

Q+A A Designer Who's a Real Spokesman

Michael Embacher, an architectural designer in Vienna, has amassed one of the most diverse bicycle collections in the world, from racing and street bikes to really curious spiky ones for riding on frozen lakes.

This summer, many of the 230 bicycles normally stored in his attic are on view simultaneously at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna and at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon. In anticipation of "Cyclepedia," the Portland show, 100 extra bike racks were installed outside the museum and a call went out for a celebratory ride through the streets, clothing optional. Entry that day was \$1 per wardrobe item; word is that many entered free.

It was Mr. Embacher's idea to suspend the bikes from the ceiling



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"For me, bicycling is a very intelligent everyday product and so important to the city," he said by phone from his home and office in the Neubau neighborhood. "It is not how many people can own cars, it is how many rich people are driving bicycles."

first seen in the Tour de France, was in the window of the local shop, but I couldn't afford it. It was a green Puch Mistral Ultima. The dreams of a small boy! Forty years later, I found one and now have it in the collection.

From the collection of Michael Embacher, an architectural designer in Vienna, top, a 1939 Sironval Sportplex recumbent, left, a suitcase-shaped Skoot from 2001, above left, and a Capo built for snow and ice, from 1966, above right.

Are your bikes ever stolen off the street?

So far, 15 have been taken, but that's it. Eventually, when they break down, they all go to Viennese mechanics, who all know my bikes. So I've gotten eight of them back.

Where is your favorite place to ride?

I love the city because a bike is the perfect way to explore it. But on weekends, my wife, Shan, and I go out to the countryside. She has balance issues, so I had a tandem built with a recumbent seat placed slightly to the side and in the front.

You are a designer who adores bikes and yet you've never created an Embacher.

There are some drawings. I once tried to make a folding bicycle. Perhaps I'll do it sometime. A bike is a very difficult project. But when it works, it's a beautiful thing.

What was your most memorable ride?

I was on a frozen lake, Neusiedler See, and it was incredible. The ice was white and it was a completely foggy day. I could not see any horizon in front of me. It was really like a rebirthing experience: all the white nothing. SANDY KEENAN

Q. When you're considering a new acquisition, where does your eye go first?

A. It's hard to describe, but it's the whole thing of it: the mechanical system and the design, all the fragile construction. I don't have a real strategy of what I like. It's all emotional.

What is the rarest bike in your collection?

The Schulz Funiculo. There are only three in the world, but mine is the only one that works. It's rare, and it has a cross frame, not a normal diamond frame, which was the first of its kind in the world. It was an everyday bike from 1937, but it was the best bike mechanically of its time because it was very future-minded. An American cycling magazine recently ran a contest to see who could explain how its rear brake works, and I wasn't allowed to enter because I have one. It's in the Portland exhibit. I bought it in France for about \$20,000, but it's hard to say what it would go for today. I'd have to find someone crazy like me to buy it.

Do you remember your first bike?

Of course. I was about 14 and I had to buy it myself, a Puch Mistral for \$800. It was not a perfect bicycle, but I was very proud of it. I earned money working around my father's surveying office. The one I really wanted, which I had



ings of the installations as if in midride, but he is reluctant to glorify these utilitarian products. There are no pampered relics in the shows. Not even the oldest bicycle, from 1922, has been allowed to retire from active street duty. (His down-to-earth attitude didn't prevent him from releasing a gorgeous companion catalog and iPad app.)

CORRECTION

An article last Thursday about the street artist known as XAM, who specializes in birdhouses, misstated the name of the school where he studied. It is the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, not the Art Institute of Chicago.

Cyclepedia is at the Portland Art Museum, 1219 Southwest Park Avenue, Portland, Ore.; (503) 226-2811 or portlandartmuseum.org, to Sept. 8.