

PITCHER THIS

In 1930 the heirs of Mann S. Valentine III (1858-1929), son of The Valentine's founder, donated more than 100 ceramic pitchers to the museum. Over time half were deaccessioned. Fifty-one pitchers remain, most with no known association to Richmond beyond their Valentine provenance. "It's not unusual for people to collect spoons or eyeglasses who then want to transfer them to a museum," explains Chief Curator Meg Hughes. **DISPOSITION:** *The pitcher will be sold at public auction. If no interest, witnessed destruction.*





STORIED OBJECTS

THE VALENTINE IS REEVALUATING
ITS COLLECTIONS TO DETERMINE
WHAT ITEMS BEST TELL RICHMOND'S
STORIES, AND WHICH SHOULD GO
TO MORE SUITABLE HOMES

by Harry Kollatz Jr.
photos by Jay Paul & Justin Vaughan



I F YOU'VE EVER HAD TO CLEAN OUT A STORAGE SPACE OR THE CONTENTS OF A HOUSE – EITHER YOUR OWN OR FOR SOMEONE UNABLE TO UNDERTAKE SUCH A PROJECT – YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE VALENTINE IS CURRENTLY GOING THROUGH.

The museum, which holds approximately 1.5 million objects in its main building and in off-site storage, is engaged in an intensive reassessment of its collection— really a collection of collections— so that it can better tell the many-layered story of Richmond. The technical term for the process is “deaccessioning.”

Some objects date to the museum’s 1898 founding by Mann S. Valentine Jr., meat juice/health tonic

magnate and an inveterate collector.

Meg Hughes, The Valentine’s chief archival curator, underscores that museum holdings are not static. “They are always evolving,” she says. “Even in the early days of The Valentine, things were coming in, and things were going out. Collecting is based on the mission and the functions and needs of the institution and the community it serves at that point in time.”

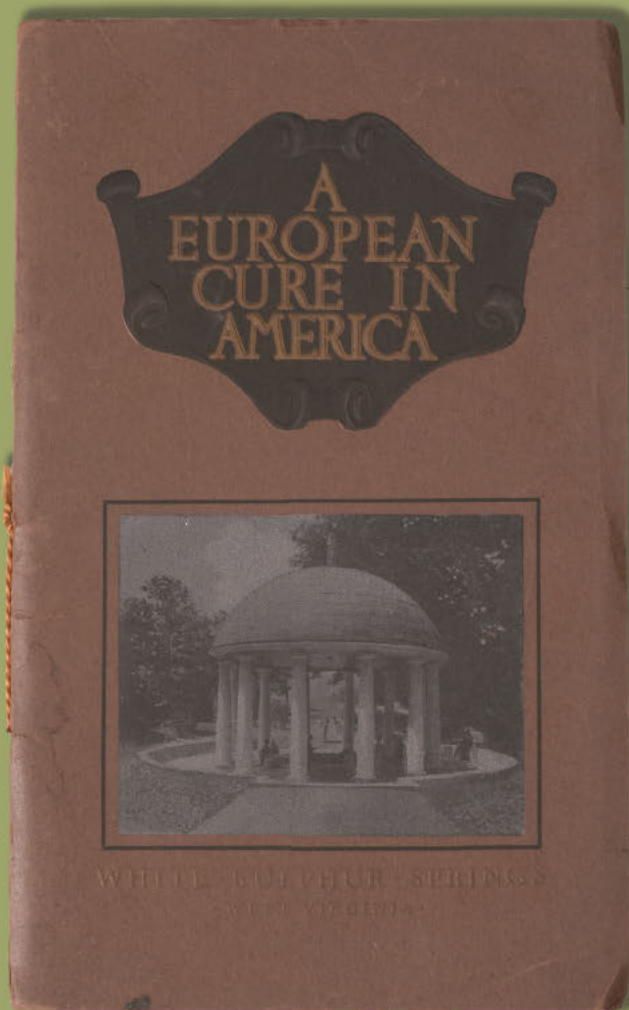
While The Valentine prunes its

collections, the museum continues to bring in objects with stories to tell: Among recent acquisitions are the late author Tom Wolfe’s typewriter, which he received from his Richmonder father, and the firefighter’s penknife used last December to cut loose the stubborn drape during the unveiling of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ Kehinde Wiley statue, “Rumors of War.”

STORIED OBJECTS | CONT'D ON P.170 >

GETTING IN

Robert Emmett "Bob" Golden (1871-1941), a "committed observer," spent his professional life writing for newspapers and composing fiction, plays and even a musical comedy. For the Richmond News Leader he covered the political melodramas of City Hall. In 1912, Golden covered the Virginia State Fair, and this badge gained him entry and permission to write about his experience. This piece, gifted by Helen G. Jenkins, went on display as part of 2019's "Dressing Identity." *The badge will remain in The Valentine's collection.*

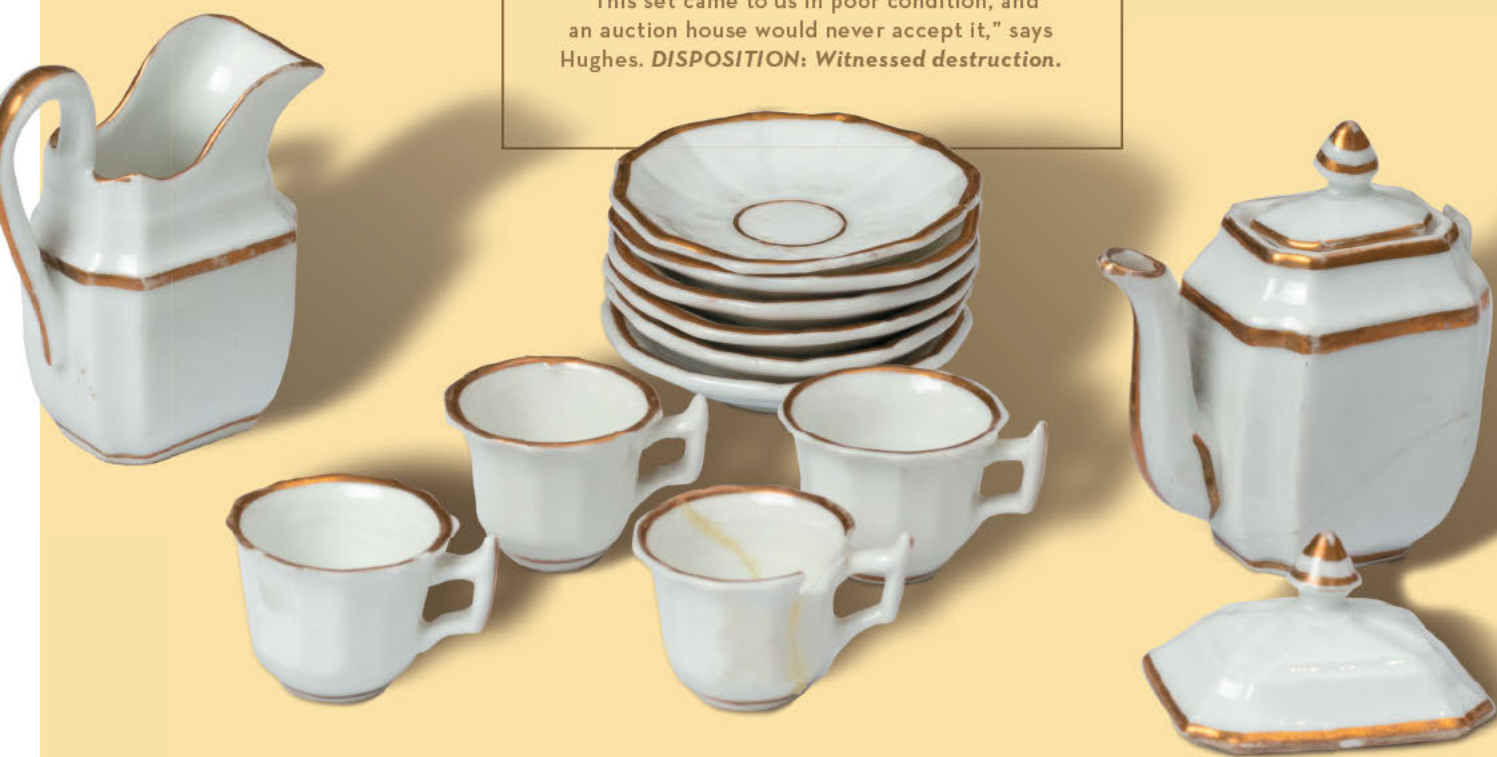


BOOKIN'

"A European Cure in America" is a 1918 booklet about the features and benefits of White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. "Richmonders traveled to spas in West Virginia," says curator Meg Hughes, "and we have photographs of Richmonders at White Sulphur Springs, but this came to us from an estate, and there's no direct connection." *The booklet will go to the West Virginia Museum and Archives.*

MISFIT TOYS

An 1850s doll's tea set, white with gold trim, came from Bessie Chamberlayne, but the pieces are nearly in pieces. "We have more than 100 of these sets," Hughes says. Most of them can't be attributed to a specific child. The Chamberlayne family is represented in other objects at the museum. A wardrobe of theirs is on view at the Wickham House. "This set came to us in poor condition, and an auction house would never accept it," says Hughes. *DISPOSITION: Witnessed destruction.*





HANDS OFF

Mrs. A. Edloe Donnan donated these circa 1930 mismatched white kid-leather gloves. "We don't know whether they were ever worn," Hughes says. "If there was some reason that they wore mismatched gloves, that would be a wonderful story to know, but at this point there is no way for us to find out if or why that happened."

DISPOSITION: *Witnessed destruction.*

CONTAINS HERITAGE

The state-supported Pamunkey Pottery School of the 1930s-40s produced decorative vases for the tourist trade. This piece was used for generations as an educational tool by The Valentine. Hughes says, "Now that we have recognized tribes in Virginia, we've decided to return this to the Pamunkey tribe, who are looking forward to getting the vase back."





COVER ME

A coverlet from the 1820s or '30s, was made from materials grown and spun in Botetourt (later Roanoke) County. The piece came through the Gish family, descended from German settlers who arrived in the state following the American Revolution. "This should go to an institution in western Virginia," says Hughes.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Consultant Wendy Jessup, whose specialty is preventive conservation, has assisted The Valentine in its deaccessioning process. She first came to Richmond in 2017 when a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities brought her to the museum from Washington, D.C. — where she's consulted for the Smithsonian, among others — to analyze The Valentine's general collection and review proposed architectural improvements.

"Most people — me — think of a place in terms of square feet," says William J. Martin, The Valentine's director for more than 25 years. "Well, Wendy came and talked about how much space things take up. If it's a sculpture, for

example, it sits there and doesn't occupy a bunch of room, but people have to walk around to look at it."

Jessup determined that if The Valentine kept collecting at its current rate, that within a quarter century, storage and exhibition of its items would

require a 400,000-square-foot building.

Martin blinks, agape. "Well, I don't know from 400,000 square feet. What does that mean? We looked at it, and that's about the size of the terminal building of Broad Street Station — the Science Museum of Virginia."

This led to The Valentine reexamining its fundamental purpose. "We'd been asking the wrong question," Martin says. "What dawned on us is not, 'Where are we going to store all these collections?' but, 'What collections do we need to have and add to?'"

Thus began the museum's effort to reassess its holdings. "The Valentine has a really wonderful opportunity to look at what they've got and critically examine the stories they want to tell across the full spectrum of what it's like to have lived — and live — in Richmond," Jessup says. "To their credit, The >

LOVE OFFERING

"Cupid's Sanctum," an 1867 wood engraving from Harper's Weekly, depicts love as a battlefield. "This was probably purchased from a rare book dealer," Hughes says, "and it's got a Valentine's theme, but the subject has nothing to do with Richmond."

DISPOSITION: Sale at public auction. If no interest, witnessed destruction.



NO VIEW HERE

Virginia Lee Kiser's etching, "Blackwell-Thames River, London" isn't related to Richmond. Kiser (1884?-1957), originally from Roanoke, later moved to Los Angeles. "This piece is going to Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke," Hughes says. "They're excited for the prospect, and there's a higher chance of it being seen by more people there."



Valentine is making a concerted effort to tell all these stories of an interesting and vibrant place. It's not just about rich white guys in suits."

SHOULD IT STAY OR SHOULD IT GO?

Not every city can boast of an institution like The Valentine. The devotion of the museum for more than a century to collecting, preserving and interpreting Richmond stories evolved into compelling exhibitions, intriguing tours and worthwhile community events.

Mann Satterfield Valentine II parlayed a meat nutrient extract he devised to improve his dying wife's health into a business, Valentine's Meat Juice, which financially supported his propensity toward collecting things — many things. Mann Jr. and his artist/historian brother, Edward, enjoyed similar interests. At Mann's 1893 death, his bequest left a lifetime of acquisitions and the 1812 Wickham House with the organizing principle for a museum. The Valentine Museum, the first private museum in the city of Richmond, opened in 1898.

Edward assumed the role of president, which he held until his death in 1930.

"Some of what [Mann Jr.] got hold of in the earliest days came from the first Virginia Museum on Capitol Square," Martin explains. That museum, open from 1817 through 1832, featured an assortment of arrowheads, fossils, plaster casts of classical sculpture, oil paintings and creatures both taxidermied and living. The ambitious project couldn't support itself from Richmond's population of 10,000 (half enslaved), many of whom could not afford to pay the 50-cent entry fee more than once (half that for children and, on occasion, "people of color"). Despite innovative programming that included nighttime entertainment, the display of a mechanical chess player and fireworks, the museum failed and orphaned about 20,000 objects. The Valentine family acquired some of them, although how many and which ones isn't clear. When The Valentine opened as a museum, those old Virginia Museum pieces served as a ready-made core for exhibitions.

As a result, "we have these ethnographic objects that have nothing to do with Richmond," Martin says. "We have Pacific Northwest indigenous materials — wouldn't it be wonderful to return these to the tribes? So we need to find an institution in that part of the world which can properly receive them."

Closer to home, a vase made by the Pamunkey Pottery School during the 1930s-'40s and sold for the tourist trade, came to The Valentine for educational purposes. The vase will be returned to the Pamunkey tribe, which has a museum and cultural center of its own.

Leslie Cheek Jr., the VMFA's theatrical and enthusiastic director from 1948-68, inherited from his father 20 eclectic shaving mugs. Somehow, they ended up in the Valentine's collection.

Cheek's family's Nashville estate, Cheekwood, is today a house museum and botanical garden. Martin called to ask if they would like the shaving mugs back.

"And their curator's jaw dropped," says Martin, imitating the gesture. "What? You mean you have them?" A period photograph of the room allowed the >

Cheekwood curators to return the shaving mugs to their exact former arrangement.

The mugs are just one of the many objects for which The Valentine seeks a happy return.

Museums and archives realize that since they now and will continue to have limited resources, they must identify low-performance pieces.

Hughes explains: "Objects that sit on shelves with no associative provenance, no story, that aren't in exhibition condition or in condition so that a researcher can come and access [them], they are in the museum world called 'lazy objects.'"

ALWAYS EVOLVING

"A finished museum is a dead one," declared Laura Bragg, Valentine director from 1928-30, a time when a woman holding such a position of authority was rare. Helen McCormack, Bragg's intimate friend, succeeded her as director from 1930-40. McCormack oversaw the relocation of Edward V. Valentine's sculpture studio to Clay Street. Both women understood The Valentine's mission even when the son of its founder, Granville G. Valentine, seemed at times to lose sight.

Granville, who succeeded to the museum's presidency, wanted materials assembled by Algernon and Mary Hammond Sullivan brought into the museum's collection because he seems to have believed money might follow the accession. Neither Bragg nor McCormack felt the assortment of decorative works and paintings would bolster the museum's mission. Martin paraphrases letters written by the women in their anxiety: "If we take this material in, it'll be an embarrassment, we'll be run out of the museum world," he recounts, "and between them they're saying, 'Mr. Valentine keeps calling, when will there be a Sullivan show?' And they're wondering how they can avoid committing to this."

The "Sullivan donation" came — and went. Museums have in the past accepted objects to fill interpretive gaps until better quality pieces come along. The majority of the Sullivan Collection underwent gradual deaccession.

Programs evolve, too. Before the creation of other Richmond museums, The Valentine took the cultural lead. Prior to the 1936 formation of the VMFA, many Richmonders' acquaintance with anything resembling fine art came from Valentine exhibitions. Later, supplemental history, science and arts education — offered to children regardless of race — evolved into what ultimately became the Children's Museum and the Science Museum of Virginia.

Today, The Valentine continues to redefine its connections to the city and beyond. A community conversation series delves into the evolution of Richmond's persistent issues, recently exploring transportation, access to green spaces, the city's eviction and housing challenges, and more. Its Richmond History Tours explore Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond's murals and city neighborhoods. Its annual History Makers awards recognize good works in the community. Current exhibitions include "#BallotBattle: Richmond's Struggle for Suffrage" and "Voices From Richmond's Hidden Epidemic," featuring oral histories and portraits of Richmonders affected by HIV/AIDS.

SOMETIMES, HEADLAMPS

On the strength of the Jessup study and their own realizations, the museum board and the staff embarked on a six-month self-examination last year. This led to 20 meetings of the collections group. They asked rigorous questions: Does it represent our community? What story is not getting told? How is this better addressed? Will this or that object have a better life in another institution?



TO SAY
THAT THERE
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EMOTIONAL
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WOULD BE
A LIE.

Bill Martin, Valentine Director

"We did [the study] in a very Valentine way," Neelan A. Markel, chair of the museum's board of directors, recalls. This entailed bus tours to Highland Park, Barton Heights and Fulton Hill and conversations about the importance of these neighborhoods within the larger scope of our city. The museum conducted surveys to determine what it lacked in its exhibitions and what people wanted to see more of.

"To say that there weren't some emotional moments while we're doing this would be a lie," Martin recalls.

Jessup offers that in her line of work, she takes the long-term view. "The preservation and care is about the people who come after us, so that the children and their great-grandchildren can understand how we lived to better appreciate how they got to where they are."

Which is heady stuff.

"We've had some quite serious meetings," Markel says. "And we've had fun meetings. You can and should do both. It's necessary for the process. The other day, some of the staff were in a storage facility wearing headlamps to get a better look >

at things. I dread cleaning out my attic. They're loving it."

Some objects present a quandary. The Valentine takes out printed public announcements to describe an object to see if anybody can claim it. If, after doing their due diligence, a proper home cannot be found, then a determination is made between auction or "witnessed destruction" — that is, an item is disposed of so it cannot be retrieved from a landfill.

"We are fully sharing what we're doing and how we're doing it," Markel explains. "This is an exciting time to be at The Valentine."

'IS THIS MR. VALENTINE?'

One of the unique challenges of The Valentine is that people want to donate objects to the institution. "Everybody's Marie Kondo-ing," Hughes says of the Japanese organization expert who inspired a movement to de-clutter thorough her books and television

program. An upheaval in the relationship between people and their things is occurring across the culture. "The Baby Boomers are getting rid of stuff," she adds.

Auction houses are overwhelmed. And have you been to a flea market lately?

Each donation is considered, although some must be politely turned away, like inherited family silver. Or decorative pitchers.

A figurative sculpture by artist and historian Edward V. Valentine, whose re-created studio is a part of the museum, however, would be a suitable acquisition, but not necessarily a given.

In 2017, the city of New Orleans removed a statue of Confederate president Jefferson Davis created by Valentine that is a copy of Richmond's Monument Avenue statue. Martin received a call from an official. "Is this Mr. Valentine?" came the query. "No, but I'm the director," Martin replied. "I work here."

The official related how the artist receives the right of first refusal for the return of removed public art.

"Well, I appreciate your offer," Martin responded, "but we already have too many Jefferson Davises in this town."

However, should the recommendations of the Monument Avenue Commission be implemented, and Richmond's Davis statue be removed from its Monument Avenue perch, what better place for the figure to go than into the space that made him, especially since some argue the statues belong in museums?

"We have a studio that can take one more [Valentine sculpture]," Martin says. "And why not reinterpret monument-making in the early part of the 20th century? And examine the artist's role in perpetuating the Lost Cause? Edward Valentine would make [a statue] for anybody who'd pay him. There's a whole piece to this story that we are perfectly suited to tell." ■

SUMMER Discovery PROGRAM

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