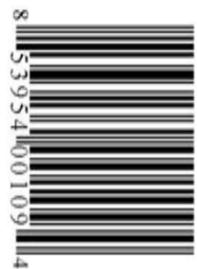


MORE THAN 75 AUCTIONS AND 50 SHOWS IN THIS ISSUE

\$1.50



AntiqueWeek

THE WEEKLY ANTIQUE AUCTION & COLLECTING NEWSPAPER

EASTERN EDITION

VOL. 42. ISSUE No. 2175

WWW.ANTIQUEWEEK.COM

APRIL 4, 2011

A penny for your weight

BY KAREN EDWARDS

Before Americans could discretely weigh themselves at home on bathroom scales, there was only one way to determine weight and that was to step on one of the hundreds of public scales that sat inside (and sometimes outside) pharmacies, dime stores and penny arcades across the country.

"The idea of public scales was brought to the U.S. through Europe," says Christopher Steele. And he should know. For 40 years, Steele has studied and amassed a collection of 185 penny scales that span nearly 100 years of American history, technology and design.

An artist, inventor and architectural model builder, Steele says he admires the scales' inventive designs – "there's such variety," he notes – but he insists it was a disembodied voice that prompted his penny scale collection.

"I was 22 years old when I stepped on a scale at the old Union depot," he says. (The depot was located in Columbus, Ohio, where Steele still lives.) "I heard this loud voice say, 'Buy all you can.'" So Steele bought the Union Station scale and has been buying penny scales ever since.

His collection is in demand by art, history and even science museums. Three Ohio museums — the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Ohio State University Art Space in Columbus — have all exhibited Steele's collection. In addition, several pieces have also been on display at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

Christopher Bensch, vice president of collections at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, N.Y.,

SEE SCALES ON PAGE 24

Middle right: Only 65 Mr. Peanut scale were produced in 1951. The more patina these scales have, the more valuable because it illustrates the working life of a piece. This scale in the Christopher Steele collection was purchased for \$1,700 in 1984. Today, it's valued at \$25,000.

Right: This scale was manufactured by the Hamilton Scale Company in Toledo, Ohio and was purchased in the mid-1990s for about \$3,500 (which included shipping and taxes.) It's worth about \$10,000 or more today.



Above: Scales were often known as "silent salesmen," encouraging customers to stay and shop where the scales were located. This scale, by the Colonial Scale Company, features a golf game that would have entertained customers while they waited for prescription refills or browsed shelves. The scale was purchased for \$5,000 in the 1970s. It's now valued at more than \$25,000.

This Week...

AntiqueWeek Community

Online – Can't identify an object? Ask the readers of AntiqueWeek's online community in the What Is It? section.

Go to www.antiqueweek.com and click on Community.

Expert gets own show

LAS VEGAS – The History Channel is seeking to strike more gold in the antique market.

On April 15, a new series *American Restoration* will officially premiere. Although the show was aired last fall, it was only on a trial basis.

National p 1

Ohio decorative arts

LANCASTER, Ohio – A unique exhibit at the Decorative Arts Center of Ohio celebrates the craftsmanship of Ohio artisans; recognition that has been a long time coming. *Equal in Goodness: Ohio Decorative Arts 1788-1860* is on display through June 5.

National p 1

History in Hampton

HAMPTON, Va. – Re-enactors, musicians, and history buffs converged on Hampton last month as the Tidewater Virginia city hosted "Hunt for Hampton History: The Civil War 1861." The occasion was the sesquicentennial of the start of "The Civil War," "The War Between the States," or "The Recent Unpleasantness," depending upon who was asked.

p 2

Maryland Questers Club

PHOENIX, Md. – The Maryland Questers will meet April 13-14 at Towson Golf and Country Club for their annual State Day.

p 2

Always on time online:
AntiqueWeek.com

130 Tables of Vintage Sports Cards and Memorabilia. The largest vintage sports hotel show in the USA! Leading dealers from 17 states and Canada. Bring in your vintage sports cards and memorabilia for free appraisals and fair market offers.



OHIO SPORTS COLLECTORS CONVENTION

APRIL 8-10, 2011

HOLIDAY INN SELECT, 15471 ROYALTON RD., STRONGSVILLE, OH 44136
SHOW HOURS: APRIL 8th, 12-8 / APRIL 9th, 10-6 / APRIL 10th, 10-4



Autograph guests incl. three Heisman Trophy winners and other great stars. Visit the website at www.ohiosportscollector.com or call 440-975-8938 for more information.

ATLANTA EXPO CENTERS Atlanta, Georgia
April 8, 9 & 10
May 13, 14 & 15
June 10, 11 & 12
Directions: 3 miles East of Atlanta Airport on I-285 at Exit 55 (Jonesboro Rd.)
2ND WEEKEND OF EVERY MONTH!

Scott Antique Markets AMERICA'S FAVORITE TREASURE HUNT
3,300 Exhibit Booths! 800 Exhibit Booths!
740-569-2800
www.scottantiquemarket.com

OHIO EXPO CENTER Columbus, Ohio
November 26 & 27
December 17 & 18
Directions: I-71 Exit 111 (17th Ave.) To the Ohio Expo Center (Ohio State Fairgrounds)
MONTHLY NOVEMBER THRU MARCH!

Scales

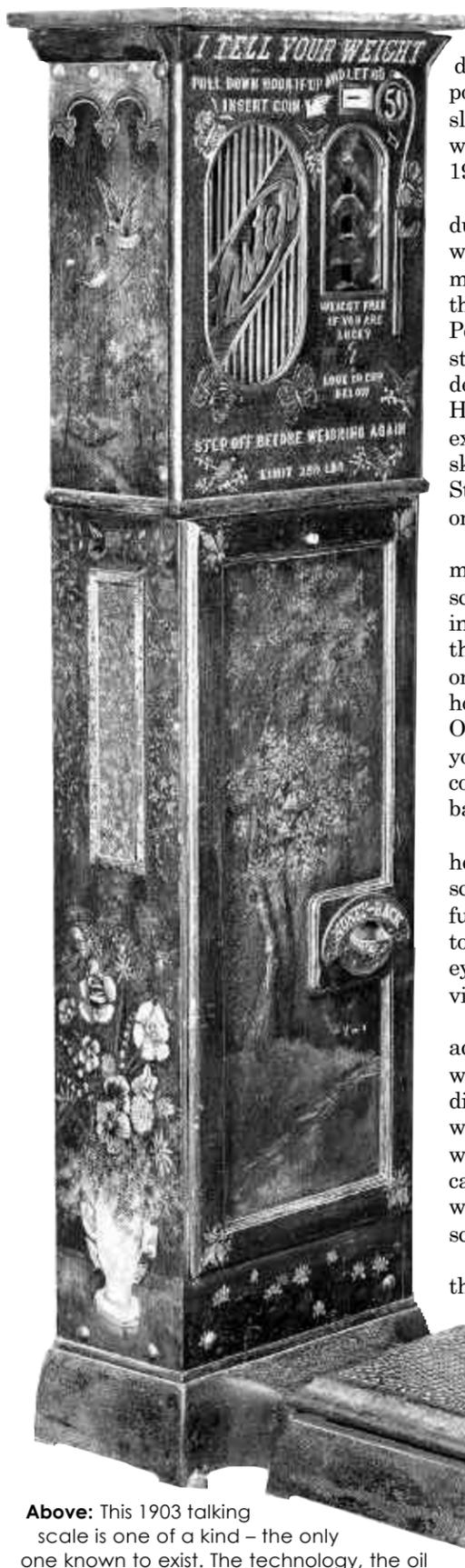
FROM FRONT PAGE

tion. "The kind of public scales he collects were a part of this country's early streetscape," he says. "They represent a way we once entertained ourselves." For Bensch, the collection intersects not only the museum's interest in history and play, but also the areas of art, architecture — and American's image of health and fitness. "These scales have disappeared entirely from our landscape," says Bensch. "That's what makes Steele's penny-scale collection important."

Both Steele and Ruth K. Meyer, the former director of Cincinnati's Taft Museum, are working on a book about the American penny scale, which is scheduled for release mid to late 2011. The book will discuss the history of the scales, the important manufacturers and — through those discussions — the evolution of the scales' design as well as the penny scale's role in American pop culture.

History of the scale

The history of the American penny scale dates to 1885, when American manufacturers picked up the idea from Europe —



Above: This 1903 talking scale is one of a kind — the only one known to exist. The technology, the oil painting on the case, the nickel drop gambling machine all make it unique. It cost Steele \$5,000 in the 1970s to add it to his collection. Today, it has increased in value by more than 10 times that amount. "In 40 years of collecting, this is the only penny scale I have seen with oil painting adorning the case," says Steele.

and ran with it. "They imported the idea then put their own distinctive American stamp on the scales they made," says Meyer. The scales made at that time were more practical than aesthetic, with large dials that, as Bensch says, "could be read across the town square." Still, they served a purpose, especially in doctors' offices and for sporting events like horse racing and boxing where the weight of participants is carefully measured. "These early scales were also found in the locker rooms at health clubs," says Meyer — and were probably used by a wealthier clientele.

When World War I began, American manufacturing efforts were diverted to the war effort and manufacture of the penny scale stopped. Because penny scales were made of useful metals, most were melted down for guns, tanks and other war material. But by 1918, the war was over and American industry was once again producing penny scales — as well as vending machines which were gaining in popularity.

"The penny scale was different from most vending machines of that time," says Steele. Unlike machines that dispensed peanuts or other products, the penny scale offered only a service. "That's why they're sometimes called 'silent salesmen,'" says Steele.

The 'silent salesmen' of that time, had an efficient, utilitarian look, but nothing remarkable in terms of design. Most resembled a simple lollypop-on-a-stick — large, round dial atop a slender column, rising from a base on which the customer would stand. In 1925, however, all that changed.

"The Paris Exhibition of 1925 introduced the Art Deco movement to the world," says Meyer — and American manufacturers were quick to pick up on the aesthetic modernism it represented. Penny scales now began to become more streamlined, more angular. Some scale designers — John Gordon Rideout, Harold van Doren and Joseph Sine, for example — built scales that resembled skyscrapers, an homage to the Empire State Building which officially opened on May 1, 1930.

As scales became more attractive, more people became drawn to them. And scale manufacturers began to add extra incentives to entice people to stand on their scale. For example, you might step on a scale and receive your fortune or horoscope or the picture of a movie star. Other scales offered gambling games — if you hit a mark, or guessed your weight correctly, you would earn your penny back.

"The penny scale really reached its heyday in the 1930s," says Steele. The scales of that period were attractive and fun, and Americans used them, not only to entertain themselves but to keep an eye on their weight — without having to visit a doctor's office.

Of course, by then, scales had also adopted more subtle ways to display weight. "Ladies didn't like the large dials," says Meyer — so small screens were embedded in the machine to make weight displays more private. In some cases, a ticket with the user's weight would be dispensed so there was no screen at all.

"There were stories about how far that could go," says Bensch. Vendors who serviced the scales, for example, would calibrate those placed in

women's restrooms so they would weigh five pounds less. "I don't know if that's true," Bensch continues — but it makes a certain amount of economic sense. After all, even some of today's dress designers will label size six dresses size two. Flattery is everything when attempting to make a sale.

By the end of the 1930s, World War II had started and once again, American industry placed the manufacture of everyday objects on hold so war supplies for American troops could be made. But after the war, the penny scale returned to the American landscape — and this time, Americans had money to spend on them. A new consumer culture was rapidly taking shape, one that made spending (as opposed to Depression-era saving) fashionable.

And American ingenuity kept improving the fun of penny scales. Steele has a scale in his collection, for example, manufactured by the Colonial company, that allows you to play golf with your penny. Bensch has tried it, but admits "I didn't do so well with that one." Still, for a penny, customers received their weight — and a brief entertainment.

Later, from the 1950s through the 1960s, advertisers looked to scale designers to help promote products. Steele has examples of scales shaped like Mr. Peanut and RC Cola, and even a 1992 computer scale that looks like two Pepsi cans sitting atop one another.

The penny scale's popularity began to decline in the '50s and '60s, says Meyer — for several reasons.

First, there was inflation. Personal scales were becoming more common, and as they became fixtures in American bathrooms, the public penny scale fell out of favor, no matter how well they were designed or what gimmicks they offered. With fewer pennies to collect, it became too expensive to send service vendors out on their routes, so the fee was raised to a nickel and larger cash boxes were created so the vendors didn't have to collect as frequently.

But consumers were unhappy with the four cent price hike, and the larger cash boxes had a tendency to throw off the delicately-calibrated scales so those extravagant spenders who used the nickel scales — if they were even working — weren't always guaranteed their proper weight

And, by that time, urban crime was becoming more prevalent and larger cash boxes attracted petty thieves. "The scales would frequently be vandalized," says Meyer.

As a result, public scales began to disappear — though not entirely. Some can still be found today, though your weigh-in will cost you more than a nickel. That's because computers now calculate your weight. While the results will be accurate, the quarter (or two) expense now seems frivolous to most Americans who simply step on their bathroom scales to check their weight — so more scales disappear.

That's why Steele's impressive penny scale collection has become important.

The Steele collection

When discussing Steele's collection, Meyer's art background brings her directly to the scales' designs.

"Christopher has an eye for design, himself," says Meyer. That's why his focus has been primarily on the Art Deco scales of the 1920s and the more fancifully-designed scales of the 1930s and '40s. Meyer says her own favorite scale from the collection is a Barnes Scale from 1930. "It looks like a lady wearing an evening gown," she says.

Provenance and patina are keys when selecting a scale for his collection. "I like scales in their original condition," says Steele, and points to his Mr. Peanut scale. Its nose has been rubbed bare. "You can just imagine children rubbing



Left: The Pepsi computer scales are relatively new. Only 100 of them were made in 1992. This one was bought new and cost \$1,700. It's worth about three times that amount today.

Mr. Peanut's nose over the years," he says.

But Steele is also attracted by design and gimmicks, like the 1903 talking scale in his collection. "It would state your weight out loud," he says with a chuckle. Any scale that provides entertainment like that, he adds, is going to be more valuable.

Steele says he's paid anywhere from \$10 to "thousands of dollars" for the scales in his collection. All of them have since jumped in value to 100 times what he paid.

While Steele is still collecting, he says penny scales have become increasingly difficult to find.

A return to public weigh-ins

Steele says he'd like to see America return to public weighing machines. With the country's current battle with obesity, he believes that scales — in plain sight — might help check impulses to overeat, and motivate people to maintain healthy weights.

"A lot of science museums today are interested in displaying the scales as part of their health and fitness exhibits," he says.

Steele is even working on inventing his own coin-operated scale.

"These machines are green in the environmental sense. They don't use electricity so none is wasted. And they can help America with its battle with obesity," he says.

Already, public scales are popping up in Europe with the ability to measure, weight, height, body-mass indexes — and even take a blood-pressure reading, all for about two Euros. And here in the U.S., the GNC health supplement chain is placing public scales in their stores. Is it possible that public scales are making a comeback?

Steele hopes so — but whether or not public scales ever again dot the American landscape, one thing is certain. Steele is one collector who will never have to wonder about his current weight. All he'll have to do is look around his collection and step on any scale that takes his fancy.

For more information on Christopher Steele's penny scales collection, visit <http://theamericanweigh.com>