

ANTIQUE TOY WORLD

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Ron Sturgeon

Gone to Texas with the Dogs

Sold by Swiss Collector, "Eva Braun Car"

*Resurfaces Across the Atlantic,
the German-Made Toy Now Showcased
in a Texan's French Chateau*

ONCE NESTLED quietly in a lofty toy collection in Switzerland, the so-called "Eva Braun Car" has made the transatlantic crossing to a proud Texan's showplace suburban home.

Tagged as the "Tin Man" by the trade press in the antique toy car world, former salvage-yard magnate Ron Sturgeon has found, bought and displayed a rare surviving tin-plate model purported to be the spitting image in miniature of the real 1930s-vintage Mercedes coupe that Adolph Hitler gave his girlfriend, Eva Braun.

"I think its value today is more than \$10,000," says Sturgeon, who sought the approximate eight-inch toy for years and won't say what he paid a Swiss collector for it. "The thrill was in the hunt," says the man who has yet to sell from his 15 years of collecting around the world.

But the latest news finds Sturgeon displaying his newest old toy—along with nearly 2,000 other models from his estimated 2,500-unit collection rolled out since the Roaring Twenties—in a new home here in the large-ly upscale Fort Worth/Dallas bedroom community.

Call it his and wife Kathi Sturgeon's shrine to man's love affairs with wheels, toys, dogs, dog art, antiques, luxury abodes—and Marilyn Monroe.

The Sturgeons recently moved into their 10,000-square-foot French chateau of brick, rock, cast stone, stucco, steel, cobblestone motor court, cast concrete tile, copper turret roof and glass. Floor-to-ceiling, exterior butt-joined glass walls span three rooms and lap over into the chef-theater kitchen. Its décor of Old World, Renaissance and Tuscany-antiqued themes embraces eight different custom-designed fireplaces vented by seven distinctive chimneys.

The multi-tiered shelves of the two-story library, with its classic carved oak fireplace mantel, showcase most of the toy cars. All that—and dual air-conditioned garages as showrooms featuring up to 10 full-size Mercedes from Ron's collection of road cars, plus more toy cars and a couple of dozen of his collection of European driving-school demonstration models. See how the braking system works or the steering column or the transmission.

In the red garage, along with a very large-scale radio

controlled racecar is another of Ron's prized models, bought in Switzerland some years back. It's a 1930s Fiat "Bolilla" Roadster, 1/4 scale, built by Fiat Engineering in 1968 and displayed at the Milano Fair in 1970. Ron purchased the one of a kind model from the world famous toy collector, Count Giansanti Colluzzi.

"I wanted a place to keep the big cars and the toys," says Ron. Dog-gone-it, the Sturgeon's crafted a multiplex which the toy and drivable cars share with nearly 100 original paintings, prints, antique carvings, modern sculptures, toys and other collectible images of—dogs. Included are 34 of the world's 19th and 20th century masterpiece oil paintings of man's best friend. "I thought it would be nice for the home to have another theme," says Ron, and Kathi agreed.

Having both started their adult years living in mobile homes and then meeting, marrying and moving into a single-wide 23 years ago, these no-nonsense entrepreneurs have several reasons to be proud of the latest installment in their saga.

Yes, the home fulfills today's dream home list: It has two top-of-the-line Fisher & Paykel drawer-type dishwashers in a custom-antiqued stone and wood kitchen with Dacor stove-top range, a GE Advantium oven with simultaneous halogen/convection/microwave cooking, separate built-in GE microwave and Miele state-of-the-art cappuccino/espresso maker, a recessed fireplace, and multiple Sub-Zero freezer and refrigerator uprights and drawers hidden in custom-antiqued wooden cabinetry.

The Sturgeons planned their French chateau with English, Italian, Greek and Texan touches—developed by an award-winning team lead by builder Dan Thomas and architect Ken Schaumburg of Fort Worth—as much for their collections as for themselves.

In one of the couple's most unusual moves, they made their luxury abode to share with two lively Cavalier Spaniel puppies. Madison the male pup and Mackenzie the tri-color female enjoy their own ceramic-tiled room outfitted with plumbing (the drain, especially handy), downsized backyard door resembling an awning-covered hotel entrance embroidered with their private address, and miniature potted trees



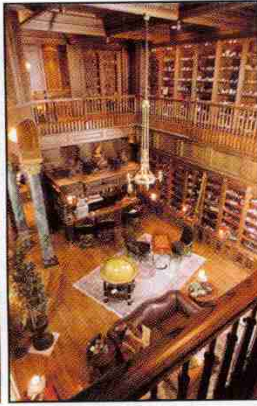
Front of home.



Two-story library with hundreds of antique toy cars.



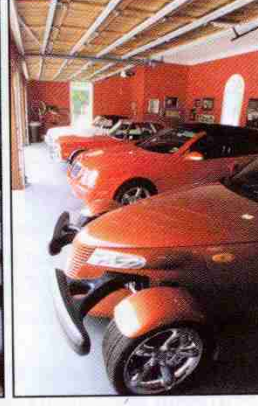
Library mantle.



Library from top.



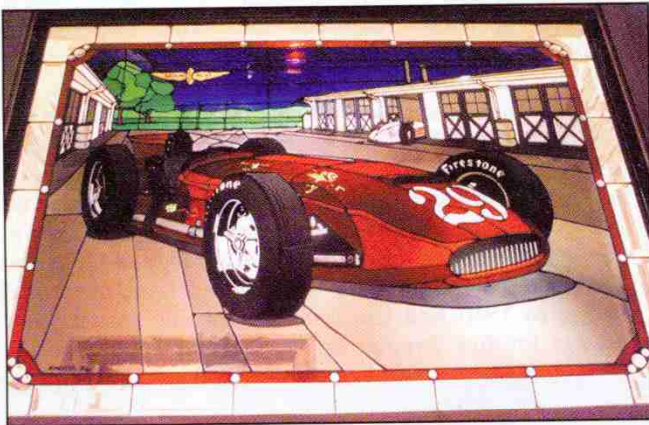
Blue garage models.



Red garage cars.



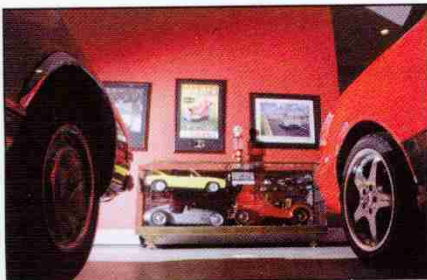
Blue garage.



Indy stained glass window.



Motor court, red garage (garages hold 10 cars).



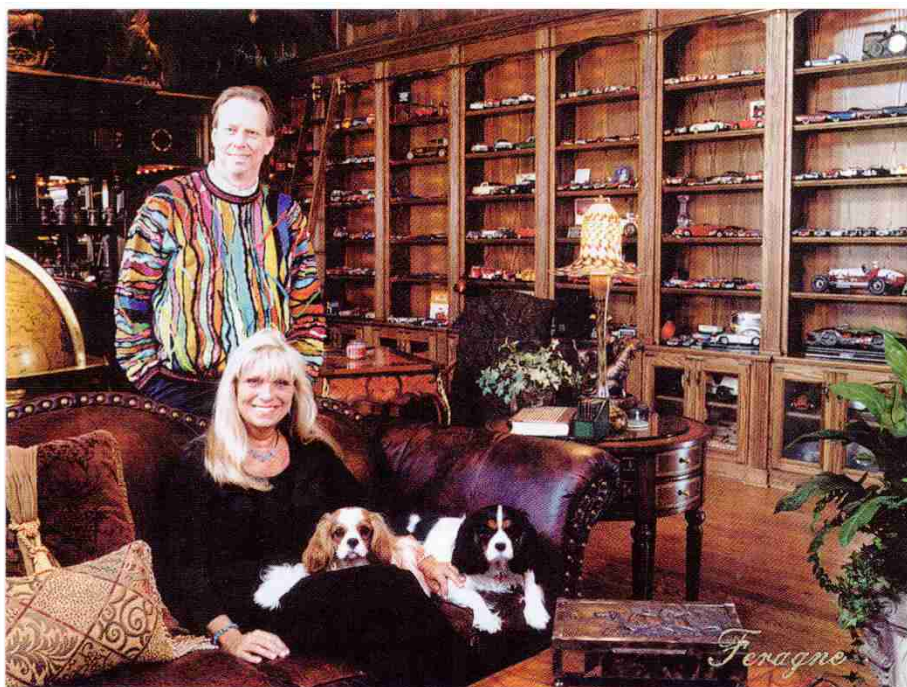
Red garage, cars and case.



Motor court with owners and pets.



Front view.



ABOVE: Ron and Kathi Sturgeon. BELOW: Eva Braun car.

plus their own cable-linked color TV.

"Kathi is passionate about dogs, and I love dogs, too," says Ron, 48, a self-made businessman who started his career with \$4,000 and a limping 1965 VW Beetle and who has recently published his book, *How to Salvage Millions From Your Small Business*.

Perhaps explaining his desire to share his intense pride in the new home, Sturgeon earned his own "junkyard dog" title as an honest mechanic, creative marketer, business computer innovator and hardnosed trader while expanding from a Volkswagen repair shop into six auto salvage yards. After developing his business, he sold the auto recycling chain to a subsidiary of Ford Motor Co. in 1999.

That's when the Sturgeons decided to build their dream home for toy cars, dogs, real cars, dog art, antiques—and Marilyn Monroe. Now playing in the frilly red-and-white bedroom, upstairs just off the S-curved balcony at the head of a sweeping spiral staircase, reminiscent of opera houses, are titillating Marilyn Monroe memories.

It's Kathi's shrine to the actress, featuring a collection

of memorabilia purchased from Ms. Monroe's estate and elsewhere. Included is a skimpy evening dress bought at the 1999 Monroe estate auction. It's a black and tight three-quarter length silk and velvet cocktail affair with shoestring straps and opera coat. Ceramic dolls, books, silver cutlery and fish forks and original movie marquees for *Bus Stop* and *How to Marry a Millionaire* also grace this almost haunted setting.

Despite not being inhibited about exhibiting some of Ms. Monroe's classic 1950s nearly nude calendar poses in the bedroom, Kathi is still a bit uncomfortable with welcoming outsiders to peek into her new home. "I'm a private person, but I understand Ron's pride in his collections," says Kathi. "As we traveled more and we would run into cool things in other countries, we would buy 'em. But pretty soon

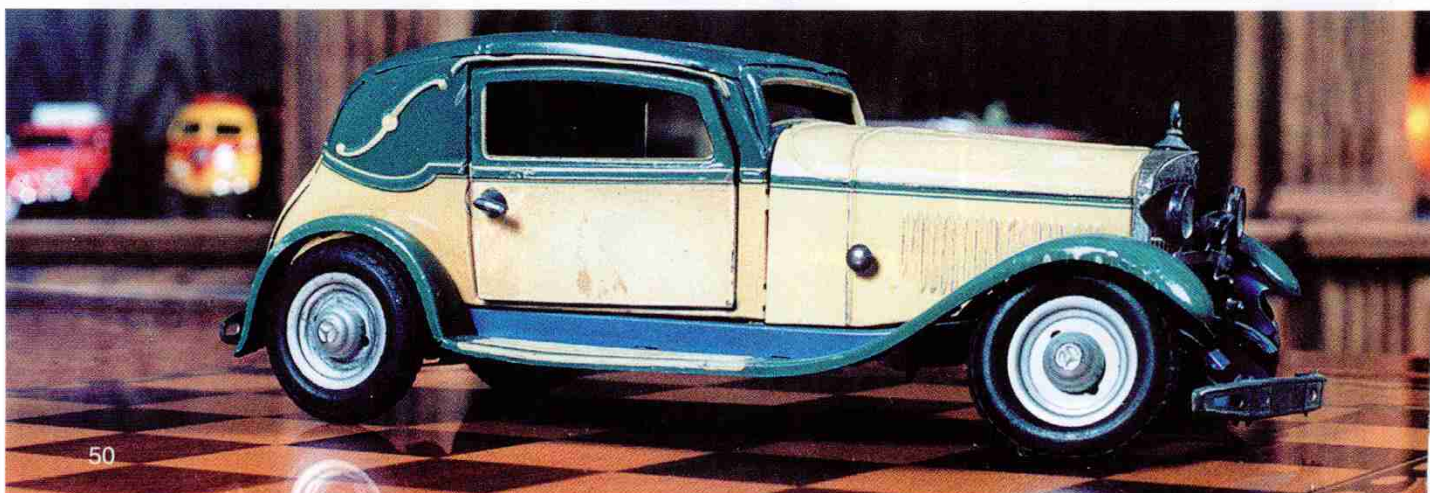
we just had so much stuff, so much stuff," admits Ron, who says he has curbed his near-fanatical penchant for buying antiques, art and toy cars. "So nowadays, we are a lot more discriminating about what we buy."

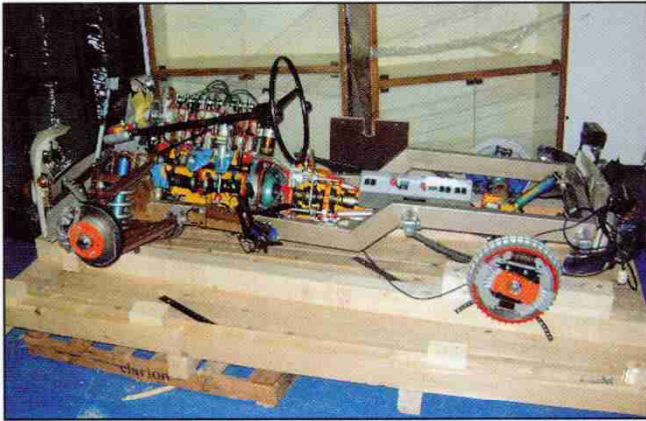
Come, walk through the 12-foot tall, Old World-style iron doors into the Sturgeons' elegant foyer and formal living room on marble floors under the 24-foot high cherub-adorned dome. Ahead is a 24-foot tall exterior glass wall.

Then bear left to enter the 1,000-square-foot library through a pair of 19th century antique carved mahogany doors salvaged from an antiquated Hungarian Embassy being razed in Paris. The heavily oak-paneled room is crowned by classic Enkeboll and other hand-carved moldings nearly two feet deep. The shelves are lined with toy cars from the floor to the oak beam ceiling.

"It's some of the finest woodwork that you can have," said custom builder Thomas, the Fort Worth-based full-service contractor who managed the project, noting that interior finish-out on the library alone took six months.

Here you can muse leisurely over the toys while sipping Kathi's strong iced tea at the library's bar, derived from a real Irish pub. It's a hybrid antique, most of it dating to 1840 and the remainder being modern day repairs for fire damage in its original Queen's Gate,





Driving school models include a half scale model.



Red garage features art and automobilia.



Blue garage features European driving school models.



Two-story library is a collector's dream.



Red garage features some large scale and one off models.



Cars with dogs, some animated, are displayed in library.



Ireland home. Standing guard atop the bar are two rare St. Bernards. They're hand-carved wood end pieces of one of the largest Black Forest clock sets ever made (circa 1750-1810). These dogs formerly resided in one of the hunting lodges of a French king (an unspecified Louis). Antique clocks also run rampant here, 70 or more, including popular 19th century calendar models.

But it's the testament to wheels, Ron's towering toy world, that dominates. Lines of hand-made, historically authentic, meticulously detailed Indy 500 winners and European racing cars—some with working motors—are joined by a one-of-a-kind Chrysler Imperial sedan. See one of the world's largest toy Mercedes collections. Luxury sedans and race cars, convertibles and roadsters, all the world speed record-setting rocket cars—and Volkswagen trucks—share this luxury space.

Ron has all seven of the tin-plate Mercedes convertibles with Robby-like robots at the wheel, made in the 1950s by Asawi Toy Co. of Japan.

The rather humble looking Tippco "Eva Braun Car," residing here in an aristocratic toy world, has simple hinged doors and trunk lid that open and latch with realistic handles. It's in excellent shape, and appears like it could be wound for a tour across the floor. Once upon a time it had working headlights, with its battery slot on the under carriage. And it joins Ron's extensive collection of World War II-era replica toys.

Definitely a big factor, of course, is Ron's love of all things automotive. As a young man, this self-confessed "gear-head" took the track name of "Rapid Ron" to drag-race VWs.

Ron's approximate 2,500 toy cars are now all catalogued in our computer inventory," says Ron's collection curator, John Harbolt. "We can sort them by categories, by manufacturer, make and description, model number and year, its purchase price, whether we have the original box, date purchased, type—whether its die-cast metal, tin plate, plastic or wood—and other groupings. We can check the new offerings Ron encounters against our existing inventory."

A retired Navy aircraft maintenance officer, Harbolt also rides herd on Ron's collection of real cars, including five Mercedes-Benz SL models.

Only six have been made, and only the 1956 Mercedes 300SL Gullwing is missing here; Ron sold his Gullwing recently for something around \$200,000 just as he was taking delivery of the latest of the line, the 2003 500SL, a fire-engine red one.

He has even melded his car and dog collecting themes with a toy contingent of canines in tin sitting behind the wheel, running along side, peering out a window or jumping through the windows of about 20 1950s-vintage models, some with dog and car action features. I'm still a collector, just a more discriminating one, and I guess I won't ever be satisfied with the toys I have," Ron admits.

No visitor should leave here without visiting the Sturgeons' copper-roofed turret tower with another of their collectibles—a century-old stained glass ceiling, an 11-foot diameter skylight. It was cut from a larger win-



Ron Sturgeon with one of his models.

dow in its original Cincinnati, Ohio church home site. Ron gave it an automated dumbwaiter for lowering from its 20-foot high ceiling perch to facilitate cleaning as well as replacing light fixtures.

"Why would I just hoard these often rare and always fun toys or these classic paintings and antiques? Yes, I'm proud of our success and what we've collected, but all of it makes sense only if we share it with others," says Ron, who built his auto-salvage yard chain to six locations with 140-plus employees and \$13 million-plus in annual sales before selling to Ford.

"He still works too hard," says Kathi, citing her husband's ongoing real estate investments and construction, positions on varied company boards and other ventures.

