



Czech perfume bottles come in stunning colors and shapes.

# Tres magnifique!

## Perfume bottle collectors appreciate the beauty, history of scents, cosmetic packaging

In the northwest suburbs of Chicago is a magical place that celebrates the beauty of scent, as it is perceived through the nose, eyes and other senses.

Visitors, by pre-arranged small group tours only, are invited to marvel at the beautifully-designed bottles, packaging, containers and other related items that have been used over thousands of years to hold and apply fragrances and cosmetics.

It's called the Perfume Passage Foundation and Museum, and it is comprised of several galleries that preserve the history, beauty and artistry of perfume bottles, compacts, ephemera and other related vanity items.

The collection, which contains 10,000 artifacts, was assembled by museum co-founders Rusty Hernandez-Sanfilippo and Jeffrey Sanfilippo.

"We've been collecting since the late 1990s and by the 2000s we had started to become more knowledgeable about vintage men's cologne bottles," says Hernandez-Sanfilippo.

As their interest grew, the collectors' collection expanded beyond men's cologne bottles. Today, a couple of the prized and oldest artifacts in the collection are a bronze scent container and a small makeup container that look like a painter's palette with a center well of animal fat surrounded by pigments in various hues. Both items date from between 2250 and 2500 B.C. in Egypt.

With so many items, the collectors decided that they wanted to share their knowledge through the museum that was established in 2019.

"We wanted to catalog, display and share the vast history of perfume through the ages," Hernandez-Sanfilippo says.

### Step back in time

The history of perfume and other cosmetics is captured in several galleries in the museum that focus on different themes or eras, including a Parisian boutique from the 1930s, a full, actual interior of an American drug store pre-1910, the Art Deco period of the 1920s and a space that pays homage to Rene Lalique, a French jeweler and art glass designer known for perfume bottles.

Hernandez-Sanfilippo says the different settings provide historical context that enhances understanding of the bottles and related items — compacts, lipsticks and purses — that are on display and which come from many different cultures.

Hernandez-Sanfilippo says the Perfume Passage recalls a time when purchasing or receiving a gift of fragrance was



The Perfume Passage Foundation and Museum, in the Northwest suburbs, is comprised of different galleries featuring elegant perfume bottles and other well-designed vanity items.

an event with various elements of beauty to unravel.

"It had different layers," he says. "There was beautiful packaging and a beautiful box presentation and then the crown jewel, which is the bottle itself."

The Perfume Passage Foundation is housed at The Sanfilippo Estate, a private residence not open to the general public except through pre-arranged charity events and pre-arranged group tours of 40 or more guests.

### Perfume bottle collectors

One of the visitors who appreciates the beauty of the Perfume Passage is Teri Wirth, president of the International Perfume Bottle Association, which has nearly 500 members. The bottle collectors visited the museum when it held its annual conference in Chicago in 2019.

"We like anything that has to do with a Victorian vanity table. We embrace all of it," says Wirth about the association that has chapters in all 50 states and in 17 countries. Wirth, who specializes in collecting pre-1920 Victorian bottles, says her interest in collecting vintage perfume bottles started in 1988 when she purchased her first bottle at an auction.

"I saw it sitting on a window sill and it just looked so

pretty," she says. Today, she enjoys collecting bottles made of Czech and Cameo glass.

"I like collecting unusual things," says Wirth who houses her collection, that numbers in the thousands, in curio cabinets.

### Commercial and non

Perfume Bottle Association collectors collect perfume bottles from two categories: non-commercial and commercial.

"Non-commercial bottles are ones that were made to bring to the apothecary to fill with scent," Wirth says. "Commercial ones were made by a manufacturer."

The range of cosmetic-related items that enthusiasts enjoy collecting is vast, including such items as atomizers, bottles with stoppers to daub the skin, and porcelain patch boxes, which were used in France in the 1700s to hold beauty marks, just to name a few.

"They'd carry those boxes and put the beauty marks on their cheeks or chin or wherever," Wirth says.

Like Hernandez-Sanfilippo, Wirth says the association members are interested in not just the beauty, but the history behind the items they collect.

"They are little art pieces and treasures," she says. "Most of us try to find out about the stories (behind the pieces) — the who, what, where and when they were made."

### It's easy to get started

One of the best parts of becoming a perfume bottle collector is that it's a hobby that's not expensive to start. Wirth says it's possible to find perfume bottles for as little as \$5, \$10 or \$20. They can also be quite expensive — up to bottles that are \$20,000.

Besides appreciating the beauty of the bottles, she says the group is also very friendly, welcoming and happy to share their knowledge.

"I think the intrinsic value of our members is the camaradery and connections we make," she says. "Everyone is so willing to help you identify items. We make friendships that last a lifetime."

Since a big part of their mission is education, the Perfume Bottle Association provides a virtual museum on its website to enable members to see and learn about different items they might collect. It also offers a quarterly magazine covering all things related to collecting perfume bottles and related ephemera.

For more information on The Perfume Passage Foundation, go to [perfumepassage.org](http://perfumepassage.org). For more information on the International Perfume Bottle Association, go to [perfumbottles.org](http://perfumbottles.org).



The Beyond the Barbershop display at the museum pays homage to men's toiletries and colognes.



Perfume Passage's collection contains 10,000 items, some from the Art Deco period.



Perfume bottles owned by Teri Wirth, president of the International Perfume Bottle Association.