

{ Here & There }

Weigh to Play

Sitting in a nondescript warehouse studio in Columbus, Ohio, is a slice of Americana many today would never recognize. It's a work of art, a thing of wonder. And how it survived is miraculous.

Gathered in this studio is the world's finest collection of penny weighing machines. Granted, on the surface, that may not mean much to some, but anyone interested in American history, the American psyche of the 19th and 20th centuries, works of art, marketing, mechanical genius and just simple fun would find Christopher Steele's colorful collection fascinating.

The good news is that 50 or so of Steele's pieces, representing a 37-year collecting passion of this artist and model maker, will make their way to the OSU Urban Arts Space for "The American Weigh: Christopher Steele Collection," slated **Feb. 2 through March 7**.

"In 1971 I got on one and my heart pounded," Steele said. "I heard a voice, I actually heard a voice—that was the only time—and it said, 'Buy all you can.' So I went out in a fury and bought all I could."

On the Scales

Steele's collection includes about 100 penny weighing machines dating from 1890 to 1992. There are bigger collections out there but none finer.

Explained Steele: "I'm a real stickler about restoration, and very little has been done. What makes my



ERIC WAGNER

collection stand out is that 99 percent of them are the way they were when last in service."

While some collectors do their best to erase history, Steele embraces it.

His Mr. Peanut penny weighing machine, for example, bears all the scars of its long career sitting on the sidewalk in front of the Planter's peanut shop on North High Street in Columbus. The color is actually worn down from countless children who touched Mr. Peanut's nose for good luck. Now there's a story.

As Steele explained, people weighed themselves in public because there were no home bathroom scales at the time and weight was considered a vital sign, just like temperature and blood pressure. What is most playful about Steele's collection and the coming exhibit is the lengths manufacturers of weighing machines went to in order to attract customers.

Some machines spat out horoscopes, fortunes, lucky numbers and pictures of Hollywood movie stars. The Fair Weigh Golf Scale, among others, gave patrons the possibility of earning their money back by using a lever to sling their penny into a safe zone, much like a modern pinball machine. Another reveals one's weight much like a thermometer, with a liquid rising up a vertical measure.

And then there is the talking weighing machine of 1903. Steele's is the only one known to exist.

"They call this the advent of the computer," he said. "When you stand on this, it goes to the record groove (literally an LP record) of what you weighed. This is a new technology, and you're paying to see it. That's what it's really about."

That little beauty took a nickel to stand on at a time when a nickel could fetch two loaves of bread.

Really, though, it was all about the penny, and the U.S. government used weighing machines and candy-

vending machines to keep pennies in circulation. According to Steele, the New York subway stations were pulling in 5 tons of pennies a day from weighing machines and a handful of candy-vending machines.

For the record, 33 pounds of pennies equals about \$50.



Storied Histories

Another interesting aspect of Steele's playful collection is the posted weight and height limitations of the machines.

"You'll notice how low the mirrors are," he said. "People were all so much smaller."

The top weight on these machines was fewer than 200 pounds, and the top height registered at 6 feet, 1 inch.

There are so many stories wrapped around these works of art. Among Steele's favorites is one involving President Gerald Ford and the hard-nosed Washington, reporter Helen Thomas. As the story goes, the two were walking along a D.C. street when Ford encountered a penny weighing machine. Ford slipped a penny in for his weight and fortune and reportedly read his fortune aloud: "You are a marvelous orator and leader of men." Thomas, in her own brilliant way, looked over the president's shoulder and replied: "It's got your weight wrong, too."

True or not, it's a good story, and fitting of this fun exhibition.

"It spans 100 years of design," Steele said. "It's a national treasure that people don't know much about. It's going to be very nostalgic."

For additional information about the exhibition, visit <http://uas.osu.edu/americanweigh>.

William J. Purpura

EVENTS AND HAPPENINGS

Jan. 9–10

Fremont Flea Market, Sandusky County Fairground, *Fremont*. More than 200 vendors will set up their wares for perusal. Admission is free, and free parking and concessions will be available. (419) 332-5604; www.sanduskycountyfair.com.

Jan. 15–16

Mohican Winter Fest, downtown, *Loudonville*. Olympic ice carvers

will be making ice creations on-site. Other sculptures will be on display, and ice-carving demonstrations will take place. (877) 266-4422; www.loudonville-mohican.com.

Jan. 22–31

Cleveland Home & Garden Show, Great Lakes Expo Center, *Euclid*. This year's Wonderful Germany theme will inspire the show's vibrant floral displays and landscape designs. Gardening seminars, interior design advice, cooking

demonstrations and the Oktoberfest Dining Hall round out the event. (800) 600-0307; www.homeandflower.com.

Jan. 29–31

Expo-Ohio Farm Toy & NASCAR Collectibles Show, Ohio Expo Center, *Columbus*. New and old farm toys, collectibles and shelf models will be available for sale or trade. Trucks, signs, parts, construction equipment, tractors, and NASCAR and racing memorabilia will be on display. (941) 228-1745.

Feb. 1–28

Black History Month at the Ohio Statehouse, Ohio Statehouse, *Columbus*. A special educational display, tours of the George Washington Williams Room and a soul food menu each Wednesday at the Capitol Cafe are on the docket to celebrate Black History Month. (888) 644-6123; www.statehouse.state.oh.us.

Feb. 4–25

J is for Jazz, Lincoln Theatre Jazz Academy, *Columbus*. Kids age 7 to

10 can create and improvise a little jazz music, explore and experiment with instruments, play together in ensembles and develop a jazz vocabulary at this workshop. (614) 294-5200; www.jazzartsgroup.org.

Feb. 6

For the Love of Chocolate Festival, Medina Performing Arts Center at Medina

High School, *Medina*. A Children's Chocolate Cookie Contest; a Decadent Chocolate Dessert Contest for professional and adult and teen hobby cooks; a Children's Candyland area with games; and a bake sale featuring contest winners are highlights at this sweet festival. (877) 441-4565.

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