



Cars, Collecting and Coca-Cola

Even NFL Pro Bowl QB is in on the action; Upcoming auction puts some of the biggest and best Coke signs up for bid

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As long as men and women have been on the road in automobiles, there has been an affinity between cars and Coca-Cola. Driving down a town or city street in 1910 and seeing a Coke banner in the window of a local soda fountain or a sign along the sidewalk out front accomplished one big thing for this iconic American brand – it pulled drivers off the road and put the product in their hands. So began a long romance between Coca-Cola and the driving public, a relationship which thrives to this day.

One major reason for the continuous success of the Coke brand has been the saturation and penetration of its advertising over the years. The 1920's and '30s saw a significant jump in the company's effort to incorporate itself into every facet of a budding and mobile consumer society. Those decades brought signs to the edges of roads at gas stations that both promoted Coca-Cola and simultaneously informed the driver of the price of gasoline. Once in the station the driver could saunter over to the Coke cooler, lift the lid and help himself to an ice-cold Coke on that sunny afternoon.

The '40s saw a war again and Coke used roadside billboards and cardboard posters to continue to sell product while building patriotic pride and, through classic graphics depicting all that was warm and fuzzy and romantic about American life, continued to embed the brand into the consumer's consciousness.

With the '50s came recovery from war and renewed optimism. The die had been cast and the relationship cemented.

Many collectors of oil, gas and automotive memorabilia have found themselves naturally drawn to collect Coca-Cola-related artifacts as well. One is Rich Gannon, the 2002 NFL MVP quarterback for the Oakland Raiders. Rich is a friend of mine who's been collecting classic cars and Coke memorabilia



for years. He has a decked-out garage and gas-station replica near his home in Minneapolis, which is where he keeps his cars – a '40 Ford, a '58 Chevy and a Shelby Mustang from the '60s, just to name a few.

"You might call it a man cave," he says. "It's where I have guests over and throw parties."

Like many classic car collectors, Gannon sees Coca-Cola memorabilia as part of Americana.

"It's an icon brand. And when you think about brands like Chevy and Coca-Cola, you think about America," he states.

When it comes to Coke memorabilia, "I collect a little bit of everything but I focus on the signs," he says.

The bigger, the better. And he wants them with lots of vibrant colors. His prized possession is a Coke triangle sign.

"It's rare. There were only a couple hundred made. It has seven different colors and is made of metal and porcelain. It's worth about \$12,000 to \$15,000."

While the former NFL star doesn't buy these items as investments, he and I agree on one thing: they hold their value, and then some.

"I enjoy it. I don't sell it a lot, but you never lose money on it," he states. "If I buy a new Mercedes or Corvette, I'm going to lose money. But with classic cars and classic Coke memorabilia, you're never going to get hurt."

The chance to see and buy some of the biggest and best Coca-Cola signs – or any type of Coke memorabilia for that matter – is coming up this spring at an auction held by the Schmidt Museum of Coca-Cola Memorabilia in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. My job has been a delight. I've been combing through the Schmidt collection, which includes some 80,000 items, in order to select 700 that will go in the auction March 24 and 25, 2012, at the Elizabethtown museum.

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As a collector since the '70s and a full-time dealer in antique advertising art, I have hand-selected and cataloged the coming auction's offerings and I can testify that they span every price range, time period, and category of collecting. And there is plenty for a car collector to love.

My reaction is effusive when asked about examples of interesting items that will be featured and that might complement a *Garage Style* reader's collection.

Among the many offerings, lot #1 features a 1930's two-sided die-cut porcelain triangle sign – similar to Rich Gannon's – estimated to fetch between \$6,000 and \$9,000 due to its high condition and relative rarity (pictured right). The same sign might only realize \$500 to \$1,500 if found with heavy wear and large chips. Such is the disparity found in today's market.

Whether it's cars, coins, art, furnishings or signs, the condition and provenance of items have always been a huge factor in determining ultimate value. As collections mature and advance, high condition and rarity, along with graphic appeal and any special "wow" factor are what generate excitement and competition for the goods being sold. And the Schmidt Museum's offerings of great material are plentiful in the March sale.

Lot 77 is another outstanding offering. It's a late 1930's, rare, and monumental outdoor Coca-Cola neon and porcelain sign with integrated clock. It once adorned the Piqua, Ohio bottling plant and carries a pre-sale estimate of \$15,000 to \$30,000. At 7-feet x 14-feet, it definitely boasts the "wow" factor.

Lot 79 is a circa 1954 roadside billboard whose multiple sheets have been mounted on a continuous linen roll. \$1,000 to \$2,000 may buy it due to its 20- x 9-foot size, and the space restrictions found in the display areas of many folks.

Just one of the many tin and porcelain signs to sell in March is a classic sidewalk sign in porcelain with a silhouette of a soda fountain tap and glass flanking each side of the large circle. The piece is complete with a bottom courtesy panel identifying the merchant and a suspension pole with exterior light kit above the sign. In high condition, the scarce sign is projected to sell for between \$4,000 and \$7,000.

There is certainly a historic connection between antique autos and the world's favorite cola. Just ask my friend Chris Koch. He owns the Auto-Stalgia, Inc., museum in Palm Coast, Florida.



"Coke and old cars are meant to be enjoyed together," he wrote in a recent E-mail.

Auto-Stalgia displays cars ranging from 1913 to 1966, and he adorns the place with approximately 1,000 signs from the same time period.

"Our guests enjoy the old Coke stuff. People love to see it because it reminds them of their childhood."

Chris has been to a number of my auctions and is always looking to add one more sign to his museum. He calls himself a certified "sign-a-holic" and says he doesn't want to stop.

A myriad of wonderfully preserved embossed tin, porcelain, and cardboard signs and posters will be offered at the March auction. Two different varieties of *gas today* signs are to be sold, and amazingly well-preserved tin and porcelain sidewalk signs of every size and variety, including many with original neon adornment, will find new owners. Lighted and neon clocks and 1950's classic button and disc signs of assorted sizes are also among the 700 lots. Cardboard posters and soda fountain festoons, door bars and vending machines galore all provide rich evidence that this is not your average auction.

The Schmidt family, which ran Coca-Cola bottling operations in Kentucky and Southern Indiana, spent 40 years

scouring the country collecting some of the best advertising art the world has ever seen. For 30 years, they shared these items with the public at their museum just off Interstate 65 in Elizabethtown, the same town as the Cameron Crowe movie of the same name. Last spring, they announced the closing of the museum with a dispersal of all its contents and very generously announced that all proceeds would go into a charitable foundation the family is setting up.

Larry Schmidt, who's overseeing the dispersal, says it's time to let others have the opportunity to enjoy and own these rare pieces that are a part of American culture. Indeed.

About the author: Gary Metz is a collector of Coca-Cola memorabilia, a dealer in antique advertising art, a consultant and a former auction-house owner in partnership with Morphy Auctions. He is working with the Schmidt Museum of Coca-Cola Memorabilia to help disperse its collection, which is the largest privately owned collection of Coke memorabilia in the world with some 80,000 items.

On March 24 and 25, 2012, the museum will hold its second auction, which will include 700 items. Proceeds will go to a charitable foundation.

Other items of interest to garage enthusiasts:

This soda fountain was part of the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. It became a part of the Schmidt museum in 1976. The soda fountain will be sold in the next auction. It's valued between \$75,000 and \$125,000.



The lights blink randomly on this large outdoor sign that once was atop a building in Asheville, North Carolina. It's valued at \$10,000-\$20,000.



From the 1940's, this large neon and porcelain sign is approximately 5' tall and hung on the side of the store above the sidewalk.



Barns typically served as roadside billboards. This one came from Marietta, Georgia and was painted in 1920's or '30s. It measures 7 ½' tall by 16' wide and is valued at \$15,000.



This soda fountain was made by the American Soda Fountain Co.-Lippincott, c. 1880's-'90s. It has a beveled mirror as part of the mahogany back bar. The counter is marble with alabaster columns and silver spigots. It's estimated value is \$12,500-\$25,000.