

Collector handles crystal with care

By MIKE SCANLON

If you think a great glass is one that used to be full of bourbon, go see Al Nash.

In 20 minutes, he'll have you drinking Pepsi and thinking about art. Nash, owner of Garden Plaza Discount on Ford Road, keeps a collection of about 90 pieces of crystal in his Southfield apartment.

Now, everyone knows crystal is actually glass, but it's hardly the right word here—calling this stuff glass is like calling a diamond hard.

The collection includes the likes of a gold thistle imbedded in a hand-cut crystal base. Then there's a gold partridge in a gold pear tree complete with fruit, all of it inside a crystal pear.

"They only sell that one at Christmas," offered Nash.

The thistle, which looks real enough to stick your socks, got that way because it's cast from the real thing. The mold was used once, then destroyed.

Most of the pieces are handblown from a kind of crystal called Steuben glass, although the collection includes works from Czechoslovakia, pre-World War I Poland, England, Ireland, and Scotland.

Steuben glass itself "is probably the

purest glass ever made," says Henry Ford Museum curator of collections, Kenneth Wilson.

You might think Wilson's judgment is clouded by the 10 years he spent as curator of Steuben's own Corning, New York, museum.

But once you've seen the stuff, you believe.

Wilson says Steuben glass contains 33-34 per cent lead, which accounts for its "high refraction index."

That means it glitters, as if, there, were a fire raging inside, an effect especially noticeable in a piece called the "Pyramidion."

The Pyramidion is an abstract sculpture of glass that has glass pebbles imbedded in its base. It sits on a rotating black velvet stand, and if there are 360 degrees in a circle, there are 360 different kinds of "refraction indexes" coming from the piece, depending on where you stand.

The most valuable of Nash's collection is another Steuben piece called the Gazelle Bowl. It's one of about 60 made since 1935, and it is worth a bundle.

Nash began collecting when he received a single bad base as a gift in 1972. Before that, "I thought collecting was stupid."

And now, he was asked, does he ever feel like the guy who bought a rowboat

in April and was making payments on a yacht by September?

"Sometimes," he admitted.

"I've thought about it a lot," he said. "I think the reason people collect is an inability to create. By buying works of art, I feel I'm endorsing the artists."

And the idea of spending more than you can afford for a work of art, it appeals to me. That's a bad way to think, but I have to admit it."

The first crystal item he bought himself was set of three nesting ashtrays.

"I saw it, and said to my wife,

'look, three ashtrays for 13 bucks,' and she said, 'It's the small one that's 13

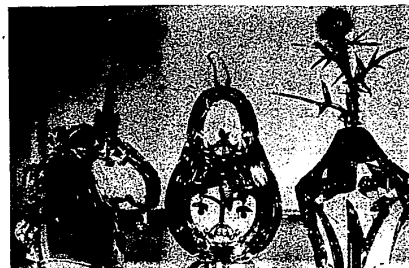
bucks, Al,' but I bought it anyway. It's worth about \$65 now."

Fine glass work has been increasing by about 20 per cent a year. Nash didn't know it would do that when he started buying it and he says it wouldn't have made much difference to him if it just stayed where it was.

But the Gazelle Bowl alone is worth at least \$8,000, said Nash.

And at those prices, the natural question was whether he'd ever dropped any of his collection.

"Oh, God, don't even think about it," said Nash.



His collection ranges from unicorns, to a gold partridge in a gold pear tree, to a 24-karat thistle that could almost stick to your socks.

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