

# Our Grand Lady

## Kathleen Cole



As most head vase collectors know, you mention the name Kathleen Cole and you'll find almost every collector owns at least one of her amazing books!

Kathleen has in fact, published a total of four head vase books. Each book is filled with hundreds of photographs detailing and documenting the exciting world of head vase collecting!

Her first identification and values book was published in 1989. This book was created at a time before most collectors even knew there was an interest in head vases. If people owned any of these dime store collectibles, they didn't know what they had, let alone recognize their value.

Head vases originally sold in discount stores like Woolworth's, Woolco and others during the 1950's and early 1960's. Several head vases have been found with their original price sticker, so we know they usually sold for less than \$2 each. Some florists filled these novelty head vases with one of a kind, elaborate plastic floral arrangements.

Some fifty years later these head vases still remain popular with collectors. In fact, some head vases have reached prices ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars. To add further excitement to the head vase collector's hunt, some of the rarest head vases still manage to surface in today's market!

So who is this mystery lady behind these wonderful books on head vases?

We refer to her books often, but what do we actually know about the person behind the name, Kathleen Cole?

*Amanda Kathleen Johnson* was born on July 16, 1932 in Hendrixtown, Georgia which is located at the point where North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia meet. It was during the great depression.

Kathleen said they grew up poor and some times were without shoes, but they always had an abundance of love in their home.

She was named after her grandmother "Amanda Kathleen" and given the nick-name Kathleen. She is the youngest of three children with an older brother and sister.



Kathleen at 9 months old in Hendrixtown, Georgia



When Kathleen was five years old, her family moved to Mineral Bluff, Georgia where she and her siblings attended school.

For several years they were educated in this two room schoolhouse. Four grades were taught in each class room.

Kathleen is standing on the far right. She's still as statuesque today as she was when she was a child.

Kathleen's father was employed at the Copper Company in Tennessee. Her mother was a Christian lady who loved and cared for the family full time and was also a fantastic cook!

After grade school, Kathleen rode a bus to Morgantown, Georgia where she attended middle school and high school. She graduated from high school at 16 then she worked part time in a florist shop making floral arrangements for \$10/week.



Kathleen soon found a full time job as a bookkeeper at a local hardware store. This is where Kathleen met her husband, Jack, who was a buyer for the hardware store.



Kathleen and Jack started dating in 1950. It was during that time Jack built a home for Kathleen's brother who had become a minister.

When Jack took on this project, Kathleen became nervous. She knew her father was a perfectionist and she was afraid that if Jack didn't meet her father's expectations, she wouldn't be permitted to date him anymore.

The home was beautiful and Jack's talents far exceeded any level of construction her father could ever imagine.

Soon after completing her brother's home, Jack began training for the Korean war and was stationed in the barracks at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Six weeks before Jack was shipped to Korea, Kathleen and Jack were married on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1951.

Jack lived in Korea for 18 months. His uncle had a construction job waiting for him in Memphis; so Kathleen, her sister and first cousin moved to an apartment in Memphis.

Shortly after Jack's return, he and Kathleen moved into their own apartment and Jack started work with his uncle.

Jack was credited for building the Clark Tower, the tallest building in Memphis. He also handled the construction of several schools, car dealerships, large churches, the first Target store and the rehabilitation building at the University of Tennessee. These are just a few of Jack's many accomplishments.

During this time, Kathleen worked as a part-time bookkeeper at a Stamp and Coin shop where she eventually retired after twenty one years. It was in 1956 when Kathleen gave birth to their daughter, Melanie Ann.

Throughout their years together, Jack and Kathleen always shopped antique stores and enjoyed collecting an assortment of antiques as well. It wasn't until the late seventies when Kathleen began collecting head vases. It was almost ten years later when Kathleen's collection had grown to more than 750 head vases.

In 1981, Kathleen wrote to Collector Books to tell them about her head vase collection. She approached them with an idea about possibly putting together a price guide. Even though Kathleen didn't hear back from Collector Books right away, she continued to add to her collection of lady head vases.

Sadly in June, 1984 Kathleen lost her beloved husband to cancer. Without her long time friend and partner, Kathleen's life took a turn into some difficult times so she began working full time at the Stamp and Coin shop.

The first Christmas without Jack was a sad time, but remarkably just the day after Christmas Kathleen received a letter from Collector Books. They wanted her to help them complete a book on head vases. Not only was she thrilled to hear back from them, she was surprised to receive a response to a letter three years prior!

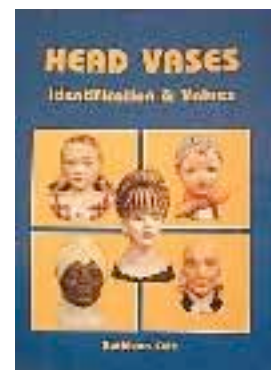
For a full nine months after signing the contract with Collector Books, Kathleen spent her evenings after work carefully photographing each of her head vases. In 1985, Kathleen sent the photos of her entire collection and corresponding information to her publisher.

In June of 1986, Kathleen's strength was put to the test again when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The following years were filled with many challenges and fortunately she has not had any recurrences since then.

In 1989, Kathleen received a letter from Collector Books announcing her head vase book was complete and copies were being shipped to stores. Collector Books titled her book: **Head Vases Identification & Values**

No sooner had Kathleen's shiny new book reached the store shelves, she was already receiving cards and letters from other collectors through her publisher.

One of these letters came from Judy Kegler in Michigan. Judy wrote to Kathleen about a head vase that her brother John recently purchased.



John, who was an avid collector of Marilyn Monroe memorabilia, bought this gorgeous head vase because it reminded him of Marilyn.

Since Judy and her brother, John could not find this beautiful head vase in Kathleen's **Head Vases Identification and Values** book, Judy took a photo of the head vase and included it with her letter. She sent her request to Kathleen through her publisher.

It was on an Easter Sunday when Kathleen phoned Judy to respond to her letter. Judy and her family were sitting around the dinner table at the time.

To this day, Kathleen, Judy and John all remember that phone call on Easter Sunday. And of course, we all know Judy is now the editor of our Head Hunters Newsletter!

When Kathleen announced her name on the phone in her southern drawl, Judy immediately hushed her family (whispered it was Kathleen Cole) and everyone gathered around the phone to listen to the conversation.

Judy said she couldn't have been more excited if it was the President of the United States on the other end of the phone! And yes, the head vase in question was a Marilyn Monroe. Kathleen placed a value of \$250 on her. Oh my, weren't those the good old days?!!!

Another letter Kathleen received through her publisher came from Maddy Gordon. Maddy was in the early stages of collecting head vases when she came across Kathleen's book.

After Maddy purchased the ***Head Vases Identification and Values*** book, she sent an invitation to the head vase convention to Kathleen through her publisher. Maddy was hosting the first head vase convention in Kissimmee, Florida.

News of the first head vase convention spread quickly to other collectors. The convention also attracted a representative by the name of Alison Levie from Schiffer Publishing. Alison approached Maddy to see if she knew anyone to help create a price guide on head vases for Schiffer Publishing. Maddy was happy to direct Alison to Kathleen.

Alison was aware of Kathleen's recently published book, but she assumed Kathleen was committed exclusively to Collector Books. Thankfully Kathleen was more than ready to take on another book; especially after seeing the great response from dealers and collectors from the first head vase convention.

In 1995, not only did Kathleen sign a contract with Schiffer Publishing, she also received another invitation from Maddy. This time it was to visit her home in New York to photograph Maddy's extensive collection of over 2,000 head vases. Kathleen Cole, the "country girl" was going to New York to visit her first big city!

From the moment she touched down in New York, Kathleen was in awe over the tall buildings and skyscrapers that mapped the big city landscape in every direction! Never before had Kathleen seen such an incredible sight!

However, Maddy's gorgeous home in Scarsdale was nothing compared to New York city. Instead she had a beautiful deck overlooking the swimming pool and it was surrounded by a lovely and peaceful wooded area. To Kathleen's surprise, there was not a tall building in sight. She assumed all New York was filled with tall buildings.

Kathleen couldn't wait to see Maddy's elaborate head vase collection. The only other collection she had ever seen was her own. After seeing Maddy's head vases, she was thrilled to have the opportunity to photograph them. There were so many new head vases she hadn't seen before and she wanted include every one of them to into her newest book she was to complete.

Every day during Kathleen's visit brought new surprises and sights to see! It was also such a treat to be able to share her passion for collecting these lovely ladies with another enthusiastic collector!

Since Kathleen couldn't sleep through all the excitement, she found herself awake as early as 4am. Kathleen kept herself busy by repainting the black in the eyes on Maddy's head vases that were missing some paint. Since Kathleen's visit, Maddy has since turned the eye painting over to her husband Bruce. After all, who's more qualified to care for her ladies eyes than the resident eye doctor!

In between photographing head vases, their days were filled with shopping, a variety of fabulous restaurants and of course, Broadway plays at night. They also visited a thrift store. Kathleen could not believe the wonderful selection of antiques they had for sale.

They also the opportunity to visit Renninger's Extravaganza in Brimfield, Massachusetts. Kathleen had never been to such a large flea market! Brimfield is where Kathleen purchased her first piece of Cordey. It was a large bust (not an open head) and she bought it for \$100. Sold! She was fortunate the dealer offered to ship her newly acquired prized possession to her home for only \$10. She was happy to report the Cordey piece arrived to her home safely.

When Kathleen finished photographing Maddy's collection of head vases, Maddy planned a Head Hunters luncheon that Friday afternoon in honor of the special occasion!



The table was all decked out in true "head vase style." Some of the head vases used for decoration were Cole plates #202 and #224 as shown in her blue book, **Head Vases Identification & Values**.



Talk about the icing on the cake! Maddy also had a special "head vase cake" made to match the décor.

In this photo, Kathleen is holding her first book **Head Vases Identification & Values**. The book is open to Cole plate #111, #3, to show the head vase that was created for the cake topping.

Three other couples in New York attended the celebration; Abe and Margot Banke, David and Mindy Smith and Jean Rich and Dennis Capani. It was a great way to celebrate not only a new adventure and a new book, but also to mark the beginning of what has become a life long friendship.

Just when Kathleen thought they did everything possible during her visit, there was one final party to attend.

Maddy's friend was celebrating her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The party was held in the Rainbow Room at the Rockefeller Plaza.

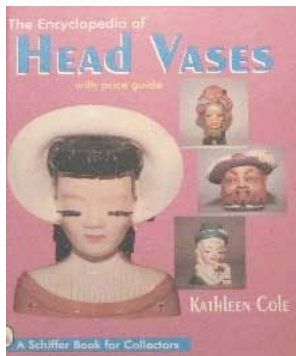
It was an incredible party that included a magnificent fireworks display. Even Jean Harris, the former Scarsdale Diet Dr's girlfriend managed to attend the party. It was quite the adventure for a small town country girl!

Kathleen calls her trip a once in a lifetime memorable experience. She remembers her visit with Maddy and Bruce with great fondness.

She was treated like "royalty" and she will never forget the kindness and warm hospitality Maddy and Bruce extended to her.

Thanks to Maddy and her wide range of head vases, Kathleen had enough new photographs to create her next book.

Kathleen's pink hard cover was titled "***The Encyclopedia of Head Vases,***" and was released in 1996. According to Schiffer Publishing, this was a record book because it only took three months to publish.



Kathleen dedicated this book to Maddy and Bruce Gordon.

Through Kathleen's book, Maddy helped to make head vase collecting the wonderful hobby it is today along with the endless hours committed to creating and hosting the annual Head Hunters Convention and through the publication of the quarterly newsletter.

The hard work and dedication between these two special ladies has helped us to better understand and appreciate our own interests in head vases while we continue to add to our collections.

Even though Maddy turned the quarterly Head Hunters Newsletter and the Head Hunters Convention hosting over to her successors, she continues to provide her support and encouragement.

Shortly after returning from her visit to New York, Kathleen signed up for a pottery restoration class. The restoration class took place in Missouri, so Kathleen stayed with her son-in-law's parents who lived in the area.

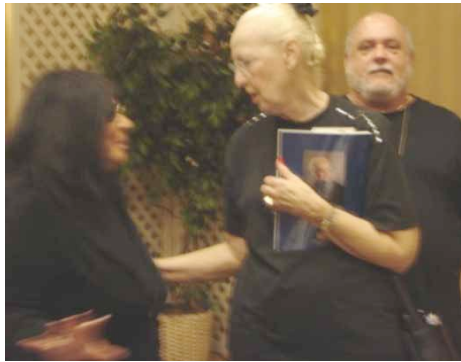
To her surprise, not a single student had ever heard of a head vase. This prompted Kathleen to contact her publisher and have six of her books delivered to the classroom the following day. Each student was given a book introducing them to head vases.

It was at the restoration class where Kathleen met Jim Keefer. Jim must have been the star pupil in that classroom because for the past fifteen years he has become a master at restoring damaged pottery and repairing our beloved head vases.

Many of you may already know Jim as the owner, operator and artist of the acclaimed "Head Vase Spa" in Blue Springs, Missouri.

Both Kathleen and Jim received their diplomas from the pottery restoration class in October, 1995. Since their class, Jim and Kathleen have remained good "buddies" over the years.

Together Jim and Kathleen have conducted short presentations by teaching us a little bit about the head vase restoration process at the closing of the annual conventions.



In this photo you'll see Maddy Gordon pictured along with Kathleen Cole and Jim Keefer.

This photo was taken at the conclusion of a head vase repair session held at one of the Head Hunters Conventions in Kissimmee, Florida.

Even after Kathleen graduated from the pottery restoration class, she decided not to pursue a career or hobby in restoring head vases.

However, after purchasing her first treasured Cordey piece at Renningers while visiting Maddy in New York, Kathleen knew it was time to start adding to her collection.

Over the years, Kathleen purchased several Cordey's and her collection now totals 59 lovely pieces. Her Cordey collection and head vases complement each other.

Kathleen has several similar Cordey pieces that were pictured in the Cordey article from the July, 2009 Head Hunters Newsletter.

No two Cordey pieces are ever identical since these delicate figurines were all made by hand.

The majority of Cordey pieces, with long flowing Victorian style dresses, are extremely fragile because of the lace trim. It is very difficult to find a piece without some minor damage.



Several of Kathleen's findings were lamps.

In order to display the lamps in her cabinets, she removed the shades and lighting accessories then left the figurines on their base.

Each figurine has its own personality and shows such intricate detail. They make a spectacular display.



In addition to combining lamps with figurines, Kathleen also has a collection of Cordey busts in her assortment of display cabinets. These are just a few of her favorites.



Kathleen's interest later turned into finding more unusual pieces by Cordey.

Her collection not only includes an assortment of elegant figurines and busts, but she has also accumulated a small collection of playful Cordey animals as well.

This adorable white kitten, the unique lamb on a base, the duck with brightly colored feathers and this tall chicken all create a wonderful accent to her collection.



Another unusual Cordey piece is this gorgeous tall vase adorned with gold and white roses below the handles.

The vase appears to be made of clay. It's so gorgeous on its own; it doesn't need a floral arrangement to enhance its beauty.

The Cordey wall hanging on the right is also among Kathleen's favorites. She displays it near her Cordey wall sconces.



It was in 1998, when Kathleen had accumulated a large amount of medical expenses; thus forcing her to sell her cherished head vase collection.

With the wonderful and overwhelming support from Judy Kegler and her family, Kathleen was able to sell her collection of over 1,500 head vases.

Judy Kegler and her family drove from Michigan to Kathleen's home in Memphis, Tennessee. They photographed and cataloged Kathleen's head vase collection before they carefully wrapped each vase and brought them back to Michigan with them.

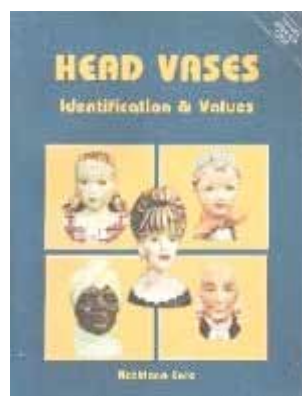
The first set of Kathleen's collection totaling 575 heads was placed for auction on May 23, 1998 at Brian Rowley's auction in Detroit, Michigan. On October 10, 1998, Brian Rowley auctioned 500 more of Kathleen's lovely head vases. It was on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Brian Rowley auctioned the last set of Kathleen's 500 head vases.

Many hopeful bidders attended the auctions looking to add that special head vase to their collection. In particular, collectors knew their purchase was coming from such an extraordinary and grand lady's collection.

Kathleen herself attended every auction and was grateful for the wonderful response she received from other collectors. She is confident that her ladies are being well cared for in their new homes.

Since the auction, Kathleen has once again, purchased over 100 of her favorite head vases and she currently displays them alongside her Cordey collection.

Collector Books contacted Kathleen to update her ***Head Vases Identification & Values*** book. The new version was released in 2002.



Although the same cover was used in the updated version, at the top right hand corner "**Values Updated 2002**" was printed to help collectors identify the most recent publication.

In addition, Kathleen also updated the head vase price guide originally written by Mary Zavada.

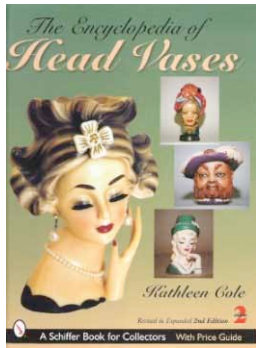
Since Mary Zavada wasn't available, Kathleen modified the price guide for Schiffer Publishing.



Years after Kathleen completed ***The Encyclopedia of Head Vases***, which was published in 1996, she realized the contract she signed with Schiffer Publishing required her to provide two more collector books.

Peter Schiffer wanted Kathleen to produce a book on Cordey, but her health did not allow her to accept the project.

Instead, Kathleen revised and expanded ***The Encyclopedia of Head Vases*** from her collection of assorted head vase photographs she obtained over the years.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of ***The Encyclopedia of Head Vases*** was revised and expanded. It was completed and available to collectors in 2003. This was the final book Kathleen provided Schiffer Publishing.

In 2007, Kathleen's ***Second Edition of Head Vases Identification and Values*** was published by Collector Books.

This extensive edition was made possible through the support of many collectors who provided head vase photographs.

More than 250 new photographs were added which included one of a kind samples, several rare head vases, many sets and never before seen head vases.

Two new sections were also added: One section features Betty Lou Nichols head vases while the other section is dedicated to head vases who have survived with their original and unique plastic floral arrangements.

Kathleen dedicated this book to Amanda Kathleen, her namesake and only grandchild. Amanda also shares her grandmother's passion for head vases.



Here Kathleen shares a photo with her daughter Melanie and granddaughter Amanda Kathleen, both seen in this family photo with Kathleen's son-in-law John.

Will Kathleen and Amanda dress as a head vase again at the next convention? If so, we look forward to the creativity they bring each time this pair enters the contest.

Kathleen continues to be a wonderful inspiration to head vase collectors. Her books have helped enlighten and inform collectors throughout the years. We're certain she will always remain an icon in the world of head vases. It was such a pleasure to learn more about the woman behind the books and to share her story with other collectors. Thank you Kathleen for all you've done for other head vase collectors!

If you have any questions or comments for Kathleen, you can also reach her by email at [Headladykc@centurytel.net](mailto:Headladykc@centurytel.net)