

Justin Fichelson

Justin Fichelson's approach to collecting is as spirited and expansive as the stories behind the objects he treasures. A lifelong devotee of history, beauty, and craftsmanship, he follows instinct and emotion rather than trends, building a collection defined by passion, provenance, and a love of the hunt. In the conversation that follows, Fichelson shares the inspirations, discoveries, and defining moments that have shaped his eclectic eye and ever-evolving collection.

What was the first piece you ever collected, and what drew you to it?

I have very eclectic taste. My great passions are Old Masters and decorative arts, but I also love photography and modern art. I collect items that I love, first and foremost, and the first piece I acquired was a photo by Terry O'Neill called *The Morning After*. It's an iconic Hollywood image of Faye Dunaway with her Oscar at the Beverly Hills Hotel the morning after she won. I simply love the photo – the colors, the atmosphere, and the glamour that it exudes.

Tell us the story behind your favorite piece – or the one that best represents you – and why it holds that place in your heart.

It's so hard to choose a favorite piece and I really don't have one; it's like asking which child is your favorite! Overall, I am most excited about a pair of early 18th-century William Kent chairs that were originally made for Ditchley Park, a splendid Georgian estate built for the 2nd Earl of Lichfield, grandson of King Charles II and courtesan Barbara Villiers. Following a private visit and lunch at the magnificent Blenheim Palace – in celebration of King Charles III's coronation – our host, led us to Ditchley Park for a tour and tea. In the 1930s, Ditchley and all its contents were purchased by politician Ronald Tree and his wife, designer Nancy Lancaster.



COLLECTORS

IN CONVERSATION



Interviews by Helen Allen,
Executive Director of The Winter Show



Previous Page: Justin Fichelson in his dining room pictured with a painting of London, a View of the Thames with Westminster Abbey by Joseph Nicholls, c. 1742, courtesy of Angie Silvy Photography.

A pair of George II giltwood side chairs attributed to Thomas Roberts, c. 1730. Image courtesy of the Ann & Gordon Getty Collection.

During the war years, Churchill often stayed at Ditchley with his family, as it was close to his ancestral home, Blenheim, and considered a safe, untargeted location. In the late 1940s, following the Trees' divorce, all the original furnishings – including the chairs – were auctioned. Ann and Gordon Getty acquired the chairs in the 1980s, and Ann, renowned for her love of textiles, reupholstered them in 18th-century crimson velvet set against an ivory background. When I saw the chairs after visiting Ditchley Park, I knew it was a match made in the stars, and I was meant to have them. After acquiring them, I found out that they once flanked the grand entrance to the Getty's San Francisco mansion, which made them all the more special. They are incredibly sculptural and beautiful, but the provenance and story behind them excite me most!

How have your personal experiences, background, or culture influenced what you choose to collect?

I've always had a great love of history and anything and everything with aesthetic beauty. As a child growing up in the heart of San Francisco, I would slip away to the Legion of Honor and the de Young Museum, often roaming the galleries alone until the paintings became as familiar – and as dear – as old friends. They became windows into another time and place. I vividly remember, as a child, reading an article about Ann Getty's San Francisco home and being captivated by the remarkable provenance of each piece. The idea that furniture, art, and rugs could be more than functional – that they could hold stories and historical significance – immediately

resonated with me. Since then, provenance has been paramount, often representing the greatest value an object can hold.

How has your taste evolved over time? Was there a specific piece or artist that shifted your perspective on collecting?

There are so many great things out there! For example, when I began, I wasn't interested in chinoiserie, but recently I have become very interested in it. As I sadly can't have everything, I've become more discerning about what I buy. The collectors that I identify with most, when it comes to their approach to collecting, would be those who collect everything. While I generally gravitate towards an English aesthetic, I don't focus specifically on any one style or period, and I will acquire anything regardless of where it comes from. Beauty and craftsmanship transcend time periods, styles, and countries of origin.

While I do think it's important to be selective with what you collect, I think it is equally important to mix high and low and make a space feel comfortable and lived-in, not stiff and cold. Ann Getty mixed different time periods and styles and the interior of her San Francisco mansion exuded personality and taste. Her home's "Turkish Bedroom" was spectacular – antique Turkish wall paneling with sections upholstered in William Morris textiles. Like William Randolph Hearst, who collected everything he loved, Ms. Getty created a collection with unmistakable personality. The same can be said for the Rothschilds, JP Morgan, and Henry Clay Frick.

All these collectors built distinct collections that reflected their personality. I believe you can know someone through what they collect, and your interiors and possessions should reflect your personality. There was once a grand tradition of building magnificent collections; today this practice seems to have become a lost art.

What do you look for when deciding to acquire a new piece – historical relevance, the artist's story, or something else entirely?

I collect based on four criteria: provenance, historical relevance, story, and – most importantly – love. You must love what you collect. I can instantly tell when a collection was designed *for* someone rather than *by* them. When advisors curate an entire collection, it shows immediately. Every piece I acquire must speak to me personally, and I prefer objects with known histories – they add layers of meaning to both the piece and the interior. When a painting or object carries a story, it transforms your surroundings. You're not just living with beautiful things; you're surrounded by history with inspiring tales to tell.



A pair of Edwardian silver-mounted stag's foot candle holders by Charles Edwards, crafted in 1901. Image courtesy of Sotheby's.



The Morning After by Terry O'Neill, the first artwork acquired by Fichelson, on display in the collector's home, courtesy of Angie Silvy Photography.

Is there a piece you regret not buying – or one you're still searching for?

One notable piece that got away was an 18th-century English tortoiseshell tea caddy belonging to the Duke of Hamilton. Originally made for English collector William Beckford, it bore his silver-engraved initials on the lid.

What's the most surprising or "out of place" piece in your collection, and why did you choose it?

I became the proud owner of an extraordinary pair of Edwardian candlesticks made from stag hooves and mounted in silver. King Edward VII shot the deer, had them crafted by a premier London silversmith, and gifted them to his friend the Duke of Hamilton – complete with engravings marking the hunt's location and date. When they came up for auction, I got into a fierce bidding war. Yes, they're literally deer hooves, but as only the second owner outside the ducal family, I regret nothing! Their incredible backstory made them irresistible.



Niche with a c.1775 George III ormolu table clock, early 19th-century miniature table globes from the Ann & Gordon Getty Collection, and Giacomo Guardi's *The Rialto Bridge, Venice*. Image courtesy of Angie Silvy Photography.

How do you display or live with your collection? Has it influenced the way you design or experience your home?

Over half my collection is in art storage – there's simply no room for it all. My home showcases a curated mix of photography, modern art, and Old Masters. My friend who's head curator at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco placed each artwork. Working with him taught me that placement is everything – how you display a piece transforms how you experience it daily. It's given me profound respect for museum curators; their work is truly an art form. I'm also fortunate to have loaned a Salomon van Ruysdael to San Francisco's Legion of Honor. My dream is to have a proper *kunstkammer* – a space in New York or London packed floor-to-ceiling with antiques, Old Masters, and decorative arts, just like those glorious 18th-century rooms where paintings covered every inch of wall space.

What motivates you to keep collecting? Has there ever been a moment you considered stopping, and what reignited your passion?

Collecting is a combination of two things: an innate collecting bug and early exposure. For me, it's a healthy addiction with no off switch – I love every aspect of it. Nothing relaxes me more than browsing auction lots, and nothing thrills me more than winning a coveted piece. The hunt is a big part of the excitement and fun in collecting.

Do you collect with a theme or narrative in mind, or is it purely instinctual?

It's purely instinctual. Collector Jayne Wrightsman apparently said, "I don't collect anything, but I collect everything" – that resonates deeply with me. If something is beautiful, unusual, and draws me in (and is remotely affordable), I go for it. I don't believe in perfectly curated collections. I buy what I love and what inspires me.

How do you balance personal passion with investment value when collecting? Which matters more to you?

First rule: buy what you love. I live for the hunt—finding unusual, special pieces at great prices. You'll find far better deals in Old Masters, antiques, and decorative arts than in modern or contemporary work. If selected with good taste, quality pieces generally appreciate over time.

What advice would you give to young or new collectors just starting their journey?

Discover what sets your soul on fire – then chase it relentlessly! Once you find what truly excites you, focus on that. Collecting should ignite pure joy, so it must be something you absolutely love no matter the genre. If it doesn't thrill you, why collect it at all?



Spencer Park

Spencer Park's collecting began with a spark of curiosity that deepened into a passion for objects with rich histories. His first major acquisition – a 19th-century Korean *soban* once owned by the Rockefellers – opened his eyes to the power of pieces that carry cultural and personal narratives. Today, his instinctive, history-driven approach shapes an eclectic collection. In the conversation that follows, he reflects on how that formative discovery continues to guide him.

What was the first piece you ever collected, and what drew you to it?

I started collecting back in high school and college, first with coins minted in Britain and her colonies between the 1700s and early 1900s. But my collection truly began in earnest with a 19th-century Korean low table – a *soban* – that I bought at Christie's Peggy and David Rockefeller auction in May 2018. I had just arrived in New York City to start my first full-time job after graduating from University of Virginia, when my wife, Wonka, suggested we stop by Christie's that evening. That detour changed everything.



Above: Group of Wedgwood blue jasperware table articles. Image courtesy of DOYLE Auctioneers & Appraisers.

The night of the auction, I began casually flipping through the catalogue. The Rockefellers, it turned out, had amassed an impressive number of Korean antiques. Then I saw it: a soban, the small, low table once found in every pre-industrial Korean household. Its simple, iconic form carried centuries of tradition, and this one had the added allure of having lived in the Rockefellers' Upper East Side mansion. The idea of letting it slip away felt unthinkable. When would I ever have another chance? My pulse quickened as the bidding opened. I gripped my paddle, reminding myself this was my very first auction. Numbers climbed, but so did my resolve. Then came my turn. Paddle 749 in the air – sold. I left that night not just with a soban, but with the first piece in what would become my serious collection.

Tell us the story behind your favorite piece – or the one that best represents you – and why it holds that place in your heart.

My favorite piece is the first piece that I ever collected – the soban. When I brought the table home, I turned it over and spotted something Christie's hadn't mentioned: a faint, almost illegible word in Chinese characters on the underside. After some painstaking deciphering and a bit of research, I discovered it was the old name of a Seoul district, used before 1914. Suddenly, the soban's journey came into focus – its life in Korea, its passage halfway across the world, and its years in the Rockefellers' home. Winning the bid was thrilling; uncovering its hidden history was unforgettable. Now it sits atop a Georgian bookcase, commanding my living room – and my heart.

How have your personal experiences, background, or culture influenced what you choose to collect?

I'm a history-loving Korean expatriate in Manhattan and an unabashed Anglophile, having grown up immersed in Austen, Wilde, Dickens, C.S. Lewis, Kipling, Gilbert & Sullivan, and Blackadder. Living between these cultural spheres has shaped my collecting. I naturally gravitate toward Korean antiques, but due to strict laws that prevent anything more than 50 years old from leaving the country, they are difficult to acquire outside Korea. This scarcity has pushed me to explore other Asian works, especially Qing Chinese furniture, porcelain, and snuff bottles.

I am also fascinated by pieces that blend cultures, like my Paul Jacoulet (1896-1960) woodblock prints. As a Frenchman who spent most of his life in Japan, Jacoulet combined traditional *ukiyo-e* techniques with a distinctly European touch. This cultural duality also fuels my love of English art from the Georgian and Regency periods – an age of neoclassical refinement and romantic flourish, often accented with Greco-Roman and imagined “oriental” motifs, but with more restraint than Louis XVI opulence. Nothing captures this balance better than Wedgwood Jasperware. I own several pieces and admire how Josiah Wedgwood created pottery that honored classical antiquity while remaining distinctly English. A large Jasperware piece often graces my dining table when I entertain, and it never fails to spark conversation.



Is there a piece you regret not buying – or one you're still searching for?

So many. Earlier this year, I was outbid for a late Joseon Dynasty *chaekgeori* (a still life painting highlighting books and scholarly objects) screen that I was hoping to win dearly at the Freeman's Asian Works of Art auction. What made this piece stand out amongst other numerous Korean *chaekgeori* was that, in addition to its undisputable royal provenance given its stylistic refinement, the painter Lee Taek-gyun had left a seal mark bearing his name – something which Korean court painters rarely did. I find *chaekgeori* fascinating, and I hope to add one to my collection in the near future, regardless of whether it bears its painter's name.



Above: Korean Ancestral Rite Tables, 18-19th century. Image courtesy of Spencer Park.

Left: A Korean soban, one of the first objects in Park's collection. Image courtesy of Christie's.



How has your taste evolved over time? Was there a specific piece or artist that shifted your perspective on collecting?

My taste hasn't changed all that much since I began collecting. I am a bit more old-fashioned than my peers (I go to work in a full suit and tie five days a week!) and have always preferred old things over new and trendy ones. In a similar vein, my taste and perspectives on what is sublime have been very slow to change, if at all.

What do you look for when deciding to acquire a new piece – instinct, historical relevance, the artist's story, or something else entirely?

Historical relevance is probably the biggest determining factor in acquiring a new piece for me. I am a big history buff and often visualize the moment of time in which the item was made or used. Afterwards, I begin to notice the other factors such as the intricate details, the finishes, or other unique aspects about the work.

What's the most surprising or "out of place" piece in your collection, and why did you choose it?

I have a small collection of Toby Jugs that is somewhat out of place compared to the rest of my collection. I never set out to collect them – they simply surfaced from time to time, and I couldn't resist them and how funny-looking they are. My wife, however, hates them and insists they take up far too much space. As a result, the Toby Jugs have been exiled from our apartment and now line the shelves of my office at the firm. My colleagues like to tease that my workspace looks less like an attorney's office and more like that of an art dealer.

Above: A pair of late Qing Dynasty hardwood chairs.

Right: *La Mariée* by Paul Jacoulet (1896-1960).

Images courtesy of Spencer Park.

How do you display or live with your collection? Has it influenced the way you design or experience your home?

My goal is to create a collection – despite cultural origins and material– that is both eclectic and harmonious. My living room is anchored by a Georgian mahogany bookcase, which is complemented by Qing hongmu yokeback side chairs, Korean pinewood sobans, and a Qing peking carpet. The theme is “East meets West,” but not in a way that is instantly apparent. To extend this collage onto the walls, I hung prints with no thematic or chronological overlap, achieving a unified but varied display – an 1879 etching of Midtown Manhattan with its vanished reservoir; a 1680 lithograph of Louis XIV’s visit to the Royal Academy; Jacques Onfroy de Breville’s illustration of the Children’s Crusade; an 1891 French map of East Asia; a Danish etching of ancient siege machines from an 18th-century encyclopedia; and a late-19th-century drawing by Léon Salles. The result is a space that sparks conversation whenever guests visit – though I sometimes get carried away explaining each piece. Even my tableware and drinkware echo the theme: many of my wine and champagne glasses are reproductions of Thomas Jefferson’s, excavated at Monticello.

What motivates you to keep collecting? Has there ever been a moment you considered stopping, and what reignited your passion?

It’s a bit of an addiction to be honest. As someone who loves history, the entire process – discovering an antique, researching it carefully, acquiring it, and then living with it – feels far more immersive than reading about the past or viewing objects behind glass in a museum. It gives me an indescribable thrill, as though I’m quite literally holding a piece of history in my hands. I also keep collecting because there is always something new that captures my imagination; any resolve to rein in my spending tends to vanish the moment I encounter a particularly compelling piece.

Do you collect with a theme or narrative in mind?

Cabinet of curiosities is the overarching theme that I have in mind. When I was little, more than a decade before that fateful night at Christie’s, I was infatuated with the descriptions of Georgian aristocrats’ and Victorian gentlemen’s cabinets of curiosities in English novels – this inspired my dream of having a cabinet of curiosities of my own. It is probably the reason why my collection is so eclectic. It is also why I like works that combine different elements and influences into one, such as the Jacoulet prints and chaekgeori I mentioned earlier.



How do you balance personal passion with investment value when collecting? Which matters more to you?

For me, personal passion far outweighs investment value. While I consider an object’s long-term value when buying, that should never be the main factor; collecting is not an efficient way to grow wealth, and markets fluctuate. Wedgwood Jasperware, for example, has lost much of its demand over the past two decades, yet I keep collecting it because I believe in its timeless beauty. Modern and contemporary art, though more popular and likely to appreciate in value, doesn’t speak to me. I realize that post-war works might (currently) be a better investment, but my passion lies with the “old stuff.”

What advice would you give to young or new collectors just starting their journey?

Don’t box yourself in too early – you risk missing something wonderful by rigidly sticking to specific themes or periods. Often, you only discover what you love by stumbling across it. And most importantly, be yourself. Collect what genuinely speaks to you, not what’s fashionable. I’m still learning, like everyone else, but I believe a good collector knows the difference between personal passion and outside opinion.

Helen Sunderland-Cohen

Director, The Sunderland Collection

For more than 30 years, The Sunderland Collection – founded by Dr. Neil Sunderland – has assembled an extraordinary archive of early cartographic material, spanning atlases, books, globes, and manuscripts from the early 13th to the late 17th centuries, with select Asian works into the early 1800s. Though the collection has no permanent physical space, it has been fully digitized and made publicly accessible through its online museum, Oculi-Mundi.com. The Sunderland Collection actively lends objects, supports scholarship, commissions contemporary artists, hosts conferences, and produces the award-winning podcast *What's Your Map?*

In the interview below, Helen Sunderland Cohen – the next Sunderland generation – discusses carrying this vision forward, as well as her own collecting passions, which include literary and world-building maps and modern and contemporary art, particularly photography.

What was the first piece you ever collected, and what drew you to it?

One of the earliest I can remember is an atlas by John Speed. It was the first atlas printed in English by an English person, and it covers the counties of the UK as well as town plans and the known world from a British perspective. The atlas has a beautiful original leather cover, with a raised oval decorative panel in the center. Inside the frontispiece is a beautiful hand-written text about John Speed and his "attainments." It always fascinated me because it is such a tactile object; that quality and the inscription make you imagine who else has picked up that atlas and read it. Since it is written in English rather than Latin or old Dutch, for example, it is very accessible and really triggers the imagination.





Speed's Atlas of the World - Hemisphere World Map

Speed dedicated *Theatre*, the first atlas of the British Isles, to King James VI, praising him as the "inlarger and uniter of the British Empire." The atlas was hugely popular, with multiple editions published during Speed's lifetime. The 1676 edition—widely regarded as the finest—combines *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* and *The Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World*, and includes newly prepared English maps of New England, Virginia, the Carolinas, Barbados, and Jamaica; it is also the last edition printed with text on the verso of the maps.



Tell us the story behind your favorite piece and why it holds that place in your heart.

My favorite piece varies depending on the day and the circumstances! One that I particularly enjoy and return to often is the world map in the *Rudimentum Novitiorum* from the late 1400s. The *Rudimentum* was a teaching encyclopedia for monks; it contains biblical history as well as genealogy and beautiful woodcut illustrations. The world map features both geographical information and legends. There are people, places, animals, Paradise with rivers flowing from it, a sun-and-moon tree, and other magical images. Each time I look at it, I find something new. It is a fantastic overview of what was known at the time, and a superb piece of graphic design.

Above: Hybrid mappa mundi world map, part of *The First Chronicles of the World with Printed Maps*, published in 1475.

The *Rudimentum Novitiorum* is the earliest known printed European/world chronicle to include maps. Written by an anonymous theologian as an educational work, it traces six ages of history from Creation to the contemporary era and features maps of the world and Palestine. This hand-colored volume is especially rare, with only a few comparable copies known.

Right: Speed's *Atlas of the World*, 1676, Map of the Invasion of the English in Ireland.



Helen Sunderland-Cohen shares a colorful tome from the Sutherland collection.



How have your personal experiences, background, or culture influenced what you choose to collect?

We try to be very focused because maps are such entrancing objects that it would be very easy to collect anything and everything! The Sunderland Collection focuses on objects that fit within its themes, represent the best quality we can obtain, and – if they are colored – feature original hand color. Since we are based in Switzerland, most of the objects are European, but we try to collect as broadly as possible and have been fortunate to acquire items from China, Japan, Nepal, Tibet, Korea, and the Ottoman Empire.

How has your taste evolved over time? Was there a specific piece or artist that shifted your perspective on collecting?

I think that for many collectors, taste evolves with looking and spending time with objects. The more that you look at different examples by the same mapmaker, of the same map or related objects, the more you can train your eye. You can also learn a great deal in general. The Sunderland Collection began with individual world maps and moved into atlases – partially because we were following the maps, and partially because the stories and connections that were evolving within the Collection really lent themselves to a broader range of objects. One item that shifted our perspective somewhat was the *Cadamosto Codex*, a 16th-century portolan (sea chart) atlas. It is an interesting example of beautiful cartography, the rich and varied contexts behind mapmaking – as well as the interplay between artisanal skills, intergenerational narratives, and atlases.

What do you look for when deciding to acquire a new piece?

Quality above everything, and whether it fits into our collection themes and timeframe.

Is there a piece you regret not buying – or one you are still searching for?

We have been extremely fortunate and privileged with what we have acquired so far. There are a few items on our wish list, but we have so many stories and research to tease out in the existing contents of the collection that we are kept quite busy! It is interesting, I have found that even with a wish list, there are many maps and atlases that we never thought of, that we did not know existed, or that we never believed would become available, and so the process of collecting is a real adventure with lots of surprises and wonderful opportunities. For example, we recently acquired a prototype atlas that was prepared around 1630 but never actually published. As we learn more about the field, we also find more and more narrative tissue among the objects. Collecting has become a never-ending journey of discovery.

What is the most surprising or “out of place” piece in your collection, and why did you choose it?

That would probably be a very old carved stone tablet from the Valdivia culture (modern-day Ecuador). The exact purpose of these tablets is not entirely known, but it is believed they are votive, and could be cosmograms. We have not yet had time to commission proper scholarship on this piece but hope to do so. It is a lovely example, and it was important to us to present more world views in the collection than just the European lens.



Lineage of Adam and Eve; illustrated Letter A from *The First Chronicles of the World with Printed Maps*.

How do you display or live with your collection? Has it influenced the way you design or experience your home?

The majority of objects in the map collection are in fine art storage. However, we do live with some of them. Having maps in one's home is delightful as they are beautiful artworks in their own right – the etchings and colors are fabulous, for example – but they are also fascinating, evocative objects to revisit and engage with.

What motivates you to keep collecting? Has there ever been a moment you considered stopping, and what reignited your passion?

Deciding to open the Sunderland Collection to the public and to make it as accessible and useful as possible has been a hugely inspiring and revelatory decision. It has given the collection energy, and a purpose, and it has led us to meet great people and learn a huge amount. It is a passion project for sure!

Do you collect with a theme or narrative in mind?

Yes. The themes are: the evolution of human knowledge across cultures, development of cartography, and artistry of maps.

How do you balance personal passion with investment value when collecting? Which matters more to you?

We always try to collect the best or most appropriate version of what we are looking for. We spend a lot of time thinking about each acquisition, checking the provenance, researching other examples, and evaluating the condition of every specific item. When the item is a book or atlas, we think about which edition we would like and why. These considerations help us to determine whether the value and price of an acquisition is something we are comfortable with. The maps are not for sale, and so we do not look at them as investments per se.

What advice would you give to young or new collectors just starting their journey?

Look as often as you can at as much as you can, even if it is not directly relevant to what you are collecting. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Explore multi-disciplinary connections as they can be extremely rich and rewarding. Have fun. And never worry about what other people think of your taste!