



SOCIETY & CULTURE

exhibits

# TRAVELING EYE

A new exhibition at The Wolfsonian-FIU reveals its founder's wonderfully obsessive knack for collecting history.

By Saxon Henry



"... with my Cross-bow/the Albatross from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," a book plate from 1875 by illustrator Gustave Doré

..... With my cross-bow  
I shot the Albatross.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WOLFSONIAN-FIU





**M**itchell Wolfson Jr., known to South Floridians as Micky, remembers when his Proustian instincts first awoke. He was on a childhood trip when he covertly snagged a fanciful key, the initial memento from trips he would pin to a large framed board that held the souvenirs of his adolescent movements. As he aged, grew more serious and his collection expanded far beyond the scope of that board, a space in the Washington Storage Company in Miami Beach's Art Deco Historic District became home to his treasures, large and small.

By the mid-1980s, he had single-handedly filled the building, which he bought and transformed into The Wolfsonian. The museum has been under the auspices of Florida International University since 1997 and remains one of the largest university collections in the United States, with more than 180,000 objects on display and in its archives. Wolfson notes he collects to preserve what would otherwise be lost, to assemble tangible memories for contemporary interpretation and to provoke responses from 21st century viewers.

This month, The Wolfsonian-FIU will celebrate the 80-year-old's seasoned eye with a yearlong exhibition titled *A Universe of Things: Micky Wolfson Collects*. A book will also be released, titled *Founder's Choice*, which tells more in-depth stories of 37 objects selected by Wolfson. The narratives read as if he's beckoning his audience along on a series of global jaunts during which he unearths fascinating finds, though he says the travel

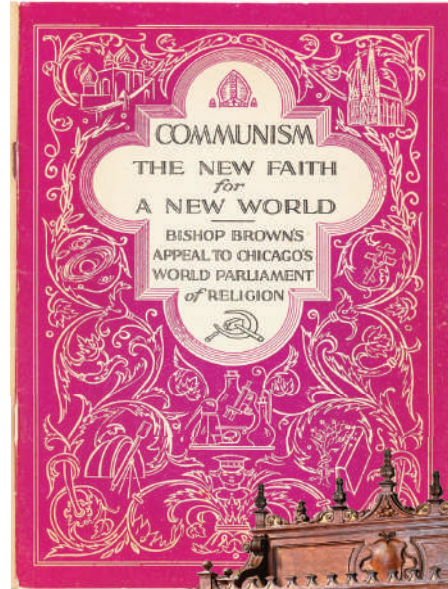


is merely the impetus to discover, record and gather. "It's my life, not an itinerary!" he declares, afterward admitting there is a bit of serendipity involved: "Often, I'm a victim of circumstance—things find me; I don't find them."

Regardless of the theme that presents itself to him, the desire to express himself in an artistic way has always been at the heart of the matter for this collector. "I was neither a writer, a conductor, an architect nor a businessman," he explains, "but I felt the ambition to make, to create." This drive had a trajectory. "I was a collector as a minor, and as an adolescent I discovered space," he says. "With adulthood, I began to fill space." Since then, making inquiries and discovering new definitions have been the most stimulating activities on his mind.

What piques his attention most? "I'm primarily interested in art which functions as an idea, not art for art's sake. It's a new form of language, neither written nor spoken but constructed, even invented." When he's on the hunt, he says spontaneity and gut instinct are the only drivers. "There are no rules except to stay within the time period and to capture the narrative expressed by the object," he explains. "That becomes the language of the objects."

Miami has certainly influenced him as a collector over the years. "What interested me about Miami was the invention of nostalgia, as we had nothing to look back on, only the moment at hand," he says. "As you know, Miami is an invention, and it's been fun to record part of the evolution." *Nov. 15–Nov. 15, 2020, 1001 Washington Ave., Miami Beach, 305.531.1001, wolfsonian.org* ■



Clockwise from top left: The Wolfsonian-FIU founder Micky Wolfson; a circa-1929 panel from the Hotel St. George in Brooklyn by Emery Roth; *Communism: The New Faith for a New World*, a 1935 book by William Montgomery Brown; an oak secretary from 1892 by Maison Krieger, Damon & Colin; *The Adventures of a Fuller Brush Man: "Dizzy Desires"* 6, a comic book from 1935.

