

# MAD TEA PARTY

**Eclectic collection to travel  
The nation after Napa**

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To collect or not to collect, that is the question.

For centuries, there have been those in the world possessed with the overriding need to accumulate in an organized fashion the things in life they find most precious. Driven by passion, madness, whimsy or a need for comfort, they seek to surround themselves with the things they love.

Beginning this week, Copia, The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, brings to Napa one of the more unusual collections making the rounds of American museums.

"The Artful Teapot: 20th-Century Expressions from the Kamm Collection" could change art patrons' minds about this common household fixture. Teapots made from antique porcelain to those with high-tech origins will be on display.

This exhibition is drawn from the collection of Sonny and Gloria Kamm of Southern California. In a recent interview, Sonny Kamm said he and his wife first started collecting fine art, sculpture and contemporary glass in the late 1970s.



John W. McNaughton, *Where's My Bloody Tea?*

Over the years, some 20 teapots found their way into their possession as glass sculptures. To fill the shelves behind a bar in their home, they placed the teapots on display, and a collection was born.

“Those 20 had an impact. It happened by accident,” Kamm said.

Today, the Kamms have over 6,000 teapots, 250 of which they display in their home on a rotating basis, while the remainder are either on the road in exhibits, like the one at Copia, or in storage. To accommodate the overflow of pots that quickly outgrew the space in their home, the couple bought a condominium down the street from where they live, specifically for storing their treasures. Kamm noted throughout history the shapes and sizes of teapots changed as the price of tea fluctuated. When tea was expensive, the vessels were smaller and made of precious materials increasing their value, and were often revered as decorative or culturally significant objects. As the price of tea dropped, teapots increased in size while decreasing in value due to the advent of mass production. The Kamms, however, make no distinction for the type of teapot they will add to their collection. Sources as diverse as well known artist Roy Lichtenstein and architect Michael Graves, production teapots and fine porcelain pieces are all represented.

For Sonny Kamm, it’s not about the number of teapots, but about the “hunt.” Kamm buys his treasures at flea markets, antique stores, at auctions around the country, on the Internet and from other collectors. He often buys one a day or more if the occasion arises.

While the hunt lures him, he doesn't lose perspective of the fact it's about the art.

“Art becomes a part of your life. (Collecting is) not all consuming, but there's always room for more,” Kamm said.

The prices the Kamms pay for their teapots vary. Recent or “novelty” pieces can range from \$5 to \$50 dollars, while those made by designers, architects and artists can go for several hundred to several



thousand dollars. Commissioned pieces from well established artists cost in the neighborhood of \$5,000 to \$20,000 per pot.

In fact, everything about the Kamm collection is a study in contrasts, all of which adds to its unique quality. The materials used to construct the teapots are limited only by the imagination of the artists.

In his book, “The Artful Teapot,” which accompanies the Copia exhibition, Garth Clark addresses the range of mediums found in the Kamm teapots. During his research, Clark found

teapots made of “tin cans, plastic, wrapping materials, ivory, lapis, coconuts, salmon skin and ostrich eggs,” to name only a few.

Size, too, it seems, is not a limitation when creating teapots. The Kamms collect everything from diminutive children’s tea sets with matching teapots to the largest pot in the collection, a teapot-shaped playhouse found in the couple’s back yard that holds their five grandchildren comfortably.

The Copia exhibition, Kamm said, will allow the public to see “the teapot taken off of the stove and put on a pedestal.”



Above: Raymon Elozua, *Water Tower*

Top: Peter Shire, *Scorpion Float*

“People don’t get contemporary art,” Sonny Kamm said. “Teapots are accessible to people as everyday objects. (They) liberate a person’s mind to see the art. They know what they’re seeing. All ages can understand them. No art experience is necessary.

“People will just be able to enjoy themselves,” he said. “They can stop worrying if they understand (the art) and just have fun.”

While Kamm believes “collections do end,” he and Gloria aren’t ready to throw in the tea towel just yet.

“We have a lot of teapots, but we still have a lot of room,” he said. “On my tombstone they’ll write, ‘He finally finished collecting.’ Maybe someday we’ll get into something else.”

The exhibition begins a year-long tour of the United States and Canada. After leaving Napa, the teapots travel to Alabama, Toronto, Long Beach, Chicago and North Carolina with a European and Asian tour in the planning stages.

The “Artful Teapot: 20th-Century Expressions from the Kamm Collection” runs from May 16 through Sept. 2.

Copia is located at 500 First St. in downtown Napa. For additional information, call 259-1600, or visit the center’s web site at [www.copia.org](http://www.copia.org)

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[www.napanews.com](http://www.napanews.com)



Above: David Gignac, *Celestial Teapot*

Top: Richard Marquis, *Stars and Stripes*