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Some real bronc-bustin’, snake-stompin’ cowboy boots, from a calendar

(Photos by Georgia Caraway)

Wooden Scotty dog postcard with hand-painted details
TEXAS KITSCH AND OTHER COLLECTIBLES

by Georgia Caraway of Denton

A lot of people may not understand the importance of the State of Texas in the overall scheme of the universe—or why someone would choose to present a paper on collecting only Texas items. It is hard to conceive of a book explaining “How to Speak Iowan,” or a battle cry “Remember the Brooklyn Bridge!” Texas, however, has been the topic of thousands of books, and national television programs such as Dallas and Walker, Texas Ranger have spread the word—perhaps somewhat warped—of the uniqueness of this Special Corner of Heaven. Equally as important, visitors to Texas have taken home tens of thousands of collectible items—some real “kitsch”—to further spread the word about this state’s far-reaching fame.

I began collecting Texana—not kitsch—while I was working on my master’s degree in Texas Studies at the University of North Texas. Texas Studies was a short-lived program that Jim Lee created during the chauvinistic excitement of the Texas Sesquicentennial. My degree means I devoted a large part of my life to the formal study of things Texan. I know of “no whar but Texas” where you could get a master’s degree based on the history and literature of a state.

My collection of Texana began in a sane fashion—not kitschy—with collecting books about Texas that were required reading for my degree. I decided that I would only collect first-edition hardbacks written by Texas-born authors—a bonus would be if it
supported an author’s autograph. As my appetite grew, my quest expanded. I had about two hundred editions, but it was getting more difficult and more expensive to find collectible books locally. So I began to scour flea markets, garage sales, antique shows, and bookstores near and far for rare and not-so-rare editions. And I lowered my standards to any book written by a Texas author or about Texas. My husband sarcastically suggested that my definition of a Texas author was anyone who visited Texas and wrote a book before he or she returned to his or her state of permanent residence. I assured him that my criterion was much stricter—the author had to cross the Texas border, write a book, and eat at a Dairy Queen before returning to his or her home state.

When the number of volumes in my collection reached more than one thousand, and the bookshelves were filling more rapidly than we could build more, I decided to diversify. Again my standards suffered. I began to search for Texas kitsch.

Kitsch is art and literature with little or no aesthetic or commercial value. It comes in every size, on every type of material—pottery, barbwire, red and white corncobs—anything that the creative kitsch mind could use to create something tacky but marketable. There are thousands of Texana kitsch items on paper—recipe booklets from the Centennial and Texas State Fair advertising Texas food and fiber products, photographs of Texas people, and Texas postcards, among others.

Texas postcards are a collecting field in kitsch unto themselves. The only rule that governs their inclusion is that the subject be specific to Texas. Texas kitsch is flooded with cards showing the Texas Centennial, Texas attractions such as the Alamo and cacti in the El Paso area, advertisements for businesses such as the Arthur A. Everts jewelry firm and El Fenix in Dallas, the bath houses of Marlin and Mineral Wells, Carnegie libraries and historical governmental buildings like City Hall in San Antonio and Waco, and real photos of the 254 historic courthouses. True lovers of postcard kitsch put them in large hardback memory books and lay them out on the coffee table in the livingroom.
A friend of mine in Denton collects only postcards about Denton. He especially cares about the two universities: Texas Woman’s University, known in the past as Girls Industrial College, College of Industrial Arts, and Texas State College for Women; and the University of North Texas, once called North Texas Normal and North Texas State Teachers College. He has more than one hundred TWU cards and fifty UNT cards. Note: collectors of kitsch are never reluctant about showing their trophies.

Looking through his cards, one sometimes finds that the messages are more interesting than the cards. One from the penitentiary in Huntsville reads, “Please don’t think this my stopping place.”

Cards depicting scenes from towns and cities are especially important, particularly early scenics, local industries, or editorial messages such as a card showing the billboard from Hondo—“Welcome. This is God’s Country; Please Don’t Drive Through It Like Hell. Hondo, Texas.”

Texas is famous for its brags about everything from wildlife to produce. There is the famous Texas Jackalope, usually with a cowboy on board. Or longhorns with outrageous horn spans. Or the outsized potato from Marble Falls or the giant tomato from Jacksonville. Some kitsch collectors specialize only in Texas Brag cards.

Another special kitschy postcard is the three-dimensional souvenir card, with a string tag attached for the greeting and mailing address. A surviving popular example is a charming, wooden Scotty dog with hand-painted details with a pyrographic message that reads, “Having a dog gone good time in Dallas Texas.” His eye is a thumbtack. Can you imagine anything like that surviving today’s mechanized Post Office equipment? The one-and-a-half-cent stamp on my Scotty tells the knowledgeable collector that this is a pre-1925 piece. Postage for postcards changed from one cent to two cents in 1925. The extra half-penny was for the additional weight.

The bluebonnet, the Texas state flower, can be found on dozens of photographic postcards. The bluebonnet can also be found on some Texas pottery. William Meyer and Franz Schultz established Meyer Pottery in Atascosa in 1887. They made jugs,
churns, mugs, poultry fountains, ant traps, and in the forties and fifties they fired hundreds of the bluebonnet-decorated souvenir pieces for serious kitsch art collectors. Texas kitsch art is also a good source for finding amateur paintings of bluebonnets from the 1940s and 1950s. Matching hand-painted inexpensive wooden frames usually surrounded these paintings.

In some cases on these little paintings, instead of the bluebonnet, we have another Texas icon—the Alamo. The Alamo is perhaps the most famous of the Texas landmarks, known throughout the world for the heroism of its defenders and for the mission’s distinctly recognizable architectural shape. Thousands of examples of items can be found with the Alamo’s façade painted, inscribed, printed, or etched on them. One popular item was a painted velvet Alamo pillow cover before I converted it into a beauty of a purse. You can imagine the comments I got about this purse when I carried it in my home state of Pennsylvania. The Alamo is famous even in foreign lands.

A world of kitsch and fine art came out of the Texas Centennial. A. Harris of Dallas contracted with Imperial Glass Company in 1936 to produce a glass platter of the Alamo for the Texas Centennial for exclusive distribution through their store. When the Centennial year was over, the mold was destroyed so that no other copies could be made. Other Centennial Imperial Glass pieces offered included a matching glass creamer and sugar bowl.

The Texas Centennial Exposition ran for 178 days, from June 6 to November 30, 1936. The celebration marked the hundred-year anniversary of Texas’s independence from Mexico. Dallas campaigned to hold the celebration there and the city’s offer to put up $10,000,000 was accepted. With some federal, state, and private donor money, about $25,000,000 was raised. Fifty buildings were erected in Dallas’s State Fair Park, with the Hall of State being the centerpiece. These art deco buildings of the 1930s might be what one would call “architectural kitsch,” unobtainable by your average kitsch collector.
Ceramic versions of “Old Rip” by the House of Webster, Eastland, Texas
Thousands of different items were made for the Centennial, many of them are cross collectibles into other categories: postcards, salt and pepper shakers, ashtrays, jewelry, Czechoslovakian plates illustrating Texas themes, a replica of a Colt .45 six-shooter, parasols, dishes and bowls adorned with bluebonnets, sheet music for “Come on Down to Texas,” walking sticks, sunbonnets, license plates, mason jars, doorstops, Swanky Swigs, playing cards, hats, miniature buildings, calendars, pincushion shoes, pottery and souvenir spoons to name just a few.

Souvenir spoons are universal collectibles in the realm of kitsch art. Texas spoons from nearly every town and hamlet have been produced in sterling and silverplate. The spoons, in demitasse size, advertise businesses as well as the towns of their location. The Arthur A. Everts jewelry firm, as well as the Texas Centennial, circulated souvenir spoons during the Centennial year.

Personal apparel also is popular among kitsch collectors. Enid Collins designed wooden box purses and canvas and leather purses from her factory in Medina, Texas, from 1958 until 1970 when she sold her company, Collins of Texas, to Tandy Corporation of Fort Worth. She was famous for her gaudy designs using braids and plastic beads and gemstones. Although I have more than sixty of these bags, the Roadrunner purses are my favorites. They come in a medley of shapes, sizes, and colors and are pure kitsch.

Other clothing items include bronc-bustin’, snake-stompin’ cowboy boots, Texas ties, and scarves. The 1950 book by John Randolph Texas Brags (Hufsmith, Texas, 1950) inspired the themes and humor found on the popular Texas-map scarf. The Texan’s view of the vastness and importance of Texas as compared to the rest of the states is clearly illustrated by having Texas cover one-half of the United States map. The scarf depicts Texas as having the most cantankerous coyotes, the most hellacious javelinas, the prickliest pears, the jumpinest jackrabbits, most rambunctious roadrunners, and the peskiest prairie dogs. And one popular scarf shows San Angelo as famous for “The Hairiest Goats (Mohair than
Goats).” Every Texas kitsch collection must have a drawer of these artistic scarves and hankies.

Household items play an important part in collecting Texas kitsch. The braggadocio, puns, and jokes found on Chamber-of-Commerce-inspired scarves and hankies can be found on tablecloths and napkins. One need never to be far away from one’s kitsch collection, even at dinnertime. Souvenir plates are very popular among Texas kitsch collectors. Texas souvenir plates are produced for nearly every tourist stop as fundraisers for women’s service clubs. The Vernon Kiln Company of California produced most of the more serious plates. They are beautifully rendered and of high quality pottery. On the other hand, most of the garish plates distributed by civic history organizations follow the same designs as the tablecloth and scarves or pillowcases and are collectably tacky.

Pottery manufacturing was a serious industry from the earliest times of Texas settlement. The weight of pottery churns, jugs, and other household utilitarian pottery prevented settlers from bringing pottery produced in the north and east in wagons to Texas. Texas potters did bring their pottery-making skills with them.

Horton Ceramics of Eastland (1852 to 1954) was the predecessor to the House of Webster Ceramics in Eastland. House of Webster produces about 200,000 pieces of pottery per year to be used by the House of Webster food gift company of Rogers, Arkansas. Much of the production is Texas kitsch. Dozens of pottery designs such as churns, telephones, apples, thimbles, and beehives are produced to contain their homemade preserves, apple butter, and honey.

But perhaps the most famous kitsch art from the House of Webster is the ceramic replica of the legendary horned toad, “Old Rip.” The legend goes that when the Eastland County Courthouse was dedicated in 1897, a Texas horned toad was placed in the cornerstone. When the courthouse was razed in 1928, thirty-one years later, the cornerstone was reopened, the horned toad twitched and
woke up. The name “Old Rip,” based on Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle, was resurrected. Old Rip was sent on a national promotional tour and even visited President Calvin Coolidge in Washington, D. C. When Old Rip came home, he caught pneumonia and died. His body was sent to a taxidermist and his remains were placed in a casket in the rotunda of the new Eastland County Courthouse. House of Webster Ceramics began making these horned toads as giveaways for school children and tourists who visited their manufacturing plant. I have received several of these ceramic horned toads as gifts. They come in different colors and shades, but all have the name “OLD RIP” emblazoned on their chest.

While searching the Internet for more examples of Old Rip as an example of Texas kitsch, I was amused to note that ceramic Old Rips are sold all over the United States. My most recent replica came from Fort Worth for a two-dollar investment. Most Texas examples cost between two and five dollars. However, invariably if Old Rip resides in California, he commands twenty to twenty-five dollars. Just because it’s kitsch doesn’t mean it’s cheap! Maybe the entrepreneurs in California have added on import costs—or just maybe they are beginning to learn what everyone here was born knowing—that Texas is indeed the center of the universe and outsiders have to pay accordingly.
Enid Collins roadrunner purses from the 1960s