



Collecting

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Tomorrow's Antiques

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Dice

The die is cast," said Julius Caesar, referring to his irrevocable gamble to cross the River Rubicon and invade Italy in 49 B.C. Some people like to toss "them bones" in the back room of the bar; others prefer to leave the odds to high rollers and collect the dice themselves.

"I consider myself a gourmand of dice—I will collect almost anything," claims Kevin Cook, who holds the Guinness Book record for owning the most dice in the world—21,430 to date, at a cost of about \$44,000. His roll started three decades ago when he discovered an old shoebox full of old dice, including bone dice, in a Colorado Springs pawnshop.

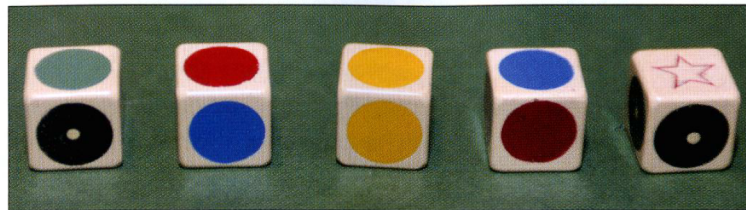
Internet auctions and trading clubs have speeded up collectors' action. Gaming conventions attract hundreds of thousands of people and are a good source for dice collectors. Gambling tokens made out of precious metals, shells, bone, ivory, stones, wood and even teeth have been unearthed in many places. Ancient Roman dice look similar to our modern counterparts—cubes with a system of dots on their faces. But the dice we commonly see are made of plastic and even these hold value. "The value of a die or set of dice is that which the market is willing to pay. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose," advises Cook.

Items to look for

☛ Casino dice: Most casinos sell their used dice to gambling suppliers, who resell them for \$5 or less. Casino dice, from



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1950 on, are called precision dice because they are specifically cut from cellulose acetate into one-half to three-quarter inch cubes and then polished to a gloss. They have straight edges and square corners with flush pips (dots). Most casino dice have embedded logos; some have only serial numbers. Cook has seen an early-20th-century "set of celluloid nitrite dice priced at \$1,000." Casino dice are collected in two categories; pairs in which each has the same logo but have different serial numbers, and pairs that have the same logo and the same serial numbers, i.e. they came from the same "stick." A stick—its contents are used in the American gambling game of "craps"—contains five dice in a foil pack; a stick can go for as little as \$10.

☛ Look for dice that were part of a short run or taken out of production.

☛ There are many odd shaped dice: dragons, octagons, picture dice. Browse Q-workshop.com for glow-in-the-dark dice and stylized shapes like pyramids at \$3 to \$4 for a single die and about \$20 for a set of seven. Rose & Pentagon makes reproductions of historic fantasy dice: dragons, "Lord and Lady dice," copies of 15th-century German dice cast in resin to simulate ivory; expect to pay \$10 a pair.

☛ Gamescience and Crystal Castle are two companies who sell interesting glass and stone samples of dice made to accompany board games. Expect to pay \$8 to \$25. Drugstore dice are not in the collectible game.

☛ The Holy Grail of dice are Mercury Tappers or loaded dice—illegal gambling dice that have mercury in the center to



allow a dye to be set to roll to a specific outcome.

• Dice cups, shakers, ladders made of leather, bone, ivory or wood, all designed to drop the dice and randomize the throw without the touch of cheating fingers. If Lady Luck is with you, you might find something desirable for about \$85. Otherwise, expect to pay more like \$400-\$800.

Top tips

- Most "ancient dice" on the market are fakes. Research before you bid.
- Store dice in a cool (64 degree F.), dry and dark space. Novelty dice made of chocolate or sugar should be placed in an appropriate container and kept in the freezer. Glass and other fragile dice must be stored in cloth bags to avoid chipping. Do not use alcohol-based cleaners.
- Mint condition increases value, original boxes are a plus.

—L.A.



PHOTO BY KEVIN COOK



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Facing page bottom left: Terracotta dice from ancient Rome (circa 400 B.C.); facing page top right: "loaded dice" with magnetic pulls that draw a matching pair together; this page bottom left: a Haiden's Horn leather cone drop with bone dice (circa 1940-1950); top right: various casino game dice

"Gambling tokens have been made of precious metal, shell, bone, even human teeth."