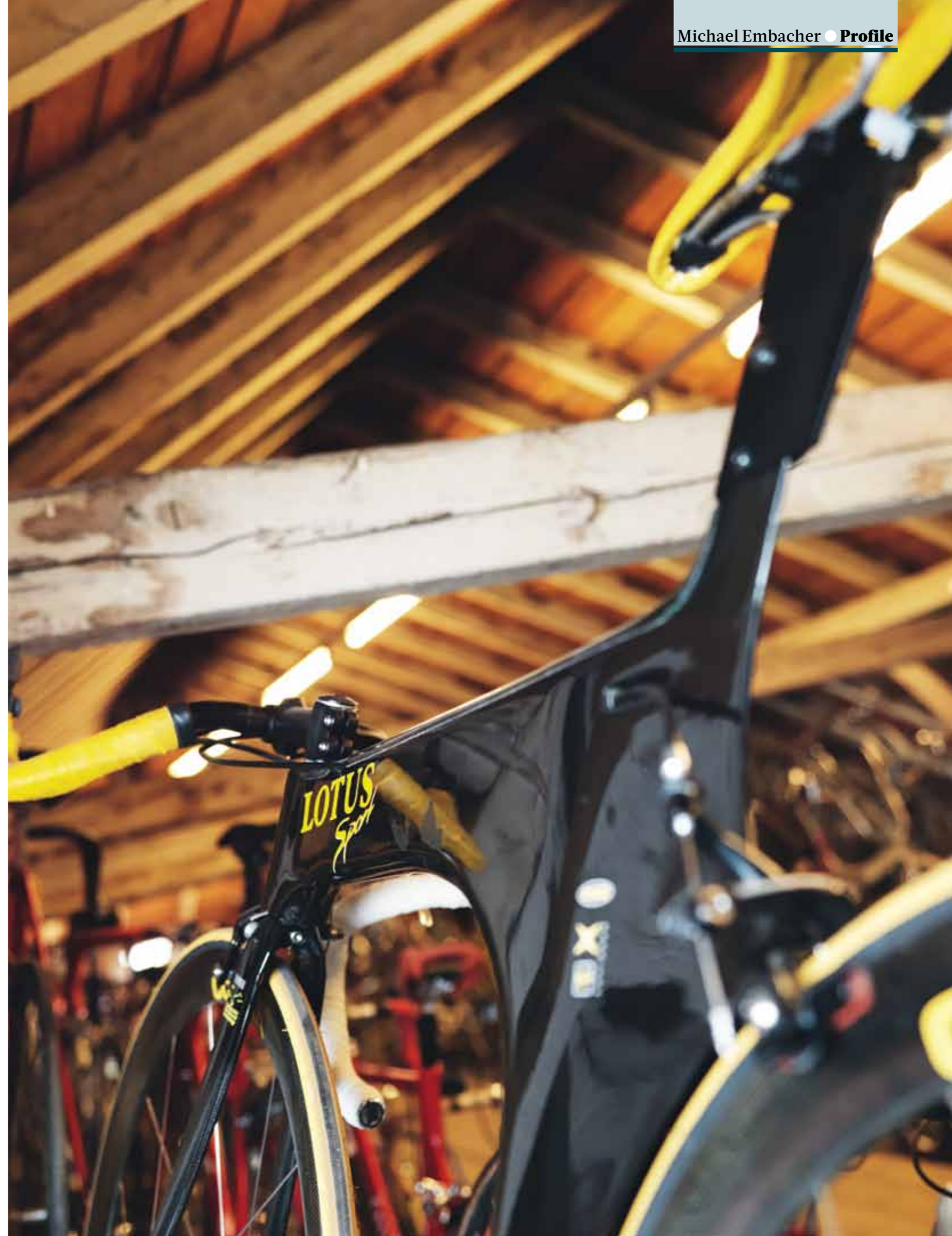




# Bike imitates art

There's a joke in the cycling world that the correct number of bikes to own is  $n+1$ , where  $n$  is the number of bikes you already have. *Cyclist* visits collector Michael Embacher in Vienna to see what happens when that formula is actually applied

Words JAMES SPENDER Photography ANDREAS JAKWERTH



Right: In Embacher's trove of an attic, bikes are ordered not by make, year or importance, but by colour



**D**o you know the story about the white horizon?' asks Michael Embacher. 'The first time I rode this bike it was -10°C. Everything was white, from the ice on the lake to the fog that was everywhere else, and it was so cold that no-one else was around. So I set out onto the lake, and into the white. Nothing. I rode into nothing. No horizon. It was fantastic, and so quiet. It was like rebirth. But it took a while to get back because everything was so white I got lost!'

Not for the first time today, Embacher's soft, unassuming features break out in a wide charismatic grin, his dark eyes twinkling with delight behind his glasses. Standing in Vienna's MAK, the *Museum für angewandte Kunst* (or Museum for Applied Arts), Embacher is in his element, pointing at one bike then another as he whirls excitedly around his most recent exhibition, a selection of his best bicycles entitled *Tour du Monde: Bicycle Stories*. There are dozens and dozens of bikes here, suspended from the ceiling by giant curved gantries of Embacher's own design ('we make it look like the bicycles are flying; they look completely different up high don't they?') and ranging from ultra-rare René Herse racers to curiosities such as the 'ice bike'.

'It's a customised Austrian frame which has a skate instead of a front wheel and metal spikes on the rear tyre,' says Embacher. 'It's

fixed like a track bicycle and steers just like normal, although you have to be careful that the front is parallel to the surface. An old guy from Vienna told me about it. He had a second one for his wife and they used to ride them on the lakes around here.'

All in all there must be nearly 50 bikes on show at the MAK, yet, says Embacher, 'This is only 20% of my collection.'

#### Out of love

An architect by trade, whose unique ideas have seen him design vast, opulent houses for international diplomats through to birdcages for parrots (we'll come to that later), Embacher began collecting bicycles 10 years ago after a series of thefts of brand new bikes prompted him to purchase his first second-hand machine, a 1970s stainless steel 'Bici Corta' from Italian manufacturer Rigi.

'I bought the Rigi on eBay because I loved the design. It was made for mountain climbing, so it has a very short wheelbase. That's why the seat tube is divided so the wheel can poke through.'

At the time Embacher paid around €700, however it wasn't until other collectors began to contact him that he realised just what he had. 'People could see what I bought from my eBay account, and they were sending me emails saying wow, this was very cheap, congratulations, this is a very valuable bike. But I had no idea. I just liked how it looked. The seat tube was just such a sexy detail.' ▶



## The Embacher Collection

Here are some notables from Michael Embacher's astounding assembly



**Colnago Carbitubo Pista, c.1990**  
With a construction very similar to French manufacturer Alan, which championed carbon tubes bonded in aluminium lugs, the Carbitubo boasted Ferrari carbon fibre and a production run so limited that even Ernesto couldn't remember it. 'I talked to Colnago about this bike.'

I wanted to know how old it is; what was behind it. He said, 'What, a carbon twin-tube pista? We made that? I have never heard about it!' Then three weeks later I got this very old guy from Colnago on the phone and he said, 'Yes, I can remember making that, I think maybe only five or six pieces.' It's a funny bike.'



**Capo Elite 'Eis' c.1966**  
Still going strong at the hands of son Harold, Capo is an Austrian bike manufacturer founded by cycling brothers Walter and Otto Cap. Both were champions in their day, with the latter claiming 7th in the 1928 Road Race World Championship. This modified Elite 'Eis' (Ice) features

a 26" fixed rear wheel on which is mounted a tyre studded with nuts and sharpened bolts. To steer, the front wheel has been replaced by a skate. Like many of his bikes, this was offered for sale by a man who had heard about the collection and wondered if Embacher wanted to have the Eis. For a fee, of course.



Far left: The bike that started it all, the Rigi Bici Corta

Left: A mint condition Dura-Ace AX groupset in original boxes



Before long Embacher had been bitten by the bicycle bug, but it wasn't just down to the necessity as a means of transport, nor by a desire to have better performing steeds or to own more coveted models. Rather, he did – and still very much does – look at bicycles from a curious designer's point of view.

'About 20 years ago I was in the MAK and there was an exhibition about chairs. I was astonished at how many different shapes and materials were possible with such a small, seemingly easy piece; it is only something to sit on with four legs. I loved that exhibition, and when I bought my first bike, the Rigi, which I'd never seen before, I became curious about bicycle construction. I fell in love and then I just bought and bought and bought. There are five bikes. Then there are 10. Then there are 20. And more and more!'

Eventually Embacher had so many that

in 2006 he thought he should publish them in a book, *Smart Move*, to showcase the things he enjoyed so much. For most people, a collection already in excess of 100 bikes would probably be enough, but for Embacher, things had barely got started.

'After *Smart Move* I paid for a free exhibition, which had 12,000 visitors in three weeks. That convinced me about having a real collection.' That 'real collection' manifested in his second book and app, *Cyclepedia*, and now stands at well over 200 bikes, which are currently spread between *Tour du Monde* at the MAK, another exhibition at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, and above his old architect offices in Vienna's seventh district.

#### Cornucopia

If there's a heaven for cyclists, it will look a lot like the eaves of Embacher's rented

attic. Like many a mythical treasure trove the exterior doesn't reflect the riches within. A shabby side door in a sleepy Viennese street gives way to an equally antiquated lift, which steadily creaks its way to the fifth story attic. As it travels, Embacher tells another tale in his typically enthusiastic fashion:

'I came here with my son last Friday and the lift broke down, so I phoned the emergency number to get an engineer. But they tell me the lift company is in Germany and it is Friday afternoon, so the earliest they can get here is Monday morning. So my son and I had to climb out of the service hatch and up the lift shaft. He's 11 so he thought it was great. I was not so sure.'

Luckily this time the lift is in order, and levering back the peeling metal doors, Embacher reveals his mothership HQ.

Racks upon racks of bikes stretch high up to the vaulted ceiling and back into the darkness. Wherever you look, there are bikes, wheels and frames, and at the far end is an innocuous set of cardboard boxes, which

## 'A heaven for cyclists would look a lot like Embacher's rented attic'

upon closer inspection turn out to be stuffed with all manner of components. In one is a perfect example a Shimano Dura-Ace AX group, complete with pedals and Shimano's original aero brakes; another houses a pristine 1983 50th anniversary Campagnolo Super Record groupset, which Embacher takes out and gazes at affectionately.

'I love this 50th Campagnolo. Look, each screw is gold, even in the brakes there are golden screws. Once I got a letter from Tulio [Campagnolo]. He said he got my book and he loves it. It was a very nice letter.'

Next to the groupsets are yet more boxes, this time stuffed with manila envelopes containing chainrings, each carefully labelled with make and size then filed like vinyl in a record shop ('I'm crazy, I know that!'), and then between them, a very



One of only 120 Bob Jackson Super Legends ever produced, featuring Hetchins lug work and 'curly stays'

◊ intriguing tandem. 'This is a track bike from the 40s [manufactured by Köthke]. It has an original Chater Lea chainset and wooden rims, isn't that fantastic? Bernie Eisel called me recently about it. He was not picked for the Tour de France squad so he got married this summer, and he wanted to borrow the tandem for the wedding.'

However, despite the tandem's heritage and professional connections, it has been repainted, a type of restoration that Embacher says he is generally against. As if to cement this point, he picks out a lurid pink, de-stickered bike in an adjacent rack. He explains that this is a highly sought-after 3Rensho, a bike made by a Japanese frame builder called Yoshi Konno who began his frame building career in the 60s by disassembling Cinelli frames and using the tubes to build his own designs.

'This is a fantastic bike, but it's a pity someone resprayed it. At first no-one knew what it was, but then my friends who help

## 'About 10 have been stolen without return, but this is the destiny of a bike, to get stolen!'

me write the text in my books suddenly called and said, "We've got it! It's a 3Rensho Moduelo RR." I only bought it because I liked how it looked, I had no idea what it was.'

As Embacher moves around the attic space, this theme becomes ever more familiar. Each bike has been selected for the collection not because of what it is, but because of how it makes him feel.

'The funny thing is that people think I must be some expert or historian, but really I just admire the bicycle. That means I know what Campagnolo is or Shimano is, but this is from owning the bicycles I have. My collection is not supposed to be a complete history. I mean, here I have my

bicycles ordered mostly by colour.'

That said, it is difficult to get away from the fact that this is probably one of the most diverse collections of bikes in existence. Bob Jacksons keep company with Alans; Mosers rub tyres with Merckxs; Kestrels stack neatly against Gazelles, while Colnagos stare back at Cinellis. And despite Embacher's modest claims to knowing little, for each and every bike he has a story to tell.

'This is a Super 30 Inch, designed for big people so it has 30 inch wheels, but they forget that big people are heavy, so this meant the spokes kept breaking and the producers went bankrupt... This is a Lotus like Chris Boardman rode. I have an unused

one too but this one I lent to a girl who is a bicycle mechanic. She raced it and came third... This Peka Stayer has two disc wheels, but there were many accidents because when the motorcycles passed, the wind would catch the front wheel and you couldn't steer anymore... This Moulton was sold to me by a widow, but she lived far away so she gave a train guard some money and told him to ride with it to Vienna station... This is a Masi, many professionals had them but they were painted with other manufacturers' names... This is a Bickerton Portable built by a man from Rolls Royce, only the frame twisted a lot so it came with a safety warning saying it was too dangerous to ride on normal pathways...'

For Embacher, the crucial thing is not so much the bike as a status piece, but rather as something with an emotional narrative.

### For art's sake?

As he is an architect, a designer and a bicycle collector, you could be forgiven for thinking that Embacher considers bicycles as prized pieces; after all he collects them, organises them and exhibits them. But this isn't the case. For starters, each bike he owns he rides from time to time, with the exception of a Bianchi C-4 Project, which he says he is worried about breaking because 'I am too fat and it has no seat tube'. Unfortunately this has led to several of them being stolen, but that's not something he lets get him down.

'Many of them have been taken, from downstairs or in the street, but mostly I get them back because the Viennese

## The collection continued...



**Bianchi C-4 Project, c.1988**  
Debuted in the 1987 Giro, the Project is the product of two polar opposites: Bianchi, a traditionalist's bicycle manufacturer dating back to 1885, and C-4, a cutting edge composites outfit founded some hundred years later. The Project's most striking feature is its lack of seat tube and

swooping lines. Look beyond those and witness a revolution – one of the first monocoque carbon fibre frames. This example is unusual in that it utilises Dura-Ace components – sacrilege in Italophile circles. But it doesn't bother Embacher. 'I have a picture of it hanging in my office entrance. What a beautiful bike.'



**Dahon Hammerhead 5.0, c.2005**  
Embacher isn't into changing things too much – a bike pretty much stays as it is once it reaches him, unless better examples of the original components can be found. However, this Hammerhead proves he's still not immune to the odd bit of

modification. 'I ride this Dahon bike a lot. The wheels are custom carbon that I had Steve Hed make. It's fantastic to ride; it only weighs 8kg and even though it has front suspension it's really direct. I pimped it up though. I think it looks good with the carbon and orange, no?'



**Subaru 2WD Dual Power.**  
'This is two wheel drive. I say it's a fantastic solution to a problem that doesn't exist!'

Below: An ultra-rare Cinetica Giotto, created by the son of Cino Cinelli, Andrea. The moulds for these frames broke, leaving about 50 bikes completed



mechanics and bicycle shops know my bicycles, so when they get brought in for repair they go, “Hey, I know this bike.” Still, about 10 have been stolen without return, but I think this is the destiny of a bicycle, to get stolen!

Furthermore, despite his collection being insured as art (‘How can normal insurance cover prototypes or bikes where there are only five in the world?’), he is at pains to show people they are everyday products.

‘When I sent some bicycles to Portland, the art courier wanted to have them shipped in climate boxes. I said why? They’re only bicycles. Just put them in the box and send them there, why do we have these discussions? And this is the great thing about the Portland exhibition, people are allowed to touch them.

‘In the MAK they cannot because the museum says it can’t take responsibility for damage. But bicycles are useful products, so people should be able to pick them up and squeeze the tyres.’ As an attitude this is something to which all cyclists can relate, yet this begs the question, if bicycles are not art, then what are they doing in an art museum? And, moreover, what is their true worth?

‘I was afraid to display bicycles in museums because as a product in itself the bicycle is not art, but then I think it is vital to show people how important design is and how good design can be, and the bicycle is a perfect example of design. But it’s still more than a functional tool. Bicycles have many terms and they are all interesting. The

## ‘Things should not have to be perfect to be enjoyed; even old, rusty bikes can be beautiful’

term of sport, of being an object, of getting efficiently from A to B, of democracy.’

As such Embacher is a champion of the bicycle as a vehicle for the masses, and actively supports Bicycle Relief, a charity that aims to bring bikes to Africa as a means of cheap transport for rural communities.

‘One of my favourite quotes is from this American politician. He said the index of a civilisation is not how many poor people sit in cars, it’s how many rich people ride a bicycle. A bicycle is a form of social responsibility. It’s important for so many areas of the world.

‘Some people complain and say why are my bikes not perfect, why don’t I repaint them? But it’s like buildings when they are restored. Venice has atmosphere because everything’s falling down! And good bicycles have atmosphere. Even if they are rusty or old or imperfect they can still be beautiful.

‘I think it’s a pity that everything today needs to be perfect to be considered functional; things should not have to be perfect to be enjoyed. There is a very famous designer called Richard Sapper, who has worked for Alessi, Mercedes Benz, Pirelli, and once even turned down a job at Apple. He was at my exhibition as he designed the Elettromontaggi [a fold up bicycle that never

made it to production]. He told me that when he was 70 he bought an old Jaguar cabriolet. He and his wife drove it from Milano to Rome and it started raining, and even though the roof was closed it leaked and everything got wet. But they did not let that spoil the enjoyment of the car. And this is a problem for some people; they lose their lives complaining about everything. You could be out riding bicycles instead!’ So with that in mind, will Embacher stop collecting any time soon?

‘Sadly yes, I am limited. I have to move my collection as the lease is up and bicycles are getting so expensive now. There is one that I want though, that has been offered to me by an English gentleman. It’s made from original plans drawn by Ettore Bugatti, the man behind the cars. It’s made from all these small tubes, it’s fantastic, and there are only three originals made by this famous frame builder in the 70s [a Californian named Art Stump]. But it’s very expensive as each one took 1,000 hours to complete. So I don’t know. But my friends tell me I started collecting bicycles 10 years ago, and that for the last 10 years I have been saying I am going to stop!’ ❁  
James Spender is staff writer for Cyclist who now believes the correct number of bikes to own is about  $n+200$