

focus on history:

Antique Eyeglasses Collection

"COLLECTOR PROFILE" BY STEPHANIE FINNEGAN

Dr. David Fleishman parlayed his ophthalmology expertise into a new vocation as a collector, curator, and crusader for the historical importance of vision aids.

Ophthalmology is the field of medical science that deals with the diseases, physiology, and anatomy of the eye. For over 30 years, David A. Fleishman was a highly respected eye physician/surgeon. During many of those years, he held the prestigious position of chief of ophthalmology at the Good Samaritan Medical Center in Brockton, Mass. Retiring in 2001 due to problems with his hands, Fleishman did not abandon his passion for or interest in the human eye. An inveterate history buff and a serious collector, he poured his energy into perfecting a Web site that would serve as a major resource and archival destination for people who are anxious to learn about the developments of optical aids. Titled *Antique Spectacles and Other Vision Aids: The On-Line Museum and Encyclopedia of Vision Aids* (www.antiquestpectacles.com), Fleishman's cyber creation is a celebration and testament to a host of discoveries often taken for granted and dismissed. Drawing upon his ophthalmology pedigree, he is determined not to let these advancements be overlooked.

"Back in 2003, following a couple



Dr. David A. Fleishman poses with a portion of the Madame Heymann eye boxes collection. "It was the greatest in history, and disappeared in 1925. I discovered it, along with the eyeglasses inside, buried in museum storage near Paris."

Leather-framed nose glasses are the Holy Grail for collectors. "This image shows, on the left, my first purchase, to begin my collection over 30 years ago," Fleishman narrates. "It is a treasure, as is that other example."

years of research, I established this educational Web site. Initially, I felt there was a story that needed to be told regarding the evolution of the optical lens. As vision aids, it was obvious that eyeglasses, in particular, have been one of the greatest inventions of all times. Yet, their developmental history has been an underappreciated and under-recognized subject. I visited a few local historical societies and museums where the curators and collections managers seemed to have little knowledge of the variety of antique optical frames and eyeglass cases," Fleishman recounts.

Convinced that this was an untold story that should be expounded upon, the physician focused his energy on a massive undertaking — a Web site that spans centuries and continents with its content. "There are currently over 6,800 identified and credited images on this Web site. They are scattered on nearly 360 webpages, representing over 845 institutions and about 150 private collectors. My own database of images is comprised of more than 125,000 digital photos," elaborates Fleishman. "So, this research and the resulting Web site have become quite comprehensive, and there is even more material on the way."

Since its inception, the Web site has attracted the attention of lay-people, medical professionals, and museum personnel. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation has called upon his expertise as they labored to recreate "spectacles with tinted lenses" that would have been appropriate for the Jeffersonian era. Fleishman also reveals that "curators have reached out with inquiries related to artifacts that have just been sitting in dark depots for a few hundred years. All sorts of discoveries are being made due to this extensive research effort." Like an ocular Indiana Jones, he personally unearthed a rare cache of eye boxes that had been long forgotten, buried and languishing in Paris. It was a global coup.

At press time, Fleishman was extremely busy developing a presentation based upon his exhaustive research on President Lincoln's eyeglasses stored



at the Library of Congress. He was set to debut his in-depth discoveries and brand-new conclusions regarding the 16th president's optical aids — a treasure trove of new information and facts concerning Lincoln's two sets of eyeglasses, and more insights into which of the pairs was the Great Emancipator's favorite lenses.

Like a hero out of a Dan Brown *Da Vinci Code* mystery novel, Fleishman had to do intense research of antique photographs, news clippings of the day, correspondence, and patents to weave together his new revelations.

On his Web site, he has an exciting retelling of his early investigation into Lincoln's lenses, which he summarized as:

"Beginning probably in 1854, Abraham Lincoln was associated with a number of different reading glasses. However, we can only be 100 percent certain of his ownership of the two pair found in his pockets after the tragic April 14, 1865, assassination.... The detailed history of these two gold glasses remains incomplete, but the smaller ones have now been closely examined and they have a lot going for them. They are rare (only four known in gold), convenient, portable, elegant,



A group of artifacts made by John McAllister Sr. He fit four early presidents and started the famous five-generation dynasty, which lasted 173 years. McAllister is "the father of opticianry," known for the first optical shop in the U.S.

and compact. They fold at the nose bridge, are patented with the stamped date 'Jan 4 1859' and ... were worn by one of the most famous persons in history. It is my opinion that they were Lincoln's favorite, since he can be associated with them beginning in 1862 and was photographed with no other reading glasses during the years he was bespectacled," Fleishman theorized.

"Congratulations to the Library of Congress because they hold two particular Lincoln treasures — and one could be considered the rarest, greatest, most significant pair of eyeglasses ever created during the past 700 years — truly world-class in all aspects," Fleishman concluded in his initial May 2012 treatise. The past year has witnessed more

discoveries and more insight into the significance of Lincoln's eyeglasses.

In his personal collection, the historian has spectacles and cases that predate Lincoln and his storied pairs. Among his 525 "fascinating objects," Fleishman calculates that many are from pre-1850. He estimates that about a third of the collection is displayed in some manner at his home: "In addition, there are hanging prints and colorful illustrations, which have become conversation pieces when people visit. I have also assembled a nice library of illustrated books on this subject. Some are considered desirable antiques because they were printed in very limited numbers well over 100 years ago as well."

His appreciation and knowledge of these artifacts have deepened over the 30 years since he first purchased a pair of eye-catching lenses at a Brimfield, Mass. antiques mart: "I became attracted to several antique eyeglasses, including one particular pair with a leather frame and no side arms. The lenses were clouded and cracked, but these were so unusual. For \$25, I bought them, along with their simple carved wooden box. Thus, my collection had begun. It turns out these were circa early 17th century (including the original box). In recent years, it has become quite obvious this rare variety is coveted by advanced collectors. They are considered the Holy Grail, since so few of them exist in museum and private collections worldwide."

Adding to that initial "lucky" find are hundreds of other pieces that Fleishman has selected from flea markets, auctions, eBay®, and antiques shops. "I have particularly enjoyed occasionally trading with other advanced collectors from Europe. We

are able to fill voids in each other's collections, which has been fun," the 69-year-old admits.

This network of international, similarly-biased collectors has also helped Fleishman with the Web site project. Though he is the self-described primary "driving force," he has been assisted by "over 1,625 educators worldwide, who have cooperated, collaborated, and contributed along the way. We have friends worldwide now and the informative Web site is making a difference since



An international display that showcases objects of different media that span the 17th to 20th centuries. The unusual items originated from Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan.

it gets more than one million hits per month, internationally."

This network of knowledgeable experts helps Fleishman answer questions posed via e-mail and to eyeball proffered photos that are sent in as well. Many letter-writers seek advice, help, and general information regarding the chronology of vision aids. "In creating this Web site, and with the help of

a brilliant webmaster, I have been able to present lots of history and lots of images to all the visitors who wander to the site," Fleishman shares.

In 1999, *Newsweek* magazine published the results of a massive survey to determine the most significant invention of the past 2,000 years. The conclusion was one that impressed the aficionado: "Simple reading glasses impacted the world more than clocks and the printing press and eight other selections from the top 11 final choices," he attests.

Despite the advances in Lasik surgery, Dr. David A. Fleishman cannot envision a world without eyeglasses: "No surgical procedure has a 100 percent success rate. So, I believe glasses of some sort will always be in demand, for protection from the sun's rays, for work-related issues (protective), and just for general 'fashion' wear, at the least."

As the years pass by, Fleishman vows to remain committed to his site, his collection, and to his mission. "I hope my work stimulates, nurtures, and motivates people to study this field and also consider the possible enjoyment that comes from growing a collection of the various styles of glasses used over the recent centuries," he reflects. "The 700-plus-year history of vision aids really is quite a fascinating journey."

It's certainly proven to be an educational and inspirational pursuit that the former ophthalmologist has focused on with admirable and enviable results. He might be retired, but he's anything but retiring.

Dr. David A. Fleishman encourages like-minded collectors to learn about and join the Ophthalmic Antiques International Collectors' Club (OAICC) and the Ocular Heritage Society (OHS). ♦