



PASSION IN THE ATTIC



Collector Michael Embacher in his realm

The bicycle: a simple principle with countless designs. Michael Embacher's fascination with bikes has led him to spend more than a decade compiling what is now one of the finest collections in the world. Some 220 international models from it are coming up for auction on 19 May.

BY DORIS KRUMPL

Coincidence had a significant hand in this, as so often in life: When Vienna-based architect Michael Embacher received a bicycle as a gift for a magazine subscription, things literally got rolling. He discovered his love of cycling. Once his appetite was whetted, he felt like trying out other models and became increasingly interested in historical and exceptional bicycles. “The criteria also included ‘exceptionally ugly’ specimens”, chuckles Embacher, who hangs bicycles on the factory walls of his office as though they were artworks. On 19 May, some 220 bicycles bought around the world over the course of a decade will change hands at Dorotheum.

The attic of Michael Embacher’s former office was home to the collection but is now no longer available. Here, the bicycles were sorted by colour and ready to go. “I like bicycles for being democratic products”, Embacher gushes, though his general approach to the matter is as casual as it is pragmatic. “Everyone can afford to have one and it needs no electronic gimmicks.” But why would someone want to collect bicycles in the first place? “Bicycles show how simple design can be if we abandon the idea of prettifying an object and attaching all sorts of frills to it to make it look better.” Perhaps the collection was actually an attempt to take an object and show how far design can go in reducing things while still producing a plethora of variants.

Embacher caused a global sensation with the books “SmartMove” and “Cyclepedia” – published by Thames & Hudson and by the collector himself – along with a special app and exhibitions in Portland (Oregon), Tel Aviv, and Vienna. And sure enough, the collection has some illustrious proponents:



- 1 A suitcase-shaped bike, Skoot, United Kingdom 2001, Opening price € 400
 - 2 Bianchi, C-4 project, Italy 1988, Opening price € 6,000
 - 3 Alex Moulton, One Off Moulton Special, United Kingdom 1991 (unique piece), Opening price € 6,000
 - 4 Colnago, Brügelmann, Italy 1979, Opening price € 1,000
- All Photos: Embacher-Collection



“Cyclepedia”, which was translated into a number of languages, has a foreword by British fashion designer and bicycle enthusiast Sir Paul Smith; also, star designer Sir James Dyson had the book sent to his clients as a Christmas present.

Some enthusiasts have declared Embacher’s collection to be second to none. The “Funicolo”, for instance, designed in 1937 by Frenchman Jacques Schulz, is the only one of three surviving examples still in working condition. “This field of collecting is still in its infancy”, says Embacher, who never bought bicycles as an investment but according to their degree of peculiarity. Take “Skoot”, for example, which has a handle to be carried like a suitcase, or a ladies’ bike by Trussardi with leather applications.

Embacher is not selling his absolute favourites, though. This very morning, he says, he rode to his office on a French model. “It is terminally rusty, and that is exactly what I like about it”, he explains. “It’s in vogue to preserve the condition and keep the patina, but otherwise leave it unrestored. Same story with vintage cars and furniture.” Or in architecture: “A completely restored Venice wouldn’t be Venice”, says Embacher.

Embacher’s bicycle collecting has led him to some odd encounters: “One fan pedalled to Vienna all the way from Barcelona. He was delighted to see that the attic actually existed,” says Embacher, “because he thought the pictures were all photoshopped.” Or the 90th birthday party of Alex Moulton, co-inventor of the Mini car, on Britain’s south coast. Moulton wheels are handmade and have a sophisticated suspension. “Just imagine, eight guys soldering away in a garage!”

Embacher believes this to be the right moment to put up the collection for auction: given the current nostalgia for vintage bicycles, many companies have taken to reviving old models.

Doris Krumpl worked as art journalist before joining Dorotheum as spokeswoman in 2004.



The spectacular collection app