

## Hippo deep

### Couple find they have water pigs aplenty

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September 21, 1997

It started innocently enough, as passion often does.

While browsing in a shop in 1980, Sandi Perlstein was captivated by "a little terra cotta hippo with its mouth open."

Its purchase "was real insignificant," she says, but a precedent was set. Since then, hippo figurines have multiplied in the Perlsteins' Mequon home with the quiet zeal of zebra mussels in the Great Lakes. Unlike those mollusks, the hippos have been knowingly, enthusiastically, ushered in.

More than 300 mock water pigs now wallow in the spacious house in the Ville du Parc subdivision. They huddle on a stone hearth, graze on a curio cabinet's glass shelves, and morph into coffee mugs and salt-and-pepper shakers in the kitchen. They come in materials from ceramic to cement, leather to silver, craft paper to quartz.

And they telegraph a playful side of Sandi and Jerry, her fellow hippophile and husband of 33 years. Parents of four and owners of Bonded Messenger, the Milwaukee-based delivery service, the couple frequently entertain at their home.

"People come in and they just love the hippos. It gets them talking," says Sandi.

Their son, Ben, a 20-year-old who books music acts for a Milwaukee club, even views the collection as a perk for some performers. "He has one band that always requests a stay at the Hippo House," his mother says.

Though they've become fanatical enough to incorporate "hippo" in their e-mail address, the Perlsteins don't regard themselves as serious collectors. They don't research individual pieces or extensively study the ungainly African beast that inspired the designs. Still, they've mastered some fundamentals of collecting: They treasure what they have and they always seek more.

"It's a fun thing to do when we travel," says Sandi, mentioning acquisitions in the Netherlands, Israel and Kenya. More of their successful explorations have taken place on domestic soil, in



**A granite hippo that abides on the Perlsteins' patio is a gift the neighbors gave the couple for their 30th wedding anniversary. Photo/Ronald M. Overdahl**

Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New York, Washington D.C., even Toledo, Ohio. Its zoo has a Hippoquarium that, like the Milwaukee County Zoo's polar bear exhibit, has a glass wall to view the creatures' underwater antics.

"We go there whenever we can," Sandi says.

A silent reverie apparently leads her from the zoo to a Ken-yan water hole, where she and Jerry saw hippos in the wild. "Did you ever see a hippo sneeze? It's like a geyser!" she marvels.

Their penchant for water pigs is obvious from the foyer on.

A lifelike hippo commands the window-bearing niche above the double doors. Were it not brownish-gray papier mache but flesh, it would weigh several hundred pounds. "That's the size of a toddler," Sandi says, pointing up.

A lighted curio cabinet nearby contains the original terra cotta hippo and more than 120 others of miniature or modest size. Some are surprisingly elegant: a variegated green hippo carved from malachite; a Herend hippo, its porcelain hide covered in the Czech company's dense, colorful swirls; a sterling silver hippo head that opens to store human baby teeth.

"We really like the whimsical ones. We like our hippos to be cute," Sandi emphasizes.

So waltzing hippo salt-and-pepper shakers and a hippo tea pot pose above the kitchen sink. A wriggling clay hippo, made by daughter Linda as a child, decorates an office shelf. In the master bedroom, a sweet-faced hippo spins atop a music box that tinkles "If I Could Talk to the Animals." A palm-sized hippo ballerina from Disney's "Fantasia" reclines on an occasional table in the great room. (There's no hippo diva in sight, though Jerry Perlstein heads the Florentine Opera Co.'s board of directors.)

The couple's favorite hippo is flat-out goofy, a cartoonish creature with polka dots on its snout and a nit-picking bird on its knee-high back. Commissioned from an artist at the Mall of America near Minneapolis, it is a focal point of the sunny great room.

"We used the accessory as a basis for our colors," says Jim Bartelt, an interior designer who worked with the Perlsteins on the project two years ago. They reupholstered a love seat and dining-table chairs in a funky chintz charged with the hippo's electric hues: fuchsia, aqua, teal, brick and purple.

Bartelt also helped the couple show off their hippos with some small adjustments. "We concentrated them more into particular areas," he said, suggesting that only special pieces remain in the great room. Throughout the main floor, "what we did is redo and rehang artwork so that pieces fit in better."

Because his clients have a capacious house, "they don't look like they're overhippoed," says Bartelt, owner of the Eclectic Eye gift shop in Bayside's Audubon Court.

He and other design pros offer the following display tips regarding collections:

Think scale: Size, of both the items and the space they inhabit, has to be considered with any collection.

"You don't want a single item to be too big for a room. You have to have a place for things," Bartelt warns. "Collectibles can kind of take over your house if you don't."

Develop group mentality: Tiny items, like the Perlsteins' miniature hippos, need to support each other visually.

"When grouped, smalls acquire a weight, importance, visual interest and narrative power they could not possibly attain on their own," Carol Sama Sheehan writes in "Mary Emmerling's New Country Collecting" (1996). For instance, the book pictures a blue-edged bowl holding handfuls of blue and green ocean glass and smooth turquoise stones, and a mottled checkerboard set with small wooden apples.

Don't go overboard, advises Claire Larkin, exhibit designer with the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. "If you have too many items in one place, you're not looking at any one of them. You're overwhelmed."

If you have "a huge collection of something like spoons or hats, rotate the collection, creating new groupings every now and again."

Play the numbers: Larkin -- who sets up displays of fine art glass, fiber art and other contemporary crafts -- likes to show an odd number of objects rather than an even one, finding the asymmetry more dynamic. With bigger items, such as baskets, "as soon as you have more than five objects, it's too many," she insists.

Consider compatibility vs. contrast: "If I'm responsible for grouping things, I usually want them to be sympathetic to one another, either because of coloration, size or shape," Larkin says.

"Sometimes it's not the similarity that makes them respond to one another, it's the differences. If I have five turned wooden bowls, I might have one that's pale, one that's dark, one that's medium, one that's squat and one that's very tall."

Stay the course: Keep a consistent theme among your collectibles or their groupings. Don't let well-meaning friends impose their tastes on you with a gift that doesn't quite fit: a glass frog, say, when you're focused on pewter.

"Collecting is a statement of very personal taste," Bartelt says.

On this point, the Perlsteins are far more accommodating.

"Nobody gives us too many, and the ones we've gotten as gifts have been real creative, real original," Sandi says.

They haven't met a hippo they haven't liked.