

# Head Vase Spa

Blue Springs, Missouri

Any lover of head vases has felt the excitement of finally finding that “special lady” only to have it quickly turn to that heart-sinking feeling when discovering that somewhere in her 50 plus year history, she suffered some damage.



For those “gotta have her anyway” moments, we crazed collectors and our damaged girls are very fortunate to have access to some very talented restoration people who specialize in head vase repair.

Whether it’s a hairline crack, broken finger or even a chipped eyelash, for the past fifteen years many of our damaged girls have been professionally restored by Jim Keefer at his “Head Vase Spa” in Blue Springs, Missouri.

Jim’s amazing artistic talent with our delicate ladies might lead one to think that head vase restoration had been a lifelong endeavor. Few of us would suspect that a twenty-five year veteran Supervisor at General Motors would find a second career in a field so far removed from the manufacturing industry, or that he would become an International solution to damaged head vases everywhere. Here’s the story of how that happened:

Jim was born in Carthage, Missouri and raised in the VERY little town of 350 people called East Lynne, Missouri. He has two children and especially enjoys his two adorable granddaughters.

It was not until Jim retired from GM that he discovered he had an eye for antiques. He began searching local garage sales with a self-imposed spending limit of \$20 per week. While that might not sound like a lot of investment, back then Jim could find a fiesta cup for five cents.

Just for fun, by renting a small curio cabinet with four shelves for \$17/month at a local antique shop, Jim found that he could sell his five-cent Fiesta cups for \$30. And in exchange for a portion of his rent, Jim would help the shop owner by reading reference books, assisting customers and act as a security guard.

As Jim’s interest in antiquing grew, he purchased a motor home so he could broaden his search for antiques in other cities and states.

To expand his knowledge, Jim subscribed to a weekly antique newsletter, which before the Internet, was one of the few information resources for collectors. He read stories about exciting finds and learned a lot about collectibles. During this time, Jim began collecting McCoy pottery and by reading newsletters and reference books, he obtained more knowledge about his collection.

In addition to collecting select pieces of McCoy pottery, Jim’s main McCoy collection was the dragonfly flowerpots. The dragonfly flowerpots came in three sizes and were curiously never marked.



Jim only learned they were McCoy pieces by studying the books and price guides.

Originally created in blue, pink, white, yellow and a greenish/teal, Jim found that there were also some “bastards” in his collection.

They were dubbed the name “bastards” due to a paint mix up.

These unique and brightly colored flowerpots were produced in the 1940's.

It's rare for most collectors to limit collecting to just one specific item and Jim was no exception.

During this time, Jim also began picking up what would become a substantial collection of 1,000+ pieces of beautiful black glass.

This collection includes a unique assortment of vases with hand painted flowers in addition to ashtrays, inkwells, bowls, plates, cups & saucers and he has acquired several beautiful place settings.



On what would become a life-changing event in October 1995, Jim learned about a porcelain pottery restoration class in nearby Kansas City.

Jim dabbled in porcelain repair with cookie jars, snow babies, Hummels and other items, but he was interested in learning how to perfect his technique. Even back then, the class was expensive, costing \$2,000, but the package included an airbrush, air compressor, a handful of paintbrushes and bottled lacquer. Each student was to bring a handful of items to be repaired.

It was a small group of students and Jim found two great friends through this class. One of these now long time friends is Kathleen Cole.

Jim's first impression of Kathleen was a “prim and proper southern lady”, who was “dressed to the nines”. Jim admits with fond affection that the students almost immediately dubbed Kathleen “Ms. Mint Julep”.

When Kathleen discovered that no one in class knew what a head vase was, she ordered price guides from her publisher for each of her classmates. It was during this class with Kathleen that Jim acquired his flair for repairing our beautiful head vases.

Also attending this class was a local lady who shared an interest in antiques. Beverly and her family soon “adopted” Jim during the holidays.

In 1998 when Jim and Beverly attended a Prussia Pottery convention Jim’s path crossed with his future.

Carol worked at an expensive antique booth and traveled with a couple of friends from Indianapolis to the convention in Kansas City. Beverly knew Carol’s friends and through that friendship, Jim was introduced to Carol.

Soon after, another convention was going to be held in Detroit. Beverly’s friends were going to be there, so Jim called Carol and invited her to join them. One thing led to another and in 2000 Carol accepted a position with the City of Blue Springs, made Missouri her home.

Although Jim was retired and Carol worked full time, they spent their free time shopping antique malls, flea markets and garage sales. Jim had refined his restoration skills along the way and had turned his hobby into a small business. Many of you may remember Jim from his original company name “Gimmie-a-Break.”

Jim and Carol were constantly on the hunt for assorted collectibles and beautiful items in need of repair. It was on one of these treasure hunts they discovered the Head Hunters Newsletter. Seeing an opportunity Jim contacted the editor, Maddy Gordon to see if he could advertise his restoration business in her newsletter.

Before Jim could advertise in the newsletter, Maddy wanted to see a sample of his work first hand, so she sent him a damaged head vase. Little did anyone know that the head vase Jim repaired back then would turn out to be so valuable! This is a photo of that very vase.



Maddy also learned that Kathleen and Jim had met each other in the restoration class in 2001. She invited Jim to join a restoration lecture at the head vase convention with both Kathleen Cole and Luanne Nichols Shoup.

In the months following the convention, a head vase auction was being held in Iowa. It was at this auction where Jim and Carol met several other head vase collectors and Jim’s restoration talents and “Gimmi-a-Break” became known among collectors.

News about Jim’s high quality work and his ability to seamlessly replace missing arms, fingers, hands and eye lashes spread quickly. It wasn’t long before Jim worked himself out of retirement and into a full time job restoring damaged ladies to their original beauty!

Since his business became focused on head vases, Jim decided to rename his business the “Head Vase Spa” and his home became the “perfect resort” for these ladies to relax while waiting for their makeover.

With years of experience under his hat (pun intended), Jim has take restoration to a new level.



He has been replicating the “removable hat” for the Ugaco “Removable Hat Girls” that got lost over the years.

Both the mauve and light blue replacement hat for the “removable hat girls” or also known as the “fly away girls” have been duplicated and are available for sale.

Jim also replaces the umbrellas for the “umbrella girl” head vases.

These umbrellas are being offered in a large assortment of colors.

The colors are: red, dark blue, light blue, aqua, black and gold. They are \$40 each and include the original style brass pole.

To view the removable “fly away girl” hats and the assortment of umbrellas for the “umbrella girls,” you can see them all at [www.headvasecollector.com](http://www.headvasecollector.com)



As Jim’s business grew and he became much busier, his crohn’s disease worsened, forcing his turn around repair time to become longer.

Despite this, Jim has never faltered and he has maintained his standard of perfection no matter how long it took to complete the repair. Jim’s loyal patrons can attest, Jim’s work is well worth the wait

As most of us can appreciate, our quest for collectibles was a totally different experience before the days of eBay. Historically, collectibles could only be found in antique malls, yard sales, trade shows or at auctions, which meant a lot of traveling.

During Jim’s travels, he accumulated a collection of Kentucky Derby glasses. Although he’s never attended a horse race, he has managed to round up over 500 Kentucky Derby glasses.

His collection not only includes drinking glasses, but shot glasses as well, some of which have become quite valuable over the years. One of these rare Kentucky Derby items is a red shot glass produced in 1985. He also owns one of the aluminum glasses that were produced and are very difficult to find.

There were only a handful of shot glasses produced in 1987 with gold trim. Since the gold trim was expensive to produce, only a limited number were made. While garage sale shopping, Jim found a votive candle holder. Little did someone know, they used a RARE Kentucky Derby shot glass with gold trim to hold a candle.

Jim's collection includes glasses from all but the first three years of the Kentucky Derby as well as samples of rare, non-official glasses. In addition, he has acquired a few Belmont and Preakness glasses.



One of Jim's most bizarre collections is his large assortment of colorful ashtrays.

Each is unique and allows the smoke to exit from all different parts of the head.

He refers to the ashtrays in these photos as his "big mouth" ashtrays. One can definitely see why they have been "dubbed" this nickname.

These are some of the more eclectic ashtrays in Jim's vast collection of over 500 with the highest valued around \$450.

These brightly colored ashtrays stand appx. 2 1/2" – 3" tall.

Having such an elaborate collection of vintage ashtrays, Jim also considered putting a price guide together. It's still a possibility, once he decides to retire again.



He has some more unusual figure ashtrays that measure almost 10" tall. Here are just a few which include a doctor, a professor and a conductor.

There are so many incredible and very unique ashtrays that were produced over the years.

Since Jim's collection continues to grow, he's still trying to find room to display them all.





In the late 90's when eBay was gaining popularity by making collectibles more accessible, Jim and Carol still shopped the antique malls, but they found that eBay had a lot to offer as well.

It was during this time, Jim and Carol also began collecting "Naughties".

Following the Victorian era, a niche market developed for china and bisque figurines of woman wearing very revealing outfits.

These little lovelies include bathing beauties dressed in swimsuits of real lace or stylishly hand painted beachwear in addition to "nudies" who were made to wear nothing but a smile.

Also produced were these "flippers" which are also innocent looking figurines who reveal a bawdy secret when "flipped" over.

They were also known as water "squirters." Many of these squirters were manufactured in Germany during the late 1800's thru the 1930s.

Jim currently collects the girl squirters while Carol has a collection of the boy squirters.



The bathing beauty in the front of this photo carries the most value at \$250.

While most of us are searching for that rare head vase, Jim and Carol are busy adding to their own collectibles.

It's possible that Jim also has the largest collection of antique "stamp lickers" sometimes referred to as "letter moisture sponges".

During his online search for unusual ashtrays, Jim met an elderly lady selling her late husband's ashtray collection. Jim bought several ashtrays from her.



During one of his ashtray transactions, the seller asked Jim if he would be interested in purchasing an old stamp licker collection.

Some of these stamp lickers were signed 957 Germany, while others were marked Beckhard Line.

The Beckhard Line stamp lickers might have been a giveaway item at one time.

The stamp lickers are also a very colorful collection!

Over the next two years, the seller eventually sold the collection of 25-30 stamp lickers to Jim for \$900. Jim's collection now exceeds fifty-five distinctive stamp lickers, each one still has its sponge intact.

Jim is also partial to miniature pocketknife collecting. Each of these pocketknives measures approximately one inch in length. They were made in Germany between the 1930s and 1940s.

Jim was able to develop his collection to include over thirty-five knives with his most collectible knife valued around \$150.

Do any readers out there know of someone who collects condom tins? Well, you do now!

Condom tins are quite collectible!

Some condom tins are valued as high as hundreds of thousands of dollars. And of course like any collectible, the higher the price, the harder they are to find.

Jim's collection consists of condom tins from the 1930s through the 1950s. They even produced condom repair kits, which of course, people found to be a fun novelty item.



Many collectors may have come across Frankoma Pottery during their search for collectibles. But how many were aware Frankoma also made Christmas cards using miniature pottery? These special Christmas cards were sent to friends and dealers.



After the cards were made using these miniature forms of pottery, the mold was broken.

Each card measures around 3" – 3 ½". Jim has about 30 Frankoma Christmas cards in his collection.



Remember "Swanky Swigs"? They were very popular in the late 1930s.

Jim's grandmother owned a set of these Kraft depression glasses.

When her items were placed up for auction, Jim purchased her set to keep her memory close.

Since then, Jim has accumulated an assortment of several other sets.

The vast collections in Blue Springs, Missouri just don't stop! In addition to the Victorian boy squirters, Carol has some intriguing collections of her own including an extensive collection of pins with names scrolled on them.

At one time, these pins were sold at carnivals and fairs. Makers would set up their tables and personalize the pins using one continuous piece of wire.

There are also common scrolled pins that read "Mother", "Sister" or "Sweetheart". Several uncommon names can still be found online and at antique malls and on the original card.

Carol has a sizeable collection of these pins, some with names you rarely hear anymore. These decoratively scripted names were created as a form of art.



And what does Carol do with these pins you ask?

Well of course, she wears them! People have been known to ask Carol what her name is for the day. It was almost a year before her supervisor noticed she wore a different name to work every day.

Carol also collects post-mortem photographs of babies.

Some of her black/white photos date back to the late 1800s and she has several from the early 1900s.

While not for everyone, these photos are quite collectible.

Carol's highest valued photo is \$300.



One of the most whimsical inclusions in Jim's diverse collections is his colorful bisque "nodders."

Jim has nodders dating from the 1800s thru to the 1950s.

The little known history behind nodders is they were actually created to predict earthquakes.

Most of Jim's nodders are also rare and unique, and some of his more creative nodders have a tongue that moves and one plays the organ!

You just never know when you may find another collector who shares your same interest or what novelty item produced today will be the hot collector item for future generations.

We thought that sharing Jim's story with you would not show how interesting it can be to learn about the treasures that others collect but also to show how a love of collecting can lead you to a world of new talents.

Whether collecting leads you to a new career or to new friends, the possibilities, like most collections are endless.

To this day, every morning you can still find Jim at the Waffle House where he meets up with former GM employees. Ask Jim about his collection of Waffle House memorabilia! Now there's another collection to be had!