

The collector

Viktor Wynd's new book explores his mania for gathering unusual objects from around the world – and he keeps many of them at his home in north Norfolk, writes Keiron Pim. 

PICTURES: MATTHEW USHER



ABOVE: Viktor Wynd with his partner, Hannah, and daughters, Leonora and Phoebe, and Sheba the dog.

It is hard to find a dodo bone nowadays – the bird has been extinct 300 years and the only occasional source is a dried-up ancient swamp in Mauritius – but if anyone can procure such a relic it is Viktor Wynd.

The slender brown fragment of legbone this dealer, collector and artist keeps in a cabinet drawer in a shadowy room in his Norfolk farmhouse is just one curiosity in a home crammed full of them, many of which might be considered morbid, though to Wynd all have their own beauty. Explore the house that he shares with his partner Hannah and their three children and you wander through a static menagerie of animals' skeletons and taxidermy (a Victorian elephant's foot, a more recently deceased large tortoise), spying curious artworks, exquisite orchids and carnivorous plants and even – resting serenely on the kitchen dresser – a preserved and bottled human foetus. Also shuffling around when I visited was Wynd's pygmy

hedgehog, Gilbert, though that day his chameleon and boa constrictor were at his flat in London.

The strange world he has created here and at his London museum is beautifully detailed in his new book, Viktor Wynd's Cabinet of Wonders, a lavish 200-page hardback that combines amusingly lugubrious text with fine photographs of his and fellow collectors' displays. Derren Brown calls it "a dark romp through the miscellanea of the macabre", while to the American filmmaker John Waters it's "an insanely delightful how-to guide on becoming a mentally ill, cheerily obsessive eccentric hoarder told with lunatic humour and absolute joy".

So what advice for any budding collector? Wynd's first response, only slightly tongue-in-cheek, is to call the habit "an illness, you don't necessarily want to recommend it to people . . . they're much better off not collecting." Then he suggests attending weekly auctions until you understand the

market, joining the salerooms' catalogue mailing lists and, unlike him, having a defined scope of interest.

"I think I'm too eclectic to have a single guiding principle," he says. "It has to sing in one way or another. Either it's visually interesting or it has a history behind it that makes it interesting. If there's something that you like and you think it will give you pleasure and you can afford it and you've nothing else to do – that's my approach to collecting!"

Wynd proved this a week after we met by impulsively buying a stuffed polar bear sight unseen for £5,000 from Great Yarmouth's closed-down Yesterday's World museum. It should sit well with his ostrich skeleton, which was prepared by being gnawed to the bone by voracious museum beetles then cleaned in a vat of soapy water for a year, before taking pride of place in his sitting room in the county where he and his family have decided to settle.

"Norfolk is very beautiful, very empty



Some of Viktor's favourite items (above left) a Vanda orchid; (top right) the nipple stone; (bottom right) the dodo bone.

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as well, quite sparse, quiet wild still," he says. "It doesn't feel like it's a suburb of London; it's not twee, it's still as it were a working place. Wonderful big skies, proper countryside, and food, good food! I went to Houghton Hall a few times before I did Wyndstock and thought it was all rather beautiful."

Wyndstock is a grand annual summer ball that he and his colleague Mark Holdstock stage at the north west Norfolk stately home, though the most recent one grew too big for his liking.

"I'm hoping to do it again, though not next year, because this year I had Twinstock," he laughs, referring to baby daughters Phoebe and Leonora. "I did four and the last one had 1,500 people,

which I think is too many. If we do it again I want to do it for closer to 500 people."

From masked balls to his taste in décor Wynd's life is about creating a spectacle, and it is all a performance: Viktor Wynd may or may not be the name he was born with, but it is the name of the character who built this collection, staged the events, founded the museum and wrote the book. Its index (or rather Wyndex) encapsulates this playful spirit: Between "books" and "bottled curiosities" is the entry "boredom, see depression"; "depression" directs the reader to "fantastical", which redirects to "genius, not enough", and thus to "pretentiousness", and so on, until we are led through the alphabet to the final entry: Wynd, Viktor, pages one to 200. ♦

Viktor Wynd's Cabinet of Wonders (published by Prestel) is £29.99. Viktor Wynd's Little Shop Of Horrors is at 11 Mare Street, London, E8 4RP.

Viktor's list

"I don't like doing favourites because they're all children and you shouldn't have favourites," says Viktor Wynd, but here are five objects that give him particular pleasure:

"The dodo bone – it's holding this item in your hand which is so incredibly rare, and the dodo is the poster child for man's effect on the environment."



ABOVE: "When I first saw Tessa Farmer's work I would never have imagined that I would own something like that and have it in my house. I think they're very funny – the fairies are definitely not nice fairies, and they're up to all sorts of things and they always make me laugh."

"The 'nipple stone' – I spend a lot of time on the beaches looking at stones and that one is particularly satisfying and pleasant and silly, and it makes me smile."



ABOVE: "This is one of Austin Osman Spare's best self-portraits; he made it in 1923 for a girl he liked who didn't like him. I think it has a sort of broody presence."

"Since I was a small child I have adored orchids. The Vanda orchids grow on my kitchen window, as if by magic on air in glass vases."