the better pieces. With the glass I just went in to buy a present and Maureen is such a nice person. Nothing happened, but I thought about glass being a nice thing to collect, then I started collecting the

glass. Then it got dearer and dearer over the years and it filled up our rooms. We didn't want to leave it to the kids because what are they going to do with it?

*You hinted that the relationship with Maureen helped.*

Absolutely! It would not have happened without Maureen. She was the star. She was certainly enthusiastic.

*I can see the porcelain making a set but the glass seems more diverse.*

No the porcelain is vast, more vast than the glass would be. It is huge.

*Then how do you target what to collect?*

It's that you don't find them everywhere so when you see something you get it. You search and you search and you may find nothing that appeals to you. You haven't been a collector obviously [laughs]. It is very hard to explain. It was never bought as an investment, never. That piece over there [he points to porcelain piece], have you ever heard of Maggie Blinko [an antiques dealer]? We bought that piece off her for \$600 and when we went back to collect it the next week she said she couldn't sell it to us for that price any more. It was now \$1100. We thought she was a 'rotten b', but a year later I saw one that was very similar sell at Sotheby's for \$30,000.

*But you bought that piece not as an investment, but because there was something you saw in it?*

To me it was a good piece. You just know. You have to have the feel. If you haven't got the feeling for it then you can't collect it. You have to have a feeling for what you are collecting. Wherever the feeling comes from you just know you have to have that piece. After the war when I came out here porcelain wasn't that expensive. You could afford to start collecting it, but you couldn't start collecting Dalton now because it would take so much money to purchase the good pieces. If you know of Clarice Cliff, you could buy pieces for ten dollars then that now cost thousands. There were cartloads of porcelain available in London after the war.

But answering your earlier question, you to limit yourself to Australian glass, because the field is so big.

I love collecting things, but once you have collected a piece I don't stand and look at it. Once you have collected that beautiful piece it's finished. You have got it so you go after the next piece. My relationship with that piece is gone [laughs]. They are only material things.

It's the same with glass too, but it is what you can afford too. With glass there is so much to offer that you need to be a bit discerning. You buy one at a time. I had collected about one hundred and fifteen artists. That was as far as I got. If I couldn't find a good piece by an artist, I got a bad piece. It was important to get as many artists as I could.

It was the same with the porcelain. If you hadn't got one painter on Dalton you would try to get another. Some painters cost much more than others. The Dalton people came out once and saw my collection. Sir 'Somebody' and the head of their art

department, but they really didn't know anything about it. They have the Dalton museum, but they didn't really know how the stuff was made. It was commercial really.

*Do you go to the trouble of learning that information?*

No, but they should know because that is their profession. People ask me what I know about this one, or that one and I know very little. It's not a set, but if there are fifty painters I want to get some from each painter.

*With the glass artists you wanted to get a 'Stephen Skillitzi', a 'Colin Heaney'?*

That's right. It didn't matter how they worked as long as it was glass from Australia or New Zealand. I was looking for something to collect after the porcelain, but really I only tapped a very small portion of it. To me it wasn't a great collection. There were so many bad pieces amongst the good pieces. There were artists that I could only get that bad piece for, or it may have been just too expensive to get a good piece.

*How did you know it was a 'good' or 'bad' piece?*

You feel that. You just know. You just know. You don't have to ask anybody. I didn't ask Maureen or anybody else. I just knew. That's the good thing. I would know a bad piece. I would know it wasn't the best piece.

You didn't get that sense of searching for it like you did with the porcelain, because the glass was all there for you. It was not easy to get pieces sometimes because glass artists are a pretty temperamental lot. They were always too busy and it was always that they were doing too much business with America.

*You would approach them?*

Absolutely, yes. They would tell me they were too busy. They could be on the breadline and they'd say they were too busy. It's funny, isn't it? You strike one or two nice ones, but the rest are very temperamental. They feel you are taking them down. I only wanted a fair price, but they see you and they put the price up. I won't name who, but some of them are not particularly reputable. Then there are some very nice people.

*Was your approach like stamp collecting?*

I suppose it could have been something like that, but as I said before it was not about 'additions'. With the Dalton and the printed stuff there was a beginning and an end to it, but not with this stuff. And you can't really sell a piece to get a better piece because there is virtually no resale market.

*The porcelain was exquisitely 'crafted', but looking at your glass collection it wasn't always about 'the craft' was it?*

But it can be beautifully crafted and you don't like it anyway. It's hard to say – people do buy paintings they hate, but they buy it for investment. I never bought for investment. I just turned out that my porcelain did become a good investment.

*With the glass you looked for a piece from each artist. You could sense a 'good' piece, but if you couldn't get a 'good' piece you would buy a 'bad' piece to get representation.*

Yes, just to make an 'Australian collection'.

*It's like hunting.*

No, it's not really a hunting field, because it is there, if you want to spend a lot of money. Give me a few hundred thousand dollars and I will get you the best Australian collection you have ever seen. If you have the money it is there to get. [points to the porcelain] That's different. It is not there to get.

The challenge with glass is to get it at a price you can afford. That's the whole fun of it when you didn't have enough money to be extravagant. That made it all the more interesting. That made it a challenge whereas if you could just go and buy a thing what's the point and you can get the most amazing pieces, technically amazing and beautiful, absolutely magnificent. I still love it (otherwise I couldn't buy it), but it was a question of it going up and up in price and so you had to be discerning. But it is very easy to collect glass.

When this Dalton was sold it was just a material thing like the glass. We had to get rid of it. The porcelain collection was going to go to Holmes à Court, but he died. It went to America inside five hundred tea chests wrapped in \$11,000 worth of bubble wrap twenty odd years ago.

It wasn't a competitive thing. Hardly anybody ever saw it. It was the same thing with glass. Some visiting friends saw one nice piece and thought it was an ashtray [laughs]. It was a piece by Richard Morell that cost me about \$3,000. They said, 'that's a lovely ashtray'.

*Do you have to like people to buy their work?*

No. The collection was partly through Maureen and partly elsewhere. I wasn't looking at the personalities. It is a shame you haven't been a collector because then you would know straight away. I am after the piece. Then unfortunately the event is over. It's probably a little like Don Juan and I move on to the next one.

I have a son who puts them in boxes. I don't put them in boxes. I like to see them.

*But you are willing to buy a piece you don't like to make 'the set'.*

'The collection', yes, otherwise it is no longer a collection. Then it is just something you personally liked. You might buy something you liked and it might all be rubbish. My glass collection wasn't bad. It was a fair collection.

*The things that attract you are not necessarily showing up front in the glass.*

Definitely not. It has to be a good piece, but I can't tell you why because I don't know what that is. I really don't know how they are crafted. I just like that piece because it looks good in my eye. What looks good in your eye?

*Something you built of experience lets you judge a good piece from a bad piece. It isn't the flashiness of the glass and it's more than a maker's competence?*

You can buy plenty of competent pieces. It just that feeling I have at the time and I know when the piece has it.

The pieces were everywhere in my home. The kids use to ride between them and the porcelain and they never broke a thing. Here is a photo of Anthony and he is holding a piece of Wooster in his hand [laughs]. These two little pieces of Meissen were the first pieces we ever bought. They were fifty pounds and that was fifty-five years ago.

I walked in to Maureen's [Glass Artist's Gallery] a few weeks ago and I knew immediately which pieces I would want. Whatever she had in that room I would know within two minutes what I wanted to buy. I wouldn't be able to buy them all unfortunately, so I would have to think what am I going to get. I couldn't tell you now the type of piece, because then I would be keeping to a narrow field. You know the best artists. You must read something about it. I used to get *Craft Arts International*, but I generally saw pieces I'd already bought.

*There are collectors who wouldn't buy a piece unless it appeared in certain journals.*

No. I never thought about that. They bought it for investment purposes. I never bought the glass for investment. Actually I lost a lot of money on it. We had a lot of the glass in rooms upstairs and maybe for six months we wouldn't have gone in the rooms. Two lots of American collector groups came and looked. It was a tour put on by the Arts Council.

*What pieces would 'make' the collection?*

Although certain works may be brilliant, if they were not in the collection it would not matter, but there are people (not too many) whose work is comparable to overseas stuff – Warren Langley or Brian Hirst. There are a few of them, a couple of dozen out of several hundred. There would be three-dozen main people.

*Thirty-six glass artists who would be essential to a collection of Australian glass because their work would stand up internationally?*

Yes. When you see the overseas stuff you know. Some things are beyond comparison. It's just amazing what they do overseas, but as a collector I did not buy for that reason because the majority of [the Australian artists] are not that good. If you took that as your measurement you wouldn't buy anything.

I still enjoy going into galleries to see what's there. I say to myself I would love to have that piece. It would be capturing the piece, but every piece I had was on show. You could see every piece and even behind a closed door I would know it was there.

*For you it was not what was already in your collection, it was what was yet to be collected.*

That's right. It's the seeking. That's the fun of it. Owning a piece is not much fun. What's the point of that?