

The Curious Collector

Written by Elisa Turner, BT Contributor
November 2019

The talented Micky Wolfson puts the oomph! in ephemera



It wasn't the type of collection people expected to be in a museum. In the early days, people thought of it as junk," recalls Cathy Leff about the Wolfsonian Museum, which she directed from 1997 to 2014.

The Miami Beach institution was founded in 1986 by legendary collector, world traveler, and Miami Beach native Mitchell "Micky" Wolfson Jr. In 1995 the Wolfsonian opened its doors to the public; in 1997, Wolfson donated the museum building and its collection of some 80,000 objects to the State of Florida, enabling Florida International University to operate it as a research center.

The irrepressible Wolfson, Leff says, actually "loved it" that people dismissed his collection as junk: "He really had enough confidence that he didn't care. I think it encouraged him that he was on to something interesting. He never thought to replicate something that was already done."

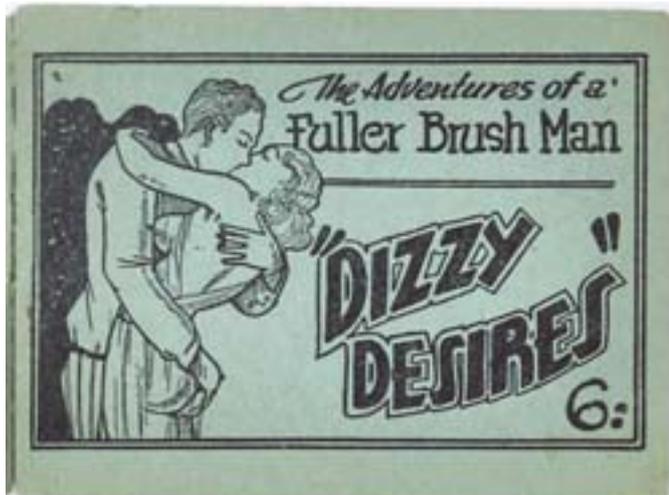
On November 14, the museum celebrates Wolfson's 80th birthday with the exhibit "A Universe

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of Things: Micky Wolfson Collects.” His collecting fuels the museum’s expanding universe, which now numbers 200,000 objects dating from 1850 to 1950. From furniture to hotel keys, these items of material culture document a century of historic change. Wolfson’s own universe includes founding the Wolfsonian museum in Genoa, Italy. It contains 20,000 objects from his Italian collection, some of which traveled in 2015 to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris for a design exhibit.

Reached by phone in Paris, Wolfson expresses astonishment at how much his collections in the Wolfsonian and Wolfsoniana have been used. “And how!” he exclaims. “I never thought I would see the Genovese collection in the Orsay Museum in Paris. I never thought people would come from Russia, China, and Japan to use the material. And, I must say, a lot of people around the world use the Wolfsonian. That gives it a certain posture in the museum world everywhere.”



Another surprise was the collection’s appeal to children. “I never thought a child would enter the doors of the museum,” he admits. “The children are mad for the narrative. They get a great kick out of the museum.”

Children, he says, are the Wolfsonian’s “greatest public.”

Wolfson continues: “The kids seem to learn the lesson of history more easily by visualizing it than by reading about it or being told about it. I’m trying to give kids a sense of what history teaches and expresses so that kids can learn a new vocabulary.”

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By nurturing their curiosity about objects, he believes, they “can visualize people of the time, what they were making and why they were making it.”

Wolfson has a lifelong curiosity about the objects that people make. He’s fascinated by the historical narrative embedded in wildly varied objects, such as a 19th-century Japanese decorative screen portraying a naval battle, as well as a trophy for female pilots saluting women who competed in the All-American Air Maneuvers in a 1939 air show at Miami Municipal Airport. Both belong to “A Universe of Things.”



Each “thing” he has collected is akin to a newspaper story answering these questions: who, what, where, when, and why?

“I like the idea of stimulating people’s curiosity, of asking people to reflect,” Wolfson comments in an interview on the Wolfsonian website. “I accept my role as a digger who searches and finds.... The challenge is to save endangered objects that are ignored or not held in admiration by others. Yes, I consider myself something of a missionary, but mainly what I do is meant to be shared with the public.”

Wolfson was born into a wealthy Miami Beach family known for its philanthropy, commitment to education, and deep local ties. In the 1920s in Miami, his father and his uncle, Sidney Meyer, founded Wometco Enterprises (Wolfson-Meyer Theater Company), a media and entertainment business that became nationally prominent.

After graduating from Princeton University, Wolfson Jr. received a master’s degree in

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international relations from the Paul N. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at [Johns Hopkins University](#)

. Next he worked about four years at the State Department, with posts in Genoa and Turin. Around 1970 he began dividing his time between Miami and Italy, pursuing activities as a businessman and philanthropist.



Wolfson's experience as a diplomat, Leff says, explains his primary interest in promoting greater understanding among various cultures. By the late 1980s, she says, he realized other people around the world were thinking about objects as he did, in the context of political, social, and economic changes.

"He was constantly learning," she recalls. "He had the alphabet and was trying to put language around it to make sense of it."

"He's not a casual traveler," she adds. "He knows where he wants to go, what he wants to see, and who he wants to meet."

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As a self-described “digger who searches and finds,” Wolfson possesses what Leff calls a “sixth sense for detecting where something interesting might be.” Suppose, she adds, “he wants to see a tiny church in a tiny village. The door is locked. He just knows how to find someone to open the door. He’s persistent, unrelenting, tenacious, gracious, and passionate about what he does.”

In São Paulo, they attended a dinner party given by the city’s Pinacoteca museum director. In the director’s house was a bust of Brazilian president-turned-dictator Getúlio Vargas (1882-1954). Vargas, Leff explains, “really built modern Brazil. He also did some really terrible things.... Micky picked up the bust, sat down at the table, and it was in his lap the whole dinner party. He was not going to let go.” As the dinner ended, she recounts, their host “very graciously” donated the bust to the Wolfsonian.

Wolfson accumulated international connections long before social media existed. “He had these Rolodexes with thousands and thousands of names. He had people just working on his Rolodexes to keep track if somebody leaves, if somebody dies, changed their name,” Leff remembers. He kept records of “everybody he met, every card he had, names of people who were recommended to him.” She marvels over “the combination of people all over the world that he brought together on these trips. He always wanted to share his contacts with everybody. He’s still the best social networker. He *is* Facebook,” she laughs.

This ultimate social networker plans more travels, more collecting even as climate change threatens, particularly in Miami Beach.

“I don’t think it will at all be the same kind of city it is today,” he says. “It will have to adjust. I’m hopeful our leadership will find creative solutions to confront the threat. We have to do everything we can to defend our environment. One has to face it. You can’t ignore it.”

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