

# COLLECTIBLES

## THE DIGITABULIST

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED THIMBLES IN SILVER, ENAMEL  
AND MOTHER-OF-PEARL TURNED BRIDGET McCONNEL

INTO AN AVID COLLECTOR

PHOTOGRAPHS/YVONNE CATTERSON



I owe my interest in thimble collecting to a stroke of good fortune. In 1980 my mother and I had a small antiques business-cum-hobby. We collected anything that took our fancy and our golden rule was: "Buy it for 50p and sell it for £1". Of course we never stuck to it.

We were both actresses and, as all members of our profession know, there can often be periods of resting. As Dickens's Mr Micawber so succinctly put it: "Annual income twenty pounds, expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness; annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery." Our aim was to indulge our collecting enthusiasm, while augmenting our uncertain incomes. Furniture was our first love but when an irate spouse balked at continually being asked to collect enormous chests from remote country shops, we felt we were on dangerous ground. During a long, boring and badly paid tour of an Agatha Christie thriller, I remember sending a series of bargains home by lorry.

The snag was storage space – our flats were becoming like junk shops with no room to move – so we decided to rent an outside stall in Richmond. On our first Sunday my small red sports car powered by a small two-stroke motorbike engine was loaded up with an amazing assortment of articles. Mother was buried under a job lot of blue-and-white china and silver-plate cake stands, and had several pine clothes horses piled around her head like a cage. When we stopped at some traffic lights, a woman crossing the road turned to her husband and said: "Look at that poor woman. That's the treatment they give you nowadays when you've broken your neck."

We laughed so much that I caused the car's

already dicky engine to stall, resulting in a traffic jam all the way up Richmond Hill.

Nevertheless, we were beginning to cover most of our expenses, although honesty impels me to own that expenditure still seemed to be of the "twenty pounds ought and six" variety. And we enjoyed ourselves enormously, keeping each new buy for as long as we wanted, then selling it off. Sometimes when our tastes were not shared by prospective buyers, we would sell at a loss.

Then came my passion for the chaise-longue and Victorian overstuffed sofa. The actress in me saw herself alternately as Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Sarah Bernhardt, reclining in a burst of romantic passion and being revived by Lord Byron. Alas, this extravagant vision was not shared by those neighbours trapped in their flats by a sofa stuck halfway up the stairs to my fourth-floor flat. This episode prompted Mother to say: "I wish we collected things that were small enough to be carried around in a handbag, instead of the entire set from an Oscar Wilde play."

Now comes Fortune – disguised, in our case, as a raffish elderly gentleman knocking at the door. "Hearing that you two ladies were fellow thespians, I decided that you would fully appreciate the artistry and appeal of what I am about to offer you," he announced. Then from several bags he tipped a seemingly endless stream of tiny articles, some of which I recognised as very tarnished thimbles.

I never knew there were so many thimbles with such variety of use and design. Then there were tape measures hidden inside animal shapes such as camels and dogs, and silver pin-cushions made to resemble ladies' shoes. Other delights included shuttles in ivory, cotton-winders like mother-of-pearl snow



flakes and painted Tonbridge clamps, known as "the third hand". Thimbles of every size and material rolled over my dining table – even aluminium advertising ones extolling bygone products: "Buy Bermaline bread" or "Vitmar for delicate children". There were Victorian silver thimbles with shy lovers' mottoes such as "Remember me" or "Forget me not", to use for embroidery; delicate ivory thimbles with no dimpling, used to sew pure silk without snagging it; and tailors' thimbles with no top, to use with thick material. I was enchanted.

The thimble has always seemed to me to have mythical or fairy-tale connotations, perhaps because it protects us from being pricked and sent to sleep for a hundred years like Sleeping Beauty. Old ladies with magic powers might point a bony finger capped with a thimble to cast their spells. When you rubbed your thimble, out from that tiny receptacle could come some powerful genie to grant your wish. Thumbelina was cradled in a thimble, Peter Pan believed thimbles were kisses, and the foxglove or *digitalis* with its medicinal associations lends its name to thimble collectors, who are known as digitabulists.

These humble protectors have been in continuous use around the world for some 2,000 years. Their early form was often that of a dimpled sewing ring, similar to a modern tailor's thimble, and their use by virtually every known civilisation, combined with a great variety of materials and beauty of design, makes

them fascinating to collect. For my mother and me, a wish had been granted: we had found something small, attractive and with very personal connections. A passion was ignited that is still with me today.

Now the problem would be where to find other thimbles and sewing accessories to add to our collection. But as time progressed, local auction rooms got to know us and sent us appropriate catalogues. When a big collection came up for auction in Hove our excitement was intense. At the viewing the day before, the only problem was that there appeared to be some extremely knowledgeable and well-heeled collectors there. The thimble that is every collector's dream – a mother-of-pearl Palais Royal thimble – was estimated at £300. It had a tiny inset of an enamelled pansy on gold, signifying "think of me" from the French *pensez*. We got so carried away during the bidding that the auctioneer had to ask if we realised we were bidding against each other. But we got the thimble for £400. It was so graceful, worthy of being worn by an 18th-century Aphrodite, the transparent mother-of-pearl giving it an iridescent radiance.

Among my favourite thimbles are the late 18th- and early 19th-century thimble toys. These are "toys" in the 18th-century sense, meaning small objects. Once, while visiting my father in Paris, we decided to spend Friday (known as the dealers' day) in the *marketé aux puces*, the famous flea-market. Sewing tools were in short supply and the day looked like being a loss when suddenly my father spotted a

beautiful early 19th-century ivory toy, an inverted thimble screwed on to an elegant base banded with gold. When you unscrewed the thimble a tiny blue glass scent bottle complete with stopper was revealed. It was not cheap because, unusually, the dealer was knowledgeable about sewing tools and appreciated its rarity and exquisite workmanship. I borrowed £600 from a reluctant parent who probably wished he had never opened his mouth.

Some of my best purchases have been made in antiques markets. If you have a good rapport with a trusted dealer, they will always let you have first refusal on anything interesting. One particular gem was a beautiful Norwegian enamelled thimble, showing a Viking ship sailing up a fjord. The enamelling was so well done that the sun appeared to shimmer on the water. I knew the artist to be David Anderson of Oslo, circa 1920, whose shop still flourishes today, although in my opinion the modern thimbles lack the detail and finesse of his earlier work. I have learnt not to be caught by the carat, or impressed by the gold or jewels of a thimble. The fact that your thimble is nine, 15 or 18 carat is not as important as its rarity or design. Small diamonds and other precious stones can be purchased relatively cheaply from lapidarists. Therefore a rare gold thimble depicting one of Aesop's fables, or the elegant Perrault fairy tales, are a better investment than one set with sapphires.

My own weakness is for collecting thimbles

Far left Bridget McConnell with her book on thimble collecting. Left An assortment of silver thimbles (mainly English c1880) worth £30-50 each. The French stars thimble (centre) came from a Paris flea market; the modern frog thimble costs £20 from Bridget's shop. The ivory thimble was used for sewing silk. Below Worcester porcelain thimbles, rarer and more expensive than silver. The butterfly and chaffinch thimbles, c1870, are each worth around £200; the modern hand-painted fruit thimble from Bridget's shop costs £60. The "jewelled Worcester" with porcelain "coral" was an auction find worth £250



with an interesting historical provenance, or story, attached. Last year at a Phillips auction a late 16th-century gold thimble set with small cabochon rubies and sapphires fetched an all-time record of £18,000, plus premium and VAT. It was so expensive because on good authority it was purported to have been presented to Queen Elizabeth I by the Mogul Emperor. The Queen later gave it to one of her ladies-in-waiting who belonged to the Burghley family. At the auction I was allowed to try it on. I thought, "Am I really wearing the thimble worn by one of the most powerful and magical women in history?"

Often I look at my hundreds of old thimbles and conjure up visions of who the wearers might have been and the lives they led. I pay heed to the engraved message "Love the Giver" and remember with gratitude Fortune's hand in starting my collection. ☺

### THIMBLE DETAILS

Bridget McConnell's shop The Thimble Society of London is at Unit 134, Gray's Antique Market, 58 Davies Street, London W1Y 1LB (071-493 0560). Membership of the Society costs £16 a year. Members receive a quarterly magazine; entrance to an annual conference; 10 per cent discount in the shop and a card giving free admission to many antiques fairs. *The Letts Guide to Collecting Thimbles*, written and photographed by Bridget McConnell, costs £12.95.