



Margaret Woodbury Strong (1897-1969)

Margaret Woodbury Strong was the only child of a wealthy Rochester family and an indefatigable collector of historical and art objects, toys and miniatures, prints and books, glass, fancy doorknobs and buttons. . objects in so many categories that her collection defied precise definition. While most other collectors of Americana treasured hand-made, colonial-era items, Margaret Strong gathered together things made after the industrial revolution had taken hold in the United States.

In 1968, she obtained a state charter for the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum of Fascination and provided for its generous endowment. The museum uses Margaret Strong's collection to interpret themes of popular culture and industrialization in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Margaret Woodbury Strong, Collector

The grand passion of Margaret Woodbury Strong was collecting. This work gave purpose to her life and, after her death, gave Rochester a unique museum.

Ancestors on both sides of Margaret's family had made fortunes. On trips to the Orient, her mother, Mrs. John Charles Woodbury, collected Japanese objects. Beginning at the age of eight, Margaret accompanied her parents abroad and was from the start a confirmed collector. On daily shopping trips during their travels, her parents gave Margaret an empty bag with the understanding that she could buy whatever she wished until the bag was filled. The child quickly learned that buying small items yielded more, and her love of miniatures--and quantities of them--was born.

Another family custom no doubt influenced Margaret's lifelong desire for possessions. Every year as Christmas neared, she was made to give away the toy she prized the most to "make room" for the new treasures Santa would heap upon her. Shrewdly, Margaret chose something other than her favorite. Once when she was twelve she named a dollhouse, which was given to cousins. Years later she reclaimed it.

After a private school education and several trips around the world, Margaret married Homer Strong, a Rochester lawyer, in 1920. With their daughter, Barbara, the family lived on a seventy-five acre estate on Allen Creek Road in Brighton, New York. Mrs. Strong became skilled in golf, bowling, archery and billiards as well as at the bridge table. She also enjoyed growing and arranging flowers, but her ever-increasing interest was collecting dolls, doll houses and toys. It was perhaps to fill the void left by the deaths of Barbara in 1946 and Homer in 1958 that Mrs. Strong gave so much attention to collecting that it became a compulsion.

As she bought entire collections as well as individual items in wholesale quantities, Mrs. Strong found her possessions outgrowing her spacious home. Adding gallery wings and outbuildings, she converted her estate into a "Museum of Fascination," as she named it. The grounds contained a little community of dollhouses, all lighted by electricity at night





and each with a little walk leading to it, which was shoveled when it snowed.

A competitive purchaser, Margaret Strong also expanded the scope of her collections to an extraordinary degree. She acquired numerous examples of minerals, Tiffany lamps, Rogers statuary, toy windmills, model ships and vehicles, medals and badges, scrimshaw, furniture, clothing, jewelry, stamps, coins and paintings by well-known Rochester artists. Besides buying buttons by the bushel, she collected objects as dissimilar as doorknobs and porcelain figurines, shells and musical instruments, fossils and rare books.

In 1960, for example, her doll collection, numbered 600; by 1969 it included more than 22,000 and was perhaps the world's largest. Among this multitude was Margaret's first doll, which had chestnut hair clipped from its five-year-old owner's own hair. The extent of her dollhouses and dollhouse furniture was equally stupendous. Also among the largest collections in the world were her more than 84,000 bookplates. A distinctive category was the grouping of toys depicting popular characters, such as Mutt and Jeff, the Katzenjammer Kids and Walt Disney characters. Amazing, too, was the number of her vases, glass paperweights and Oriental objects--and the list could go on.

A lonely person, wary of fortune-seekers in her later years, Mrs. Strong was eccentric in her dress and independent in action. For example, she once lined the lawn of her Kennebunk Beach, Maine, summer home with forty-six old-fashioned bathtubs filled with plants. This, she said, was to keep people from cutting across her lawn and because she "had always thought it would be a good idea to have a hedge of bathtubs."

In the year before her death, Mrs. Strong obtained a state charter for her museum. The museum was the chief beneficiary of her will, and her estate of about \$100,000,000 provided very generously for its continuation. The gigantic task of preparing the more than 300,000 items for display and the construction of the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum on Manhattan Square, begun in 1973, was not finished until 1982.

By then, it was apparent that this unusual woman had preserved objects expressing the popular culture and industrial manufacture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as had few others at the time. This museum is outstanding in its presentation of artifacts of American life from 1840 to 1920. Its contribution to knowledge of social history can only grow more important as the years go by.

Resources

"Margaret Woodbury Strong" The Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, First Stages: a belief report on the founder and the collections Rochester Public Library Local History collection, newspaper clippings file.

