

The J. Edgar Hoover Art Collection

Photographs by Matthew Lewis

By Kenneth Turan

You know a man by what he collects," this man says, his wary, tenacious face showing no emotion, no hint of anything at all. "And what kind of a person was J. Edgar Hoover?" he adds, finishing the thought. Now his mouth starts to crinkle at the corners, the face breaks up and the man starts to laugh, a sharp barking laugh. "Ha, ha," he goes, "ha, ha, ha," and then there is silence.

Like most men who have three names and use them all, Robert Hilton Simmons is serious about what he does, which happens to be collecting art. Late Chou Dynasty and Sung Dynasty

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artifacts, 12th-century B.C. oriental bronzes, early American pottery. Not cigarette coupons hokum, but nice things, class.

So what is he doing bending over in the hall closet of his Capitol Hill home, pulling out old boxes, brown grocery bags, sacks of plant food, finally, finally getting to the good stuff: a bulky object shrouded in newspapers and mystery? "This is a great piece," he says deadpan, taking off the paper. "There are very few in existence." And out pops an eight-sided basket, painstakingly made in its entirety of popsicle sticks. "He really cherished this," Simmons says, and maybe he smiles.

What Robert Hilton Simmons is holding is one of 50 objects — bric-a-brac, knickknacks, jimcracks, oddities and even art — that have only one thing in common: their last owner was J. Edgar Hoover, well-known public citizen and former director of the F.B.I. Slowly and carefully, alternately horrified at his pleasure and pleased with his horror, Simmons unwraps, with

appropriate comments, the following:

- A vaguely obscene, "really unbelievable, huh," salt shaker with a nude woman perched provocatively on the side.

- A huge cloisonné object, presumably a vase, pear-shaped and garish with heavy metal handles on the sides. "One of the most expensive, one of the most horrible."

- "Another piece de resistance," a jewel-covered cigarette box in the form of a celestial sphere which revolves while playing "Around The World in 80 Days."

- An imitation mother of pearl and jade desk set, "from which, I assume, he was writing some of his famous books, like *Masters of Deceit*."

- A whiskey decanter that plays "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" as one begins to pour. "I can just see him," Simmons says, his face dreamy, "sitting all by himself, pouring a drink and saying, 'Somebody cares.'"

Out come two wooden storks from New York's erstwhile Stork Club, a decanter shaped like a hand grenade, oriental objects described as "early Chiang Kai-shek period," more and more and more until everyone has seen quite enough, thank you. "A very strange cross-section," Simmons says, surveying it all. "You look at some of the things he owned and you think, 'What a curious lot of things to have and collect.' He was some sort of an enigma."

Robert Hilton Simmons, 50 years old and a New Englander to the core, he isn't exactly an open book himself. First he spends approximately \$1,000 on J. Edgar Hoover's personal art, bowling-ball shaped cookie jar and all. And then, incredibly, he goes one step beyond and offers to put it all on tour in the Soviet Union, Hoover's personal heart of darkness, for the express purpose of "promoting understanding by demonstrating common interests." What kind of a person would do these things? "Philanthropic," Simmons answers with elegant pleasure, carefully choosing his words. "A sensitive, humanitarian type person." And then, if you look quickly, you will see him smile.

It all started, Robert Hilton Simmons thinks, late one World War II night in New York City when he and a buddy, wandering about as servicemen are prone

to do, saw a vision in a shop window. It was, Simmons remembers fondly even now, "one of the worst examples of bad art I've ever seen," a plaster of paris mannequin wearing a mother of pearl corset. And that was perhaps the first inkling of "an idea I've had for a long time, to do a collection of bad taste in art, of kitsch."

The word is from the German, originally referring to things tossed off quickly from trashy materials. Now it means highpoints in bad taste, supreme examples of awfulness like Graumann's Chinese Theater or Mona Lisa bath towels. "It's bad design, bad taste, inappropriateness, the other side

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of the coin to a good art collection," Simmons says, but still he is attracted to it, to the idea of "buying all the worst kitsch." For didn't an art professor of his say, "If you see what is bad, you understand more of what is good." And J. Edgar Hoover, Simmons is unashamed to admit, had a taste in art that was "perfectly awful, terrible, what more can you say? It's the worst kind of kitsch you ever saw in your life. It's the epitome really of awfulness."

Most of Simmons' finer arts collection is a result of 20 years' work as a ship's officer in the merchant marine, 20 years that took him all over everywhere. In 1965 he bought his house in Washington and settled into kind of a gadfly position on the local art scene, becoming a founding trustee of the Museum of African Art and perennially jousting with S. Dillon Ripley and the Smithsonian Institution on questions of art and ethics. A man who lives off the occasional sale of parts of his collection as well

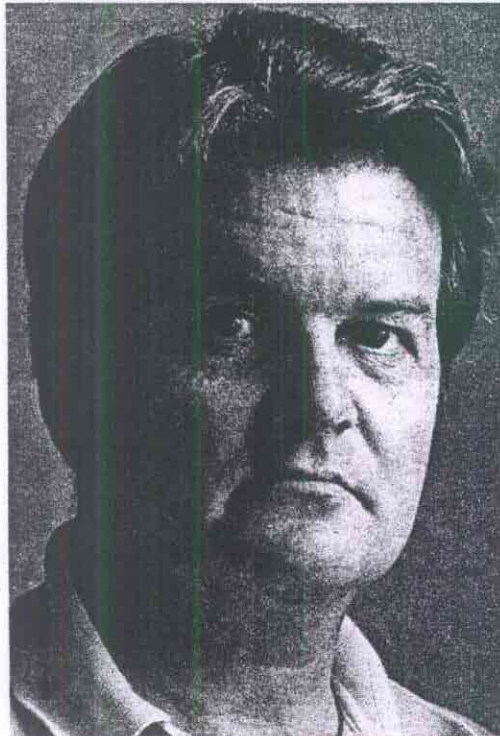
as part-time merchant marine work in Baltimore, Simmons was working on a book on the city's museum situation when the Hoover madness first struck.

"I've always been an admirer of Hoover's, I've watched 'The FBI Story' unfold on TV," Simmons says dryly. "When we were growing up he was one of our idols; we all wanted to be G-men." So when an acquaintance told him that Hoover's stuff, then owned by long-time buddy Clyde Tol-

son, was being secretly auctioned off at Sloan's in downtown Washington under the code marking JET, he couldn't help, as he puts it, "getting swept up in this great opportunity."

Down on the scene, Simmons found himself in spirited bidding with others who had broken the code, including several teary-eyed FBI men. His wife, an assistant curator at the Corcoran, was aghast: "She thinks its absolutely horrible. She was trying not to be with me. 'Can you imagine,' she said, 'what people are thinking of your taste?'"

But Simmons, once he got started, found the grip of the thing inexorable. "There wasn't much point," he told himself, "in buying more than a couple of pieces unless you bought an awful lot." And as "an old Yankee trader," the collection seemed quite a good buy, something he could always re-auction in the posher atmosphere of New York's Parke-Bernet or "give to the Smithsonian and take a tax deduction. I felt I was rescuing it from obscurity. It has historical value, like George Washington's false teeth."



Collector Robert Hilton Simmons and a choice piece of Hooverabilia.

And then, slowly, another idea caught Simmons' admittedly "dry, New England sense of humor." A collection of American entrepreneur Armand Hammer's art was, much to Simmons' disgust, then touring in the Soviet Union: "such awful stuff, it seemed the result of some horrible sense of humor." So, not to be outdone, why not offer them Hoover's stuff too? "With Hoover's relationship to Russia, being the symbol of anti-Communism, I thought his art would be of interest to the Russians," he says puckishly, adding, "and probably very much admired by the average person in the Soviet Union. It might even genuinely further the spirit of detente."

So off went a letter to Mrs. Yekaterina A. Furtseva in the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Culture, offering "the collection of one of our most prominent citizens, recently deceased . . . a cross-section of one man's taste." And even if Hoover had been a vigorous anti-Communist during his life, he was at the same time "a warm and generous human being" who, Simmons had no doubt, "would have been delighted by the latest developments in the field of cultural exchange."

The Soviets, however, were less than

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amused. A certain A. Diuzhev, writing back in Russian which Simmons had translated at the Library of Congress, claimed a tight schedule made it inevitable that "an exhibition in the U.S.S.R. of the collection of E. Hoover, in the near future would be impossible." Hardly crushed, Simmons is toying with the idea of offering it all to Mainland China, and has already had the satisfaction of returning to Sloan's and overhearing an outraged employee say, "You know, this guy's gonna send it all to Russia, the whole damn thing."

Yes, Robert Hilton Simmons will admit under heavy prodding, "It's a gag, but how often do you get a chance to pull this kind of gag?" But that doesn't mean, should the Russians have agreed, that Simmons wasn't perfectly prepared to go straight through with it to the end, right down to organizing the exhibit and writing a catalog with "beautiful pictures in color and deadpan descriptions of the pieces. I might do that anyway, I might write a book."

And just because it was kind of a gag, don't think that Robert Hilton Simmons doesn't in his own heart of darkness have some nice thoughts about the Hooverabilia. "The idea is not really to make fun of J. Edgar Hoover," he maintains stoutly. "It's not just a romp and a burlesque, there's a certain sensibility there." In fact, if he had the chance, Simmons would buy even more of the stuff, things that got away like the black ashtray with the white Venus de Milo rising from the center and the baby's milk mug with "Johnny" written on it in gold.

"It's really almost fantastic to own this much of one man's collection," he says. "I thought at the time I was lucky to get it, and I definitely feel kind of responsible for it. I have kind of an obligation to the people of the United States."

And what would Mr. Hoover himself be thinking if he knew what his much-loved memorabilia was going through? "He might be very happy," Robert Hilton Simmons says, allowing himself one small pleased smile, "that someone was still enjoying it as he had."

Goodnight, J. Edgar, wherever you are. ■



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