



H. Richard Dietrich Jr, 69, Collector Of Important Early American Art

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CHESTER SPRINGS, PENN.: H. Richard Dietrich, Jr, 69, a retired executive whose lifelong love of art and history spurred his creation of one of the most important collections of early American art, died peacefully of melanoma on August 30 at his home.

Henry Richard Dietrich, who grew up in Villanova, Penn., lived a richly varied life as a businessman, philanthropist, collector, conservationist, father and friend. While still in his early 20s, after the death of his father, Dietrich dropped out of Columbia Business School to take the helm of the family business. The company, Dietrich Corporation, owned Luden's, a cough drop and candy manufacturer, as well as other holdings, including upscale Philadelphia women's apparel store Nan Duskin and Queen Anne Candy. Dietrich served as president until the family sold Luden's to Hershey in 1986. While Dietrich loved business, his true passion was collecting and land conservation.

As a young man, Dietrich took to collecting, at first focusing on early edition books, but soon branching out. He combined a passion for American history with his love of collecting, developing a knack for reconnecting items from the past. He believed that, in the proper context, objects tell fascinating stories about their time. He believed, for example, that a piece of Chinese Export porcelain was far more revealing if it could be seen together with a portrait of a Hong merchant, and perhaps an American sea captain who imported it. Such a piece could end up in the home of a Philadelphia family who would own other fine trappings.



H. Richard Dietrich Jr

Dietrich was fascinated with fitting together these pieces of a puzzle and in some way recreating the reality of their time, and in doing so revealing the people who lived among them. Dietrich was most intrigued by the Colonial American era. His first such collecting started with two pieces of export porcelain from George Washington's Order of the Cincinnati service.

The focus of all of Dietrich's collecting was The Dietrich American Foundation, established in 1963, and now based at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The foundation was set up to collect, research, document and lend historically important examples of early American decorative and fine arts. Its collections comprise furniture, silver, ceramics, porcelain, Pennsylvania German decorative arts, historical documents, manuscripts, prints and paintings.

Other fields include military and naval history, American maritime industries with an emphasis on whaling and maps, as well as depictions and writings of American Indian tribes and the exploration of the West.

Dietrich never bought thinking that the pieces were his. He always bought with the thought that they would be shared and seen by the public. He felt an obligation to see that these pieces be studied and examined in order to benefit scholars and to help tell the story of American Colonial craftsmanship. With this sense of public service, during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Dietrich purchased the very best pieces that came to the marketplace. He approached this with an incredible zeal, once amusingly described as a sort of Jimmy Stewart with an incredible passion for Americana.

Presently the collection numbers more than 2,000 objects and 1,500 books and documents, on loan to 28 different institutions — a number that varies with exhibits. Long-term loans have included ones to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the White House and the State Department's Diplomatic Reception Rooms, the Huntington Museum in California, the Cincinnati Art Museum, Mystic Seaport and the Naval Academy Museum. Many of the foundation's objects are currently on view in the American Wing and period rooms at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Dietrich had a very close association with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He was one of the founding members of the museum's American Art Advisory Committee in 1969, and was elected to the board of trustees the following year. In 1972, he became chairman of that committee, serving for 35 years before becoming chairman and trustee emeritus in December of 2006.

Over the years he sought to continue to strengthen the American collections and ensure that pieces created in Philadelphia and Southeastern Pennsylvania would have a place at the museum. Dietrich took pride in the city at the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, and worked tirelessly to make certain the collection of its iconic museum was matchless in its representation of the city's artistic and historical achievement over three centuries.

Dietrich was not only passionate about acquiring art, but also about giving art. During his lifetime he bestowed a significant number of important pieces upon worthy institutions. The gifts targeted "holes" in collections as well as strengths, placing something special that complemented the rest of a collection.

Dietrich's single largest gift was the famed Cadwalader Easy Chair, donated to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2002 on the occasion of its 125th anniversary. He purchased the chair for a record-breaking sum for an easy chair in 1987 (a record that still stands). The chair, of carved mahogany with upholstery had been "discovered" in a Chester County school as part of a suite of furnishings commissioned by revolutionary war hero John Cadwalader.

Representing one of the rarest examples of Eighteenth Century American furniture, the Cadwalader chair was a point of pride for Dietrich, fueled as much by its tremendous historical significance as for its rarity. The chair had been used in the family's Philadelphia home, where members of the Continental Congress and eventual signers of the US Constitution were entertained. The museum houses in one room a large group of surviving furnishings from the Cadwalader house. Here one can view portraits of the family along with the household objects depicted in those very portraits. History on a world scale is shown in the context of a living room of a Philadelphia family.

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A closely linked passion of Dietrich was the preservation of farmland and open space, especially in his beloved Chester County, where he helped provide early and ongoing support to start local land trusts and preservation efforts, and personally bought environmentally and historically significant tracts of land to keep them out of the path of development. His own home, built in 1721, was in fact used as a Revolutionary War hospital during the battle of Valley Forge to handle the overflow of wounded from the hospital at nearby Yellow Springs. The house and surrounding land became his inspiration to piece together and study the physical remnants of history.

Dietrich served on numerous boards and associations, including that of Wesleyan University, where he graduated in 1960. He was also a board member of the American Museum in Britain, Rosenbach Museum and Library, US Department of State Fine Arts Committee, University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. He had also served on the Friends of American Art Executive Committee at Yale University and was a member of the American Decorative Arts Committee at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was also a longtime member of the Walpole Society. He attended Episcopal Academy in Marion, Penn.

His life was filled with an abiding love of history, art, the land, of things maritime, of travel, and time with family and friends. Surviving are his children, daughter Cordelia Dietrich Zanger, sons H. Richard Dietrich III and Christian B. Dietrich, and granddaughter Olivia M. Dietrich. He is also survived by his brothers, Daniel and William Dietrich. He will be fondly remembered by his family and the many friends and acquaintances he touched throughout his full life.

Robert L. McNeil, Jr, also an accomplished collector of American art, issued the following statement: "Dick and I were close friends for 45 years and enjoyed each other's company in many areas. While Dick appeared reserved, he had a great sense of humor and a very keen and productive mind. In the field of American art and material culture, he was intellectually curious and shared his knowledge and the objects in his collection most generously. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, we worked together to create the recently formed Center for American Art and, with others, to establish the most comprehensive collection of early Pennsylvania fine and decorative arts in the country. His achievements were recognized by scholars and collectors, and he was elected to the Walpole Society. Dick was one of our great collectors of Americana."

A memorial service will be conducted in early November.

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