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The American Weigh: Christopher Steele Collection

The Ohio State University Urban Arts Space



February 2–March 7, 2010

Free Admission

Exhibit sponsored by AAA

Mettler Toledo



METTLER TOLEDO

50 W. Town St., Columbus, Ohio 43215, in the former Lazarus Building

Phone: 614-292-8861; Web: <http://uas.osu.edu/americanweigh>

Hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 11am to 6pm; Thursday, 11am to 8pm

Special hours for Arnold's Sports Festival: Sunday, March 7, 11am to 6pm



Christopher Steele with Mr. Peanut Scale

Photo by Chas Krider

Fresh topic with little exposure

For a half century, Americans relied on penny scales to watch their weight. At their peak, over 10 billion pennies were dropped annually into these colorful machines.

With weight-loss resolutions on so many minds, now is the perfect time to ponder the role public scales played for well over 100 years.

The American Weigh: Christopher Steele Collection

The Ohio State University Urban Arts Space presents “The American Weigh: Christopher Steele Collection.” This comprehensive exhibition showcases half of Christopher Steele’s top 100 coin-operated, public-weighing machines. Steele’s nationally recognized collection includes a cast-iron workhorse from 1890, penny scales from the colorful art deco period, novelty scales of the 1950s and 1960s, and the rarest mechanism-free computer scale of 1992. A national treasure, this collection eloquently chronicles 100 years of American ingenuity, technology and industrial design, and has been described by the Smithsonian as “a valuable asset for future scholars studying twentieth-century community life.”

History: In the late 1880s, the first American penny scales made their way onto the scene, offering the public their first opportunity to monitor their weight and health without visiting a doctor’s office. By the 1930s and 1940s, these mechanical wonders brought in over \$100 million annually, or 1.5 billion in today’s dollars.

Inventors outdid one another by creating gimmicks that enticed people to drop in a penny—some scales told fortunes, some dispensed pictures of movie stars, some returned the coin when the correct weight was guessed. Sheer beauty and sophisticated design attracted people to these money-making machines. Penny scales by top designers—John Gordon Rideout, Harold Van Doren and Joseph Sinel—mirrored silhouettes of modern skyscrapers and discreetly delivered one’s weight. Less modern scales relied heavily on larger round dials that could easily be seen by prying eyes.

Once a corner landmark, these coin-operated public scales have all but disappeared. The affect of seeing so many of these gorgeous machines on display together at one time is truly amazing. With patinas intact, over 90 percent of the penny scales are the way they were when last in service.

This delightful collection is on view February 2–March 7 at The Ohio State University Urban Arts Space in Downtown Columbus, Ohio, in the historic Lazarus Building. The show will be open for the Arnold Sports Festival 2010 weekend with special hours on Sunday March 7. Admission is free.

More information and pictures can be found on the web:

<http://www.theamericanweigh.com/> and www.americanpennyscales.com

Click on “Media” tab for press releases and to download pictures for publication.

Contact Christopher Steele to schedule an interview.

Phone: 614 421 2201.

Email: theamericanweigh@gmail.com

Collection Information

The primary collection consists of 100 coin-operated weighing machines. A unique national treasure—the colorful designs, intricate mechanisms, fine craftsmanship and playful nature stand testimony to the remarkable accomplishments of America's first vending service.

“My ultimate goal is to see this national treasure preserved for future generations to enjoy and study,” Christopher Steele explains. “This endeavor has profoundly changed my life. This is the culmination of my 37-year coast-to-coast search for American penny scales.”

Kent Rambo, Vice President of Marketing for AAA Ohio Auto Club, notes:

“I’ve had the pleasure of seeing the collection and it certainly will appeal to everyone, from Americana buffs to industrial design connoisseurs. And I’m sure many of our AAA members will recall fondly seeing penny scales like these, while idling along their town’s Main Street in the family sedan. We’re happy to be a small part of bringing this American treasure to the OSU Urban Arts Space downtown.”

About Penny Scales

America’s first vending machine to sell service

The first penny scales of the late 1880s offered a service rather than a product, setting them apart from the new and fast-growing vending machine market. Penny scales gave the public their first opportunity to weigh themselves without going to a doctor.

Known as silent salesmen

Once corner landmarks, American penny scales were playful and fun and stood watch like sentries across the American landscape, reminding everyone to watch their weight and keep healthy.

Pitched as trade stimulators

These “robots of trade” evoke nostalgia for simpler, healthier times, and have all but vanished from the urban landscape.

Turned pennies into gold...kept pennies in circulation

Over 10 billion pennies annually were dropped into the coin-slots of penny scales in their heyday. A 1937 U.S. Department of Commerce report stated, “Penny scales were the principle means of over 130,000,000 people keeping in touch with their weight and health.”

Green machines from the mechanical era

Ingenuity was required to attract passersby. Enticements such as tickets with pictures of Hollywood movie stars, scrolls with horoscopes, games of chance, gum, candy and other clever gimmicks were employed—all without electricity.

Still in service worldwide, 120 years and counting

Twenty-first century scales provide new innovations. In Ireland, computer scales offer height, weight, body-mass index and blood pressure for two Euros.

Museum Comments

Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, New York

“Having seen this significant collection, I’m struck with what a national treasure it is. As important historical artifacts, the scales provide insights into American popular culture. As interactive devices, they help contemporary Americans reflect on timely issues like health and obesity. Since penny scales provided both a public service and a form of entertainment, Strong National Museum of Play remains interested in the possibility of providing a home and interpretive platform for [the] collection and accompanying archive. We would be uniquely qualified to maximize the historical context and the modern impact of penny scales in ways that could benefit the widest possible audience.”

Christopher Bensch, Vice President for Collections, November 2009

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

Carl H. Scheele, former curator for the Division of Community Life, explained, “There is nothing like seeing a collection in person. Aside from the splendid condition of [the] examples, I was very impressed with the variety in terms of dates represented and the different types and manufacturers. The most intriguing to me, in terms of technology, was the one with the phonograph record. I had never seen such a sound recording before. The overall impression was spectacular.”

The Taft Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio

“The penny weighing scale is now a museum piece of considerable interest....A material cultural artifact and a symbol of the universal quest for a healthy, trim appearance, the penny scale is worth a pound of study...The acquisition of Christopher Steele’s collection of Vintage American Penny Scales was pursued with passion and knowledge.”

Above excerpts from the Taft exhibition catalogue *The American Weigh*, with text written by Ruth K. Meyer, the former director of the Taft Museum. The museum showcased 26 scales from Steele’s collection in 1983–84. Steele extends a heartfelt thank you to the museum for the ongoing use of the title.

Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York

The late Arthur Drexler stated, “This is exactly what the museums need to be showing to attract people in larger numbers to their institutions.”



About the Collector

Christopher Steele's fascination with American penny scales began in 1971. As he stood on a scale in the Union Depot in Columbus, Ohio, he heard a voice say, "Buy all you can." Within months his lifelong passion had begun—with his first acquisition being the very scale that spoke to him. Thirty-seven years and counting, he is still adding to his unique collection.

His interest in patina and provenance garners respect from museums that have sought loans from his collection. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Taft Museum, Columbus Museum of Art and Toledo Museum of Art have all have drawn upon this national treasure.

Educated at The Ohio State University, Steele has worked as a contract potter, performance artist, visual artist and architectural model builder. He works with wood, canvas, paper, paint, fiberglass, metal, clay and found objects. Steele also is an inventor; he is currently developing a new coin-operated weighing machine.

Steele's artwork has been reviewed in *The Village Voice*, *The Soho Weekly News*, *Dialogue Magazine* and *The New Art Examiner*. Art critics RoseLee Goldberg, John Perrault and Peter Frank have also honored his work. His model work has appeared in *Progressive Architecture* and *Architectural Record*.

A lifelong community volunteer, Steele is founder and president of the non-profit architectural preservation group Citizens for a Better Skyline. Since 1983, the group has designed and funded many preservation and public arts projects, including the nationally recognized Mona Lisa mural in Columbus, Ohio.



The American Weigh · Christopher Steele Collection ©2010
Twenty-four of top one hundred · set 1



The American Weigh · Christopher Steele Collection ©2010
Twenty-four of top one hundred · set 2