



The 17th-century arcaded panelling in the living room came from west Schleswig. In front of it a 16th-century chest from the island of Rømø supports busts, made in 1927, of the Amazonian chieftain Chico Moreco and his son

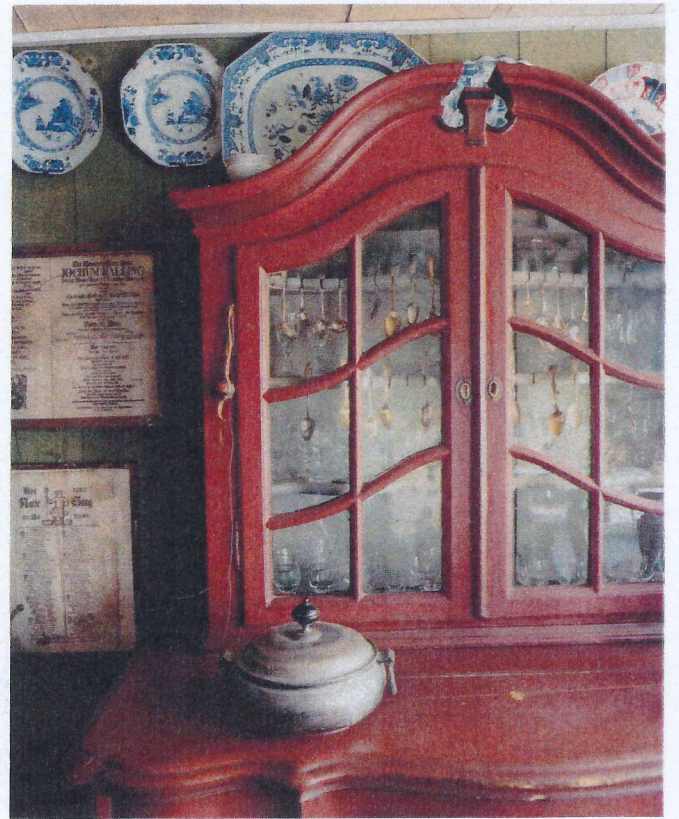
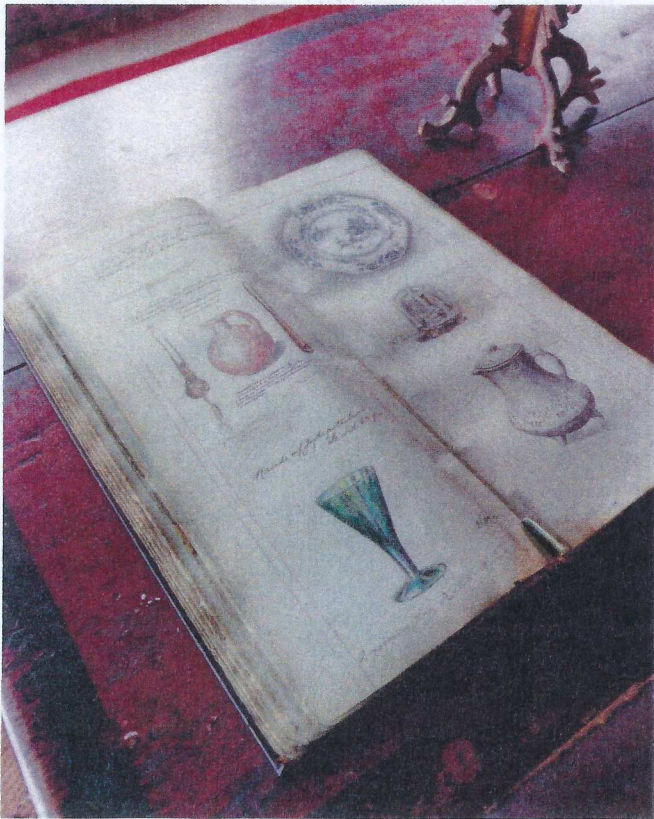




# Artist's Proof

When Danish sculptor Gunnar Hammerich set up home on the island of Aerø, he brought with him an obsession for collecting and recording. Presented to the local town in 1967, his house is still crammed with the evidence: ceramic mugs commemorating visits from friends, a bust of an Amazonian chief he met in Brazil, watercolour illustrations of each object he acquired. It's a remarkable testament to one man's passion, reports Roger White. Photography: Antony Crolla





Top: a bust on the table in the Stove Room is of Peter Mikkelsen Toft (1932), a pharmacist and founder of the museum in Tønder, south Jutland. Above left: Hammerich catalogued each new addition to his collection with an accompanying watercolour. Above right: an 18th-century glass-fronted cupboard, made in Aarøskøbing, contains a miscellaneous arrangement of glasses and spoons. The blue-and-white ceramics on the wall are English. Opposite: the living room's stove came from an inn at Tranderup on Aarø, while the mid-18th-century longcase clock is by Casper Pedersen of Stokkeby, a nearby village









**TO MANY** who visit the Danish island of Aerø, pretty much everything can seem stuck in a 1950s time-warp. This is less true of the main town, Marstal, where unsympathetic modern developments have intruded into the tight-knit web of narrow streets and left it with a rather moth-eaten feel. That this is not the case in the rival town of Aerøskøbing has a great deal to do with the sculptor Gunnar Hammerich (1893-1977), who during his long residence here managed to inculcate in the local people an appreciation of the need to conserve their heritage. The result is arguably the best-preserved, most attractive small town in Denmark.

Hammerich was not at all a local by origin, having been born the son of a prosperous Copenhagen engineer. However, his mother was a doctor's daughter from Svendborg, the main port of departure for ferries to Aerø, which may be why he began adult life as an apprentice in a merchant's warehouse there. In Svendborg he met a teacher at the technical school who not only fired him with enthusiasm for old buildings but also suggested that he should take a look at Aerøskøbing, which he did in 1913.

Although it received its charter in 1398, Aerøskøbing's heyday had been the 17th and 18th centuries, which is the period of the majority of its surviving buildings. The prosperity that resulted from fishing and trading generated an extremely pleasing variety of houses, very few of them grand but together close-lining the cobbled streets to create a perfect piece of townscape. In the late 18th and 19th

centuries the town was eclipsed by Marstal, which quickly grew to three times the size of Aerøskøbing as a busy centre for long-distance trading. The place that Hammerich fell in love with in 1913 was consequently in a state of arrested development, where the population was in decline and very little had happened architecturally for a century or so.

Hammerich, meanwhile, had decided that commerce was not for him, and that he must be an artist, above all a sculptor. A substantial inheritance from his father, which he invested cannily on the Copenhagen stock market, meant that he was able to study at the Danish Royal Academy of Arts, from which he graduated in 1916. Further visits to Aerøskøbing had confirmed his love of the place, and that same year he bought a small half-timbered house in the centre of town as a holiday home, adding even smaller adjoining properties in 1919 and 1921.

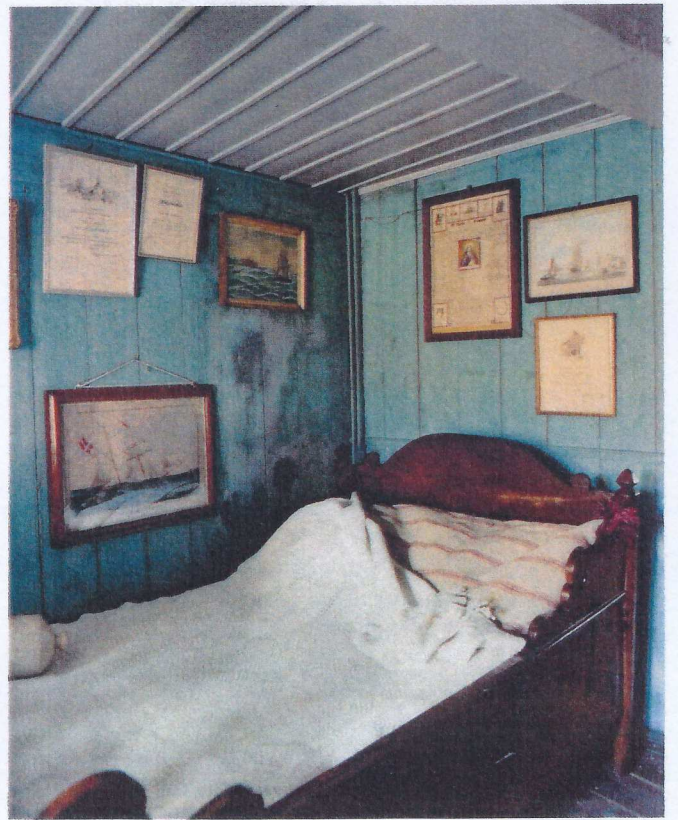
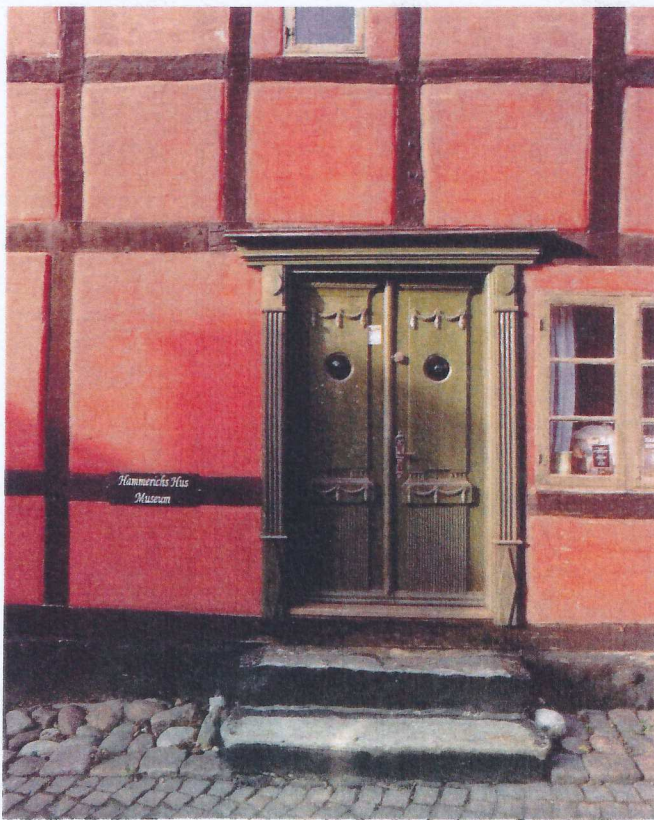
By this time he had begun the almost obsessive collecting of folk artefacts from Aerø and the neighbouring islands of the southern Danish archipelago, as well as from Schleswig, the Danish-speaking southern part of the Jutland peninsula. Lost to Germany in the war of 1864 but partially recovered in the negotiations after World War I – in which Denmark had remained neutral – Schleswig stirred Hammerich's nationalist inclinations, the more so because, through his brother (a diplomat who took part in the negotiations), he was able to garner a number of commissions for monuments and memorial stones there.

Top left: an assortment of old utensils hangs on the kitchen walls. Top right: a plate rack is stacked with 18th- and 19th-century English china. Opposite: the parrot on the door to the stairs was brought back from the Amazon in 1927, and sat on Hammerich's shoulder until its demise









Top: the half-timbered, pink-painted exterior of the house is typical of the picturesque streetscape of Aarøskøbing. Above left: the entrance doors to the house are a rustic version of Louis XVI style. Above right: an 18th-century bed from the island of Strynø is accompanied by naive pictures of 19th-century ships. At the head is a religious picture, *A Traveller's Compass Through Life*, probably late 19th-century. Opposite: this box bed, dated 1786, came from the island of Avernakø, but its carved top was found in Vindeballe, Aarø





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In the 1920s Hammerich took an extended sabbatical to travel around Europe and beyond. The final leg found him in Brazil, where in 1927 he made portrait busts of an Amazonian chieftain and his son. When he returned to Denmark he brought with him a brilliantly coloured parrot, which accompanied him everywhere perched on his shoulder; when it died he had it stuffed and displayed on the wall of the Aerøskøbing holiday house. The next year, following the death of his doting but disapproving mother, he married his long-standing German girlfriend Emma Jochims. They never had children, but this appeared not to matter, as Hammerich was highly sociable, and a constant stream of Copenhagen friends found their way to Aerø. He commemorated their visits by making ceramic mugs bearing the relevant name and date, which were then hung from the ceiling beams of his living room.

The collecting resumed. The 1930s were a particularly fruitful period for this, since the prolonged economic crisis made local people eager to sell. Even the two larger rooms of his holiday house were quite small, and his acquisitions were increasingly shoehorned in with a view to achieving maximum capacity rather than artistic effect. By the time of his death the house contained some 3,500 objects and around 2,000 Dutch tiles – some of the latter acquired in South Jutland, the others from Aerø houses to which they had been brought back by sailors. As each purchase arrived it was carefully catalogued in Hammerich's

elegant hand, with an accompanying watercolour illustration, a note of what he had paid, and the circumstances.

By the time he and his wife decided to become full-time residents of Aerøskøbing in 1943 it was clear that the little house at 22 Gyden was an impossibility for occupation, so they bought in addition what is probably the largest house in town. Hammerich became ever more a lynchpin of local society, setting up the town's first cinema, where he sat at the door selling tickets and smoking his trademark cigar. The collection continued to be shown to his guests, and was available to anyone else who expressed interest. In 1967 he presented both building and contents to the town, along with the plaster maquettes for many of his own sculptures. Small-town residents can be slow to accept high-profile incomers into their ranks, but over the course of six decades the charismatic sculptor from distant Copenhagen made himself Aerøskøbing's best-known and maybe best-valued citizen. All the while he was imperceptibly educating them into a greater awareness of the town's special architectural qualities – in the early 1960s, for instance, when the picturesque gas street lamps were due to be replaced by intrusive new ones, he persuaded the council that a better solution would be to convert the old ones to electricity. If aesthetically aware tourists now make a beeline for Aerøskøbing rather than Marstal, it is perhaps because the one had a Hammerich and the other did not ■

*Hammerichs Hus, 22 Gyden, 5970 Aerøskøbing, Denmark. For opening times, ring 00 45 62 52 29 50, or visit [arremus.dk](http://arremus.dk)*

Top: in the Poster Bedroom the painted chest of drawers dates from 1809. On it sits a 1925 bust of Svend Methling (1891-1977), actor and director at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The rope hanging from the bed canopy was to enable elderly or infirm occupants to haul themselves upright. Opposite: in the same room, a box bed from Vindeballe is hung with curtains from Avernakø. A Neoclassical pot cupboard sits by the window

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