

FROM THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF PHILIP SLEIN

OR... PHILIP SLEIN'S MAGICAL MUSEUM OF STUFF: THE ART AND SOUL OF A MAJOR COLLECTOR

At Dragon, Crab and Turtle. Mid-May through August 2021.

By Elizabeth Bernhardt, PhD

Philip Slein is present in many places around St. Louis ... You might know about him from his gallery—once downtown on Washington but later relocated to the Central West End (near Barrett Barrera Projects and CENTRO). Maybe you followed his passionate 2020 political cartoons on Instagram or maybe he caught your eye around town in fabulous attire when *Ladue News* voted him “Best Dressed”? Maybe you went to high school with him or perhaps you are an alumnus of one of his fine arts classes? Maybe you’ve spotted him driving around in a vintage wood paneled Jeep? Another highly possible scenario is that you met him shopping estate sales.

If you haven’t been to his loft on Washington Avenue, you may not be aware that over the past several decades Philip has combed our city’s incredibly rich and varied estates to create what might be the largest and most incredible private collection of artistic and historical material culture in the region. The man deserves a museum space to showcase so many treasures, and our gallery is thrilled to be able to exhibit his collections and introduce them to a wider audience.



Above: a couple of installation shots of fascinating sections of Slein’s collection before parts of it were removed for the show

Phil’s passion pours out into his collections of paintings, sculptures, metal airplanes, hi-fi equipment, copper cookware, wooden sculpted santos, neon signs, carpets, models of Mississippi steam boats, old doors, vintage ceramic bathroom items, pharmaceutical containers, human skulls, suits of armour, grandfather clocks and more. He is a master of estate sales, a connoisseur of global antiques, and a man knowledgeable in all fields related to junkie.

His collections are proof that Phil’s passions are the arts—and art in its many shapes and forms. And his art reaches way beyond Vasari’s classical trio of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Slein is also all about Music as Art. Clothing as Art. Political Cartoons as Art. Decorative Art as

Art. Installations as Art. Taxonomical arrangement as Art. Plant placement as Art. The Art of Collecting. Knowledge of History and Cultures through Art.



Left: Slein directs art handlers (mostly from Bad Girlz Studios) on how to move his stuff
Right: A glimpse of Slein's collection including part of a gilded American eagle on the left, part of his Philodendron monstera and a blue model airplane in the background, part of a West African sculpture in the center, and part of a fantastical Mexican creature on the right



Above: Tiziano Vecellio's *Venere di Urbino* (ca. 1538) remade in 3D form by Dutch pop artist Saskia De Boer (b. 1945 Amsterdam) as part of Slein's loft display before its partial relocation to Locust Street



Left: Slein arranges elements of his collection on a table

Right: Katherine Bernhardt enjoys looking at the collection while sitting in one of Slein's early modern Italian chairs and in front of Slein's own "Tortured Artist Chair" featuring hundreds of sharpened pencils on its seat, back and armrests

Slein's incredible collections have been selectively accumulated and curated over a lifetime in an American city famous for its stuff: St. Louis. Founded in 1764 by the French along the west bank of the Mississippi River and across from the major ancient indigenous city of Cahokia, St. Louis soon after became wealthy as a trade depot, and its many citizens began their collections—perhaps reaching their peaks in the 1910s and 1920s—along with the simultaneous construction of enormous luxurious residences to hold and display all of their findings on Portland, Kingsbury, Westmoreland, Pershing and Lenox Places, Lafayette Square, Lindell Blvd., Brentmoor and Carrswold out in Clayton, and others. St. Louis is an old-world feeling city loaded with fascinating items and unique architecture—and these kinds of things are some of what attracts Slein's eye.

Despite the Americana, it would be difficult not to notice so much from Italy within the collection. Slein clearly loves Antiquity and ancient Rome. He told me that he likes the idea of palaces filled with stuff in Venice; and at one point he blurted out loud that he loves a senes of *ancientness* around him. He has classical-looking marble busts and bronze pieces depicting the gods, a painting of the Duomo di Firenze, pharmaceutical jars inscribed in Italian and Latin, carved early modern Italian chairs, wooden and cement versions of Corinthian columns, a Ferrari *Mille Miglia* large-scale ceramic ashtray allegedly worth more than a Ferrari, Gucci loafers painted on Robert Lococo's feet, sets of antique Italian bottle top stoppers, Sicilian cart pieces...and other *italianità* that I have surely missed (or that may still be located too deeply in the collection to see).



Although he self-describes as a “loner,” he is never alone among all of his incredible things and their connections to their makers and their stories. Phil has so much stuff though that he has even suffered recurrent nightmares about being on vacation somewhere but that his stuff came along with him and basically ruined his trip. Alas, it is time for a show, it’s time for cleaning out his closet and considering letting go of a few pieces... If nothing else, letting go of some of it will clear up some space and allow him to collect more.

Right now the collection is being considered as an inalienable installation lot but interest in individual pieces should be directed to the gallery for sale consideration.



Above left: detail of mid-century pantry;
Above right: detail of a mid-century sculptural painting

Below left: A carved marble bust of former Missouri congressman Thomas Allen (1813-1882) among other mounted sculptural heads

Below right: me (and lots of art) reflected in the famous distortion mirror saved from The Highlands, an amusement park that operated from 1896 to 1963 on the grounds where SLCC@Forest Park was later built



Q&A with Philip Gregory Slein



What does your dreamlike fantasy best case scenario estate sale look like? It would look like my loft!

What attracts you to certain things? I'm a broad-based collector. I don't know in advance what I want when I go into a sale. I keep an open mind. It's exciting to be the first one into a house. And my heart starts beating if I know I can buy something.

How would you describe how you decorate your own spaces, including your home? It's an "all centuries mash-up." I like having a 16th c. Dutch still life painting next to a Burger King sign. I love to juxtapose pieces, fine art with advertising, etc.

Do other people in your family have collections? My father collected art and loved hi-fi and jazz and opera. He bought good stereo equipment in the 80s, and I got tuned into it. Everyone in my family liked things—but not to the level like how I've collected things. As a child I collected baseball cards and Corgi toy cars. I have always loved to arrange and display things. I like to be around it all, and it's inspiring.

Did you go to art school, and do other people in your family make art? I have a BFA from the University of Missouri at Columbia and an MFA from Wash U (1996). My sister has a BFA from MU and an MFA from RIT in Photography.

What were you like in high school? What was your favorite subject? I was an amiable dufus. My favorite subject was Art.

Do you speak any other languages? Have you lived abroad? I spent two summers in Florence (1994 and 1995) and some time in London. Besides English I know some Yiddish and Spanish.

Where is your family originally from? They have been in St. Louis for a long time, since the Civil War.

Did you have a Bar Mitzvah? No, I had a confirmation.

Have you been vaccinated for covid? I got the Johnson and Johnson shot.



What books are you currently reading? I usually read the internet. If I find something I like, I research, research and research it some more. I read article after article about it. Sometimes I binge read all night about a specific clock or something.

We know you love music and stereo equipment and that you love to blast records and “rock out” at home. So, what does that mean, and how do you feel when you do that? I’m really into vintage hi-fi. I love to listen to music at home. I have eclectic tastes and like tons of different genres. I have numerous 1970s McIntosh amplifiers and JBL speakers...so the music sounds amazing—and totally different from how young people listen to music today on iPhones or through wireless earbuds. It’s a completely different experience. It’s both relaxing and invigorating to crank it up!

What did you wear in order to win “Best Dressed” in *Ladue News*? I won that back in 2012. I wore a tuxedo a lot. I prefer art and antiques to clothes. I don’t have a favorite fashion designer.

Who is your favorite collector? Sir John Soane in London. I like the maximalist look that people have adopted. [Soane’s house and its collection are now a museum at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields—

see www.soane.org—and his display methods could have served as a model for some of Slein’s installations. Hopefully someday soon Slein will create a house museum like Soane’s.]

What is your favorite museum? The Frick Collection

Who is your favorite artist? Katherine Bernhardt. It’s the first time that the most important artist in St. Louis is a female—it’s the first time a woman has been in that position here ever.

What are some of the main themes of your collections? Wood carvings, clocks, hi-fi equipment, santos, cats, St. Louis history and objects, circus paraphernalia, paintings, locomotive trains, riverboats, African art objects, books, Victorian bird boxes, scientific items from doctors’ collections...



How tall are you? 6'4"

Besides STL, where else in the world would you like to collect stuff? I love stuff from Europe and from all continents too.

What do you think about having a show of your stuff, and what should it mean? It’s a cool opportunity but it is physically and psychologically taxing and stressful; I am worried about breaking something. Also, I am in the art business so I want people to understand the pleasures of collecting.

How come you never opened an antique store? I never want to sell it. It’s hard for me to sell stuff. There’s that old adage around the antique market: You don’t own the stuff—it owns you...

When you go on vacation do you really have nightmares about your stuff travelling with you? I have had nightmares that I took too much stuff with me on vacation. It must be a metaphor or my subconscious warning me about what I’m doing.

What does your family think of your collections? My dad loved my collection. He also thought I had too much stuff. Whenever he'd come to the loft he'd be interested in everything down there. He encouraged me to sell more.

Do you have any kids? No, I still feel like a kid myself!

Below left: an ancient bowl containing carved items created by indigenous peoples of the Americas

Below right: vintage Italian Anri bottle stoppers



Above: Slein's modern monster remake (left) of Quinten Matsijs' 1520 painting *Das ungleiche Paar* (Ill-matched lovers) (center), that had in turn been based on *un disegno grottesco* from 1490 by Leonardo da Vinci (right)

Below left: A wooden bowl decorated by Slein

Below right: a reflection of the show in a 1970s Thai carving of a jungle

