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A photograph of Christopher Forbes, a man with grey hair wearing a dark blue pinstripe suit, a white shirt, and a red patterned tie. He is standing in front of two large, classical oil paintings. The painting on the left depicts a woman in an elaborate white and green gown with a crown. The painting on the right depicts a man in a military uniform with a red sash and a star on his chest. The background is dark and moody.

THE GREAT LOVES OF **CHRISTOPHER FORBES**

Media executive talks about
French monarchs, wine, comic books,
and why true collecting inevitably
leads to agony and ecstasy

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The Mortality of Immortality

Every object you see here bears an inscription that marked a moment that was of great moment to Gone getters and doers.

These varying milestone markers, so meaningful to lives past, were acquired in flea markets, at auctions and other emporiums of the ephemeral.

This trophy room is a moving reminder that all things and all of us are all too soon "over and out."

Malcolm Forbes



Trophy cups, oars, trowels, and a relic from the 1937 Hindenburg disaster are part of Forbes' "The Mortality of Immortality" collection. "[My father] was fascinated by the idea that these objects symbolizing a great achievement in one's lifetime could wind up in an attic or for sale at a flea market or yard sale," says Christopher "Kip" Forbes.

The Great Loves of **CHRISTOPHER FORBES**

MEDIA EXECUTIVE TALKS ABOUT FRENCH MONARCHS, WINE, COMIC BOOKS,
AND WHY TRUE COLLECTING INEVITABLY LEADS TO AGONY AND ECSTASY

INTERVIEW BY SUZANNE GANNON ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES LEYNSE

In his office on the second floor of the Forbes Building on New York's lower Fifth Avenue, Christopher "Kip" Forbes has created a shrine to Napoleon III – history's "most underrated" monarch and the object of Forbes' deepest collecting passion. Surrounded by massive oil portraits, terracotta busts and Staffordshire figurines of the sometimes-mustachioed royal and his wife the Empress Eugénie, the third child of Malcolm Forbes, and a vice chairman of the media company founded by his grandfather in 1917, discusses his art, his family and the most salient trait he inherited from his father, who passed away in 1990.

How did you become a collector?

Collecting is a disease, an affliction I inherited from my father. The symptoms are different for everyone, but the common denominator is that you can't help it. Some say it's unaffordable because you are driven to make acquisitions whatever your means. Of all of the vices one could have – gambling, drinking, mistresses – it's a vice with residual values.

About which of your collections are you most passionate?

My first great love is Napoleon III, who was a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte and a grandson of Josephine. He was born a prince in 1807. His father was the King of Holland and he lived in a palace.

Why Napoleon III?

He is one of the most underrated historical figures by historians, yet he was the first elected president of France and its last sovereign at the same time.

How did you first encounter him?

In sixth grade, I was studying the American Civil War, and I read about Napoleon favoring the South, yet I knew that Napoleon Bonaparte was long dead, that it must be another member of the family. So I began reading up on him and found him fascinating. He was extremely adventurous and known for his military exploits including the Crimean War, the Franco-Prussian War, the conquest of Senegal, the Franco-Mexican War, and the Second Opium War, among others. He had designs on creating a French sphere of influence in the Americas, and despite a defeat of French troops by the Mexican army, he held the support of Mexican conservatives and wound up installing the Austrian Prince Maximilian as Maximilian I of Mexico. He paved the way for the modernization of France as we know it with a series of Second Empire projects, including ports and railroads and the urban plan for Paris.



Bertie Charles Forbes, Christopher Forbes' grandfather, launched *Forbes* magazine in 1917. Today, *Forbes* is an international publishing and media company, with millions of readers worldwide.

What was your most significant Napoleon III acquisition?

We were sailing across the Mediterranean one summer when I was 16. In St. Tropez, we stopped in a funky antique store where I found my first major piece: a three-quarter length portrait of Napoleon III by Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin [1809-1864] and a pupil, Eugene Montpelier. My dad bought it for me – I think it was less than two thousand francs at the time or about \$400. This was at a time when \$100 constituted a large gift, so my dad offered it as a birthday present, a Christmas present, and birthday present again. It was the gift that kept on giving. I had to have a frame built for it.

What was your first Napoleon III acquisition?

My first acquisition was a letter from Napoleon III to a fellow sovereign who was his cousin. It features the signatures of both sovereigns, which makes it fairly significant. I also own his letter of surrender to the King of Prussia after the Franco-Prussian War. And I have the childhood uniform, chamber pot, and other personal effects of his only son, Eugene Prince Imperial, who was shot to death in Zululand.

What's the difference between a true collector and a mere acquirer of objects?

If you haven't had to make sacrifices to get something you really want, or had to sacrifice other objects in your collection, then you have never gone through the exquisite agonies and ecstasies of truly collecting. Making the tough choices is part of the fun. It's always reassuring to have your tastes validated, but often there comes a time to move on.

Have you ever been driven to an irrational acquisition?

Early in my marriage, I was completely smitten by a gorgeous Empire chandelier. I said to my wife that we could either pay for the car or the chandelier. She very wisely opted for paying for the chandelier, which is still hanging in the dining room. But for three years she asked where to put it, which was just not an operative question as long as I was still able to put food on the table.

How did your studies influence your collecting tastes?

After my first semester at Princeton, I concluded that economics and I did not enjoy each other. So I asked my father if I could major in art history. He said yes and offered to make me his curator. He would pay me a salary and my tuition in exchange for my keeping track of his acquisitions because all through his life he bought more than he could afford because he had an enthusiasm across a whole range of sectors. One of my happiest moments was to see a painting that I'd paid \$800 for in 1972 sell for half a million years later. So the return on investment wasn't bad. I also wound up conning my professor into letting me develop a catalog of Victorian paintings rather than write a thesis. The items in the catalog eventually became the impetus for "The Royal Academy (1837-1901) Revisited: Victorian Paintings from The Forbes Magazine Collection," a traveling exhibition that was shown at the Met in 1975. He thought I was a genius. I graduated magna cum laude.



The Forbes Collection includes Cartier botanicals – small figurines of flowers made of precious materials such as gold, jade, lapis and coral. “This is by far the largest private collection that exists,” says Forbes, “and I can remember them decorating my dad’s desk in his office.”

How long have you worked for the family company?

Almost from the moment I emerged from Princeton. I’ve been here my entire career because I’m otherwise unemployable.

Is there any crossover between the skills you’ve developed for the purposes of collecting and those you employ in business?

In the early days of my career, I like to say that I transitioned from fine art to the fine art of selling advertising for the magazine. I have always known how many pages of ads I’ve had to sell to make an acquisition of a particular painting possible. I’ve also been able to leverage the fact that we have our collections on display here in our galleries, which

enables us to entertain clients, and to loan our collections to museums, which gives us another opportunity for entertaining. Mixing the two passions is a converging of all my enthusiasms.

Does your wife indulge your habits?

I do love being surrounded by my collecting labors, but over the years my dear wife has been gaining on me in that we now have a few Napoleon III-free environments. She’s very patient with me. She has supplemented some of my collections with a serious Biedermeier collection, and we both are passionate about the art of the American West and southwestern landscape paintings.

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In addition to Napoleon III memorabilia, do you collect other objects?

There was a brief period during which I collected stamps and coins, but I'm much more serious about my collection of *Flash* comic books, which probably consists of a few thousand pieces. I have complete runs. He was my favorite superhero when I was a child, and I became pretty serious about it around age 10. I remember sweating my way through boarding school where I wasn't allowed to have them. I'd stick them under my shirt and then bury them like contraband in my trunk.

How do you go about making your acquisitions? Do you attend auctions or work through dealers?

Fifteen years ago at a flea market in Paris, I met a dealer of royal memorabilia and I had a field day. He dangled temptations in front of me. Dealers are very much like drug pushers in that they take full advantage of one's afflictions.

Are you always intently focused on acquiring or do you go through surges followed by quiet periods?

I'm being rather virtuous for the time being, though I'm not quite totally on the wagon. Sometimes I'll find myself thumbing through an auction catalog and suddenly my own personal devil-lust sets in.

You garnered a lot of media attention for a bottle of wine you bought at auction years ago.

Yes, I still hold the Guinness World Record for the most money paid (£105,000) at auction for a bottle of wine. In 1985, I bought at a Christie's auction one of the now highly controversial bottles of 1787 Chateau Lafite purportedly owned by Thomas Jefferson. It had been put up for sale by the now infamous collector/dealer Hardy Rodenstock, who alleged that the bottle had been "discovered" in an old cellar. I beat out Marvin Shanken of the *Wine Spectator* in that purchase and it's a gift that just keeps on giving. It was perhaps my most memorable and visible acquisition. I went on several talk shows to discuss it. These days, I treat it as a presidential artifact rather than stowing it away in my wine cellar. I believe wine collector Bill Koch is still pursuing Rodenstock in a lawsuit that alleges the Jefferson bottles are not authentic. But having been a bystander, I really don't let it matter to me anymore. The story has been optioned as a movie in which I hope Johnny Depp will play the young Christopher Forbes.

How did the selling of your dad's collection of Faberge eggs affect you?

Pop always said that he had acquired in life more than he would have ever dreamed he could. He said that when the time came to divest, that he hoped to allow others to enjoy the pleasure of acquiring that he himself had experienced. He never had an intention of building a monument to himself. He would have made the same decision. The sale of the eggs allowed us to continue investing in dot coms, which in

2001 were becoming more profitable than print. Technology is now the bigger side of the business.

What is the greatest legacy your dad left to you and your siblings?

Our heritage is the business, the magazine. We had the privilege of being the custodians to these Russian works of art and the circumstances of parting with them were rather agreeable.

What is on exhibit in the Forbes Galleries now?

I happen to sit on the board of the American Jewelry Institute, and so we recently put together a fairly extensive presentation of costume jewelry. Faux bling seemed to be the right message for 2009 and 2010. In the lobby vitrines, we recently exhibited our collection of Cartier botanicals, which we will soon put up for sale. And in the permanent gallery, we are featuring "The Mortality of Immortality," which is a whimsical collection my dad amassed. These are items that have been engraved with detailed inscriptions to commemorate some great moment in time – trophy cups, oars, trowels, a 1937 relic from the Hindenburg disaster – and that collectively illustrate the concept of *sic transit gloria mundi* – "thus passes the glory of worldly possessions." He was fascinated by the idea that these objects symbolizing a great achievement in one's lifetime could then wind up in an attic or for sale at a flea market or yard sale.

What is the significance of the Cartier botanicals?

In the early 1900s, when Russian enamel was coming into fashion, Cartier was making small figurines of animals and flowers, such as lilies and magnolias and orchids, out of precious materials such as gold, jade, lapis and coral. They were made at only one factory in France and entirely hand-tooled. I think my dad acquired them by way of the close relationship he had with Claude Cartier. There are 12 or 15 of them in the collection and each is only 3 to 5 inches high and sits in a base of rock crystal. This is by far the largest private collection that exists, and I can remember them sitting on my dad's desk in his office.

What was your father's collecting philosophy?

He never got too arrogant or too big for his boots. I remember as a young kid hearing a reporter ask him if he ever felt guilty about his wealth or his collections. And he said, "Guilty? I have been so lucky in the lottery of life! Do I appreciate it? Yes!" My dad thought of his circumstances as the luck of the draw and that the fun of having these things lay in sharing them.



Suzanne Gannon has written for *Town & Country*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Art & Antiques*, and the *Financial Times*. She has been a guest on NPR's "Talk of the Nation."