



art

The king of curiosities

New York artist Barton Beneš bequeaths his irresistibly weird collection of pop artifacts to a museum in... North Dakota? **By Dylan Foley**

Visit artist Barton Lidice Beneš's apartment in New York City's West Village and you may feel you're in a dream. Meticulously organized cabinets brim with macabre and mirth-inducing objects. Stuffed heads of wild animals festoon the walls, bone chips of Catholic saints hang in the kitchen, and on Beneš's worktable the gallstones of actor Larry Hagman are proudly displayed near a straw used by Monica Lewinsky. If what you see isn't surreal enough, consider this: At Beneš's death, this whole apartment is headed for a museum in North Dakota.

"Living in my apartment is like living in a 17th-century curio cabinet," says Beneš, a 59-year-old maker of modern relics whose work has been attacked in British tabloids and featured on the cover of *ARTnews*. "I've been fascinated by relics ever since I took a monk's bone from the catacombs in Rome in 1963."

He's been busy. His 850-square-foot apartment is crammed with thousands of artifacts, including a statue of the Virgin Mary created by Beneš from dollar bills, numerous African carvings, and a mummified Egyptian catfish that he says "smells like bouillon."

Beneš has been HIV-positive since 1986 and suffers from emphysema. This past spring, after a period of ill health, he made arrangements with the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks, whose curators will videotape, document, and measure everything to re-create his apartment in their museum on the American Great Plains.

But why is Beneš donating his life's work to a museum in North Dakota? The story begins in 1993, when Beneš created "Lethal Weapons," a highly controversial exhibit made up of 30 artworks filled with his own blood, including a Molotov cocktail, a water pistol, and a perfume atomizer. The show



Monica Lewinsky's straw with lip gloss
HBO Special
"Monica Lewinsky in Black and White"
May 2001
New York City

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opened in Lund, Sweden, after government health officials had forced Beneš to heat the artworks at a temperature of 160 degrees in a hospital oven to make them safe for public viewing. "Lethal Weapons" later toured England's Midlands as part of the group show "Brenda and Other Stories," which was attacked in the press and called "any rotten trash" by a Tory politician.

"Commercial galleries in the U.S. wouldn't show it at first," says Beneš, a wiry man with a wicked sense of humor. The first American viewing of "Lethal Weapons" was at the North Dakota museum, where Beneš's work was exhibited without controversy. "They didn't have preconceived notions about what art should be," Beneš says admiringly. "They were very open-minded with the exhibit. Even school trips came."

Beneš spent his own school days in New York City, where he was raised by his Czech immigrant relatives. He was a medal-winning speed skater as a teenager but gave that up to go to art school. His lover of 30 years, the basket maker Howard Meyer, died of AIDS complications in 1989. "Most of my boyfriends are in their 20s now," he sighs. "All the good ones my age are taken."

For the past two decades, Beneš has been making relics out of found and bought materials—acquiring nails from the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Tex., and turning them into a conceptual burning cross, for example. Such images contrast nicely with Beneš's Warholian "veneration" of such pop flotsam as a fork used by actor Steven Van Zandt of *The Sopranos*. Beneš puts the "relics" into wooden cases, turning them into small "museums" that sell for as much as \$20,000.

Now, with the future of his art taken care of, Beneš seems headed for a rose period. His health has stabilized, and he's very active. And this October the prestigious art publisher Abrams presents *Curiosa*, a lavish book about Beneš's bizarre collection. "I have a penny found in Sigmund Freud's couch and a piece of coal from the *Titanic*," says Beneš of the highlights of the book. "Of course, Monica's straw will be included." ■

Foley writes about books for The Denver Post.