

“It’s not going to be the thing I’m best known for - or if it is, how sad is that?”

Tom Gilmore is showing me a pencil sharpener he picked up one day in a gift shop. It’s about an inch tall and depicts a boxy, mid-century building, perched on top of a manual pencil sharpener. The man who transformed downtown’s Old Bank District by converting office buildings into lofts had no idea that the decision to buy that trinket would determine his fate as the pencil sharpener guy.

He owns hundreds of tiny pencil sharpeners now, with miniature versions of the Eiffel Tower, the Space Needle, the Statue of Liberty, the Tower of London and the Hindenburg, as well as an oil derrick, a dinosaur, and an airplane. “I lost count at 300 and something,” he says.

Like most collections, Gilmore’s began as an accident. He had an architecture firm in New York and often used pencils in his line of work. He also traveled a lot. While killing time during a layover at the Dallas airport, he found the aforementioned building pencil sharpener and brought it back to the office for his employees. It was a big hit. “It started this insanity where any time anybody went on a trip anywhere on the planet, they felt the need to bring me pencil sharpeners,” Gilmore explains.

Some of the more peculiar items in his stockpile include a pair of praying hands that glows in the dark, JFK, a cat in a shoe, and a blender. “Some of them are so tacky it’s hard to imagine,” he says. But clients at his architecture firm loved the collection and so did their kids.

His favorite pencil sharpener is from the 1939 New York World’s Fair. It features the spire and orb exhibitions and it’s made of Bakelite, an early plastic. A friend found it in her grandfather’s home in Kentucky. Gilmore keeps the oldest pencil sharpener in his collection on his desk. It’s a dainty, WWI-era globe featuring Siam and other countries that no longer exist.

Gilmore writes with a pen now and insists that hoarding pencil sharpeners was never his passion. “It’s not about the collection. It’s about each individual moment you have when you find one.” He’s coming to terms with the scope of his collection, which is displayed on a ledge along the walls of his office. “Once in a while I’ll have a meeting in here with some bankers and they’ll say ‘what are those lovely things on the wall?’ And it’s just like, ‘you don’t want to know.’ It’s taken a long time for me to come out. But now I’m out.”