

Museum of Mysteries

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Tucked away behind the barrel room at Barossa Chateau is one of Australia's most unusual private museums containing rare European treasures – the lifetime collection of an eccentric aristocratic winemaker.



For sheer verve, colour and individuality, few Australian viticulturists can hope to match the life of Hermann Thumm (1912-2009), whose adventures could easily have sprung from a novel by Graham Greene or John Le Carre.

Born into a wealthy German family in Russian-controlled Georgia just before World War One, Thumm saw his ancient family estate seized by the new communist regime. As a young man he fled to Iran (this involved swimming across a river while being shot at by border guards) before being interned by the British Army in 1941 and finally settling in South Australia, where he founded the imposing Chateau Yaldara – thus changing the course of winemaking in the Barossa.

While Thumm's most visible legacy is the magnificent European-style chateau he built on the banks of the Para River (now owned by McGuigan Wines), he also left something far more personal behind: a collection of rare porcelain, glassware, furniture and oil paintings.

Containing some individual 1,500 items, the Art & Antique Gallery at Barossa Chateau is surely one of the most eccentric private collections in Australia – and a priceless one. The Russian-born winemaker was obsessed by Meissen porcelain from the 18th and 19th Centuries and filled several cabinets with these pieces. His pride and joy is a depiction of Helios The Sun God by the artist Kaendler. Catherine the Great of

Russia once owned a copy of this work, which now resides in the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. The collection also contains an 18th century Ludwigsburg porcelain carriage – there is a similar carriage in the Queen's private collection.

Mark and Mandy Creed, who are now responsible for Barossa Chateau, the extensive rose gardens, the impressive barrel room, cellar door and the Art & Antique Gallery, are constantly amazed at the things they discover in Hermann Thumm's private museum.

Both agree that they would like to know more about the provenance of individual pieces, but appreciate that properly cataloguing the entire collection will be immensely time-consuming.

"There's a list of everything in the collection, but it hasn't yet been properly catalogued," says Mandy. "It's unfortunate that we don't have more background on some of these items, but Hermann seems to have kept a lot of these details in his head."

Until the collection is formally catalogued, the couple must rely on anecdotes from former employees and members of the Thumm family. The great man's autobiography, *The Road to Yaldara*, provides some hints about his obsession with European art, but is light on detail. In the book, Thumm calls his collection "history crystallised in beautiful items and delicate art, ornate clocks, porcelain, paintings and ingeniously-worked suites and furniture."



It is tempting to suggest that the grand if somewhat austere room and its collection of flamboyant oil paintings and French antiques represent Thumm's yearning for a settled aristocratic past so cruelly snatched away from his family by the Russian Communists.

"No matter what we think about the old aristocrats of the past centuries ... they made Europe's art into a mammoth classic and left behind a legacy in art and treasures unsurpassed in human terms of beauty and excellence," he writes. "All contributing enormous wealth to our quality of life."

Although they are busy running Lyndoch Hill and their own wine label, the Creeds feel very honoured that the Thumm family has entrusted the collection to their care and are determined to lift its profile.

"Mandy and I love this place and this collection," explains Mark. "What was most important to Hermann was that people would care about what he'd done and would really appreciate this property."

But making sense of the collection is challenge for both its curators and the casual visitor alike. Thumm was an eclectic collector, buying prodigious quantities of china (Meissen, Stinton, Wedgwood, Worcester, Sevres, Derby and Chelsea), antique paintings, ornate clocks, classical French furniture and Chinese lacquer work.

Lodged incongruously in this maelstrom of European and English finery is a painting by the Australian landscape artist Ernest Buckmaster,

another curious choice. "It's almost as though he's leaving clues to his personality," says Mark. "The really interesting story is not so much the cataloguing of the items but how Hermann came to collect these things – where he found them and why he bought them. But perhaps we'll probably never know the full story. And that adds to the mystery."

Exactly what role Hermann's wife Inga played in his lifelong hobby is also shrouded in mystery, although there are hints in his autobiography that she was an equally passionate collector.

Like many avid collectors, it is possible that Hermann Thumm was simply caught up in the excitement of hunting down rare objects. "Browsing, discovering and occasionally coming across or buying a bargain, as on rare occasions happened, was a thrill," he writes. "This was particularly so if it turned out to be piece of exceptional value."

These are the words of a man who relished a challenge, whether that was dodging bullets in Iran, concluding a tough business deal or tracking down a rare Meissen figurine. **bl**

Barossa Chateau is located at 1 Hermann Thumm Drive, Lyndoch. Phone: (08) 8524 4920; www.barossachateau.com. Tours of the Art & Antique Gallery are held at 11am and 2pm daily. Bookings are essential.