

## Smithsonian horizons



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*Our collections may include some trivia, but the real emphasis is on more enduring achievements*

"Smithsonian treasures TV trivia" was the headline on a story in the *Chicago Tribune* last spring. Amid traces of skepticism about whether these are indeed "national treasures," critic Marilyn Preston noted the recognition and pleasure with which exhibits like Mister Rogers' sweater, J.R.'s hat, Fonzie's leather jacket and Archie Bunker's chair are greeted by throngs of Smithsonian visitors. In the course of interviewing curator Carl Scheele, who has the responsibility for these and similar acquisitions in the National Museum of American History's Division of Community Life, it appears that her doubts were largely dispelled by what she saw and heard. So have been those of other commentators.

Television is central to how we see who we are and how we got that way, Scheele told her. It is perhaps the most intimate theater ever created, permitting the sharing of experiences, values and dreams by immense numbers of Americans. For all its popularity, the Museum's TV trivia collection is small and selective and is being allowed to grow only slowly. "We're not a Hall of Fame," Scheele continued, although it clearly helps for a program to reach a mass audience. Evident behind most of the selections that have been made is a sensitivity in the parent programs to issues that are foremost in our modern American conscious-

ness. Also evident in most of the shows thus memorialized is the depth and complexity of the central characters, which may help to explain their durability.

There is undoubted substance in this rationale, but I must confess that it still leaves me uneasy. A treasure, I would like to think, is something of enduring value. It should be chosen for placement in a museum not because it is instantly recognizable, but because it will continue to evoke rich images and associations when no one is left who recognizes it. Or a second criterion might be that objects acquired for museums will at least retain permanent value as signposts of their times, guiding viewers into a deeper understanding of past and present circumstances. TV itself probably has become the most evocative, widely observed signpost we have. But can we explain its power with a few isolated accessories or pieces of clothing?

It ought not to be the practice of a Smithsonian Secretary, and it will not be of this one, to attempt to call the shots on collecting policy outside a very narrow realm of personal expertise. I concede that I have none in this area. Even if the connection with our mandate for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge" is as debatable as I am implying, would I really want to argue with those crowds of appreciative viewers? Definitely not. The Smithsonian has a responsibility to all of its many audiences, including those for whom some tangible vestige of familiar TV imagery is clearly a pleasurable part

of a trip to Washington. Other than the disproportionate attention given these items by the media, the Smithsonian's collection is—and will remain—very small. So why is the whole matter so somewhat troubling?

My formal responsibilities may begin with the rationale for the Smithsonian collecting activity, but the underlying issue involves a feature of American thought and perception that is disturbingly more general. The boundary between performance and actuality, between the false simplicity of media hype and the contextual considerations and uncertainties with which we must inevitably deal, is becoming dangerously blurred.

Perhaps the most important truths are simple ones. But our own human record of creativity (and destructiveness) certainly seems memorable enough to deserve the primary attention of the museumgoing public, without needing the airbrush treatment of media-based myth and metaphor. Most people, I believe, come to the Smithsonian and other museums as places to view treasured achievements that are tangible as well as enduring. But if the relics of TV are accepted as additions to the permanent collections of museums, with accompanying fanfare, is there not some danger that we will contribute to the ongoing erosion of vital standards of judgment and performance in the society at large?

*Richard Adams*