

Each Box Tells a Story for Villa Gardens Resident

She has collected them from all over the world. They come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, designs and materials. She bought some for a few dollars and others are priceless. But to be sure, every decorative box Villa Gardens resident Herrad Marrs has collected, evokes special memories.



“Each box in my collection has sentimental value, not so much monetary value,” Herrad said. Each box evokes a treasured memory for Herrad of the time and place it was acquired. “I’m often asked if I have a favorite and the answer is no, each one is special for different reasons.”

Herrad has been collecting boxes for more than 50 years. Each demonstrates the skills of its creator and reveals its origins. Some are ceramic, others metal, glass, woven natural fibers and even one made from porcupine quills. She has acquired almost all of them while traveling around the world to an estimated 30 countries. Before Herrad downsized for her move to Villa Gardens, her collection numbered more than 100. When she moved to Villa, she kept 35, donating the rest to the Pasadena Guild of Children’s Hospital for its annual “treasures and trivia sale.”

“I told myself I would keep the 35 and not buy anymore,” she said. “But recently I went to Portugal, saw something I liked and couldn’t resist,” Herrad said with a laugh. “So now I have 36.”

Herrad’s collection began when she inherited a Japanese Imari porcelain box brought from Japan in 1881 by her great grandfather, Ludwig Heinrich Phillip Doerderlein, a professor of biology and zoology at the University of Strasbourg in France. In 1879, after Japan first opened entry to the West, Professor Doerderlein traveled there to teach at the University of Tokyo. When he returned in 1881, he brought back the unique treasure. Fifteen years ago, Herrad bought another Imari - a more contemporary version. “They really haven’t changed much even in 100 years,” she said. “The Imari have a classic design.”



“The original Imari isn’t necessarily my favorite but since it has a family history to it and it’s the oldest in my collection, it’s probably my most treasured,” Herrad said.

The most unique box in her collection probably goes to one woven by a member of an indigenous tribe in northwest Canada, using ecru-colored porcupine quills to design a small, yellow and brown bird on the cover. Another unusual box was purchased at the Alaska State Museum. It’s a miniature jar-shaped woven basket (about 2 inches by 1 inch) decorated with a geometric pattern executed in red and black. One of the most exquisite of all the boxes is from India, a pure white marble with a cover inlaid in a blue floral design highlighted with iridescent silver leaves.

Many of Herrad’s boxes are porcelain because of her family history. Her family on her father’s side owned a porcelain factory for 100 years in Europe. Carl Tielsch founded the Altwasser factory in 1845. It swiftly became second largest porcelain factory in Silesia in what is now Poland. Products of the Tielsch factory quickly became known for their high quality and artistic values. Unfortunately, after World War II, when Poland became part of the Soviet controlled communist block, the factory was destroyed. However, many porcelain pieces manufactured there can still be found on collector’s sites and on eBay, Herrad said.

“Many times during my travels with my husband we would come across boxes I liked and I would buy them,” Herrad said. “Other times, if we were visiting a country that had a well-known porcelain factory I would visit and seek out pieces. Each box has a story to tell. You could even say, they speak to me.”

Editor’s note: Special thanks to Villa Gardens resident Carol Bierhorst for contributing to this blog.