

Uncommon Collections (of Robert Leopardi) More Than Corkscrews

Story by Claire Rogers, Photography by Bob Rogers for Desert Leaf Magazine June 2022

Corkscrews are able to open much more than wine bottles. Tiny corkscrews have been used to open cork-sealed bottles containing medicinal potions or household goods. The functions of the diverse types of corkscrews in Robert Leopardi's collection, however, are a bonus to something akin to an art collection.

Leopardi studied history in college and had a close friend whose family owned an art gallery in Princeton, New Jersey.

"When we were in our 20s, we'd hang out at his townhouse filled with all this wonderful Arts and Crafts furniture," says Leopardi, "so I fell in love with this stuff from the Arts and Crafts period."

Leopardi went on to become a wine broker, and his wife, Marie-France, was in the travel business, so they traveled a lot.



Animals are frequently depicted on collectible corkscrews and bottle stoppers.

“I was collecting pieces from the American Arts and Crafts period, and I started seeing these corkscrews. I would find these great old corkscrews for nothing,” says Leopardi. “It grew to where I was bringing back corkscrews from every trip we took.”

Through his research, Leopardi was learning the true value of corkscrews that he was able to buy for as little as \$20.

“I was figuring out that the corkscrews I was finding were worth a lot more,” he recalls.

Leopardi now belongs to two international corkscrew-collecting clubs, one of which is the Canadian Corkscrew Collectors Club (CCCC).

A few years ago, Leopardi was invited to join the International Correspondence of Corkscrew Addicts. The ICCA is known as the most prestigious corkscrew collectors’ organization in the world. There are only 50 members, and membership is by invitation only, according to Leopardi.

The collectors’ meetings alternate between the US and Europe.

“Our last trip, before COVID, was a trip to the ICCA in the Lofoton archipelago of Norway,” says Leopardi, “and then we had a day and a half to get to the CCCC meeting in Stratford-upon-Avon.”

Part of the fun of collecting is spending time with friends. “We’ve met some incredible people from all over the world,” says Leopardi. “I would say that collecting corkscrews isn’t just about collecting corkscrews; it’s about the people, it’s about the experiences, it’s about the friendships that you make, and the whole package. Obviously, COVID has put a real damper on that, but we still have virtual meetings, and we still have a lot of fun.”

Figural corkscrews are just one category within Leopardi’s collection, and a subset of those, the celluloid figurals, are particularly captivating. After its invention by Alexander Parkes in 1856, celluloid grew into widespread use as a substitute for increasingly rare ivory. In the 1890s, celluloid was used to create the now very collectible Gay Nineties corkscrews styled as spreading ladies’ legs. The early celluloid figurals also included figures of mermaids and alligators.

Another material substitute for ivory—the tagua, or corozo, nut—was used to create unique corkscrews made in Central America and South America. This fine-grained nut, also called vegetable ivory, is durable and workable and the perfect size for a head-shaped figural corkscrew.

“I started out with collecting furniture, but I always like to take things a little further, so we’d stop at antique stores, and I’d see corkscrews I thought were cool, so I’d pick them up,” says Leopardi. “That’s the thing; I’m in the wine business.”



Most of Leopardi’s favorite corkscrews have interesting stories, best shared among friends.



Details in the figural corkscrews can be particularly charming.

And the perfect wine, opened on a perfect evening, can open up endless possibilities.

“What’s really incredible is that famous winemakers will visit and come into the house, and they never forget me,” Leopardi says, “so that opens up incredible doors. When we travel, we always get to go see these people.”

And they stay in touch, according to Leopardi. In thanks for his hospitality, winemakers may send him a book or collectible corkscrews. Likewise, Leopardi gifts memorable corkscrews to new contacts. And Leopardi is always happy to help new collectors with learning the ins and outs of corkscrews.

According to Leopardi, most wine producers are now using STELVIN screw caps on wines that are meant to be consumed within a few years, so corkscrews aren’t as widely used anymore. He notes that the corkscrew antiques of the future may be more limited. Although there are some decorative pieces, there are not so many that have the potential to be around for a long time. Nobody is making great modern day counterparts to the older corkscrews, says the collector.

“In the wine business, I use my history every day,” acknowledges Leopardi. “And in corkscrew collecting, the decorative arts [are] where my love of history really comes out. I love the fact that I can imagine someone in 1903 seeing these pieces and buying [them]. There is a history behind every single piece in here,” adds Leopardi, gesturing to his collection. “You wonder what bottles of wine [the owners] opened, ... [the corkscrew’s] history.”



Celluloid figural corkscrews became popular.