COLLECTORS' DEPARTMENT

THE EDITOR OF THIS DEPARTMENT WILL BE GLAD TO ANSWER ANY LETTERS OF ENQUIRY FROM ITS READERS ON ANY SUBJECT CONNECTED WITH OLD FURNITURE, POTTERY AND PORCELAIN, GLASS, MINIATURES, TEXTILES, PRINTS AND ENGRAVINGS, BOOKS AND BINDINGS, COINS AND MEDALS, AND OTHER SUBJECTS OF INTEREST TO COLLECTORS. LETTERS OF ENQUIRY SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED BY STAMPS FOR RETURN POSTAGE

(Collectors' Notes and Queries and The Collectors' Mart will be found in the reading matter columns of the advertising pages of this number.)

Bird Cages

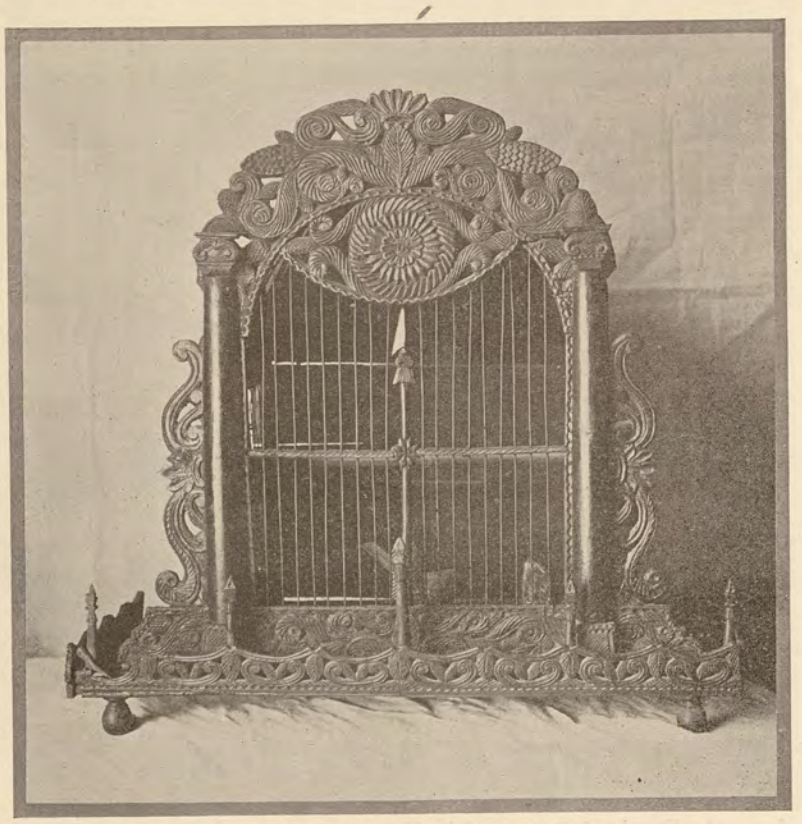
By Walter F. Webster
Photographs by T. C. Turner

SO very few collectors seem to have realized or appreciated the beauty and quaintness of old cages that the one comprehensive collection which has been formed possesses an interest which is particularly and rightly its own.

Without a doubt there is not a nation upon the earth which does not include a love for birds among its characteristics. It is by no means the result of civilization, for among savages it has always existed, as their folk lore will attest. In the folk lore of many primtive races, birds are endowed with a certain mysterious attribute which places them midway between the gods and the denizens of the earth. Their soaring into the empyrean realms of the heavens, has led to their being considered as especially favored by the gods or regarded as their messengers and in some countries even the feathers of birds are cherished as sacred, and those gathered from birds' nests are wafted aloft and ascend as prayers to the deities.

In civilized countries the little feathered songsters who are members of the family circle occupy a position of high regard in the home and from the ice-bound lands of the frozen north to the olive and ilex groves of the fragrant and languorous south, infinite care and patience has been employed in fashioning their little homes. The making of cages for birds has been, of course, a form of home handicraft—a kind of "fireside industry," and for this reason it has a special value to collectors and to others who trace in the making of such objects the expression of artistic instinct toward the attainment of a national idea. It is natural, perhaps, that the cages for such household favorites as birds should reflect the architecture of the people by whom the cages have been made. After all a bird cage is the home of the birds who live within it, and is therefore a house in miniature, and to be planned and built much as a home in ordinary. Russian cages, therefore, are models of Russian architecture, and often possess bulbous spires and the other earmarks of Russian architecture familiar to travelers in that land of the semi-barbaric and the picturesque; Dutch bird cages likewise reflect the pleasing quaintness of homes in the little country of canals and windmills, and cages from China and Japan are often tiny temples.

The materials of which bird cages are made are many and varied. As might be supposed, wood in some form is often employed, for wood is indigenous everywhere, and as bamboo or reed is easily woven and twisted into divers shapes and forms. Wood is also easily carved, and carving is a form of universal handicraft. Metal is used largely by cage-makers everywhere, and metals such as brass or copper which may be hammered or beaten appear about as often in the form of repoussé as in the form of wire bars with which they are associated in our minds with the bird cages which are made in factories to-day.



An early Dutch chip-carved bird cage, 1714. Drake collection

The Dutch and the Japanese, who are wonderfully dexterous in the handling of many forms of ceramic art, have utilized their skill in such work, to some extent, in the fashioning of cages. The use of the Delft ware made in Holland has produced results which are especially pleasing, for with the structural portions made of white and blue or polychrome Delft, the use of brass or copper wire is very successful.

The one collection of cages which is sufficiently complete to present a really

A wood and copper cage

An early Dutch cage

A simple and primitive cage

definite idea of the extent and variety which exists, has been formed by that most indefatigable of collectors, Mr. Alexander W. Drake, of New York. The creating of the collection has occupied many hours of his travels into foreign lands and has involved many adventures almost as interesting, in the homes and haunts of foreign peoples who have come to America, and so extensive is the assortment of cages which he has gathered that it takes one into the homes of almost every country beneath the sun, and represents the architectural achievements of almost every people.

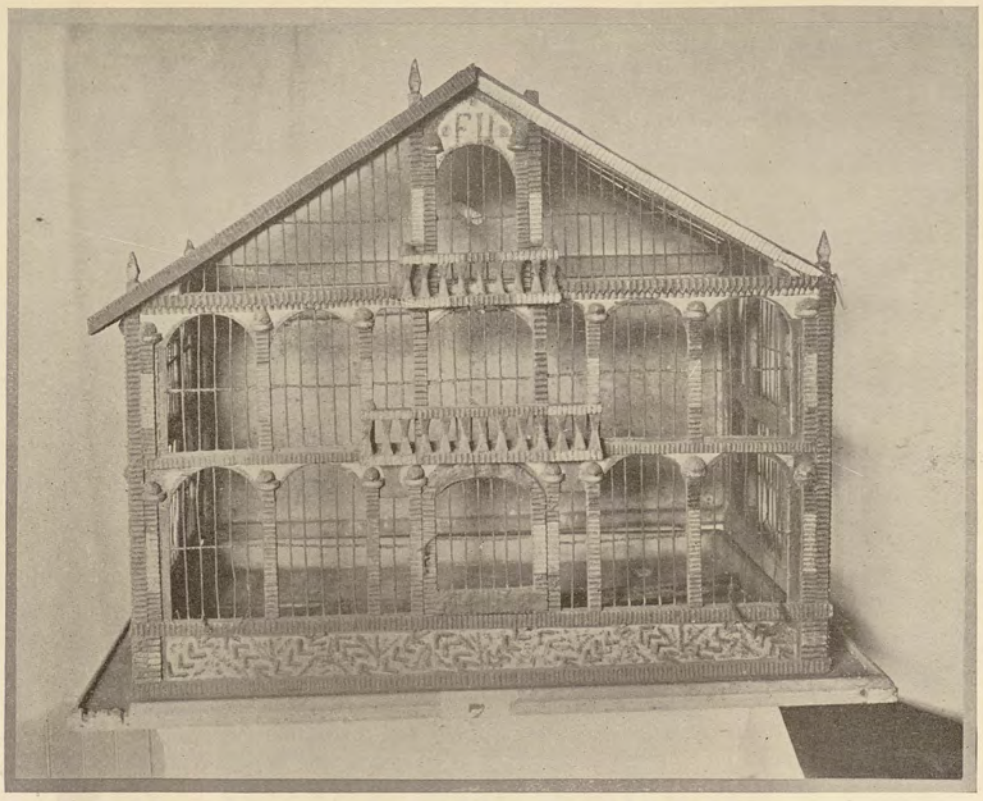
The accompanying illustrations of bird cages in Mr. Drake's vast collection afford an idea which could never be conveyed by mere words of the quaint beauty and infinite variety of what most of us regard as the most commonplace and prosaic of domestic or household objects. We are so accustomed to seeing cages of wire, either of brass, iron or copper, and in merely a few hopelessly uninteresting shapes, turned out by the thousand in our factories and on sale in every "bargain basement," that it is something of a revelation to discover that in other lands and in earlier days when a greater attention was paid to the beautifying of the commonplace cages of unusual interest and of a high decorative value were made. The Dutch cage upon page 289 is a type and an example of the artistic thrift and care which the patient and home-loving Hollanders have always lavished upon objects of household adornment. Chip-carved by some tireless craftsman in 1714, its brown wood has aged to a rich and mellow bronze, and one likes to imagine it occupied by a family of red birds or parrakeets. It seems to belong in an interior such as were painted for the benefit of us who have come after by Vermeer and certain of his companions. Surely the cage must have hung in its original setting close by a casement window filled with leaded glass. Nearby there must have been a mantel laden with much blue and white Delft, and below the mantel there was doubtless a shining array of brass pots and kettles over the fire.

Equally typical of Holland and quite as beautiful, though in a wholly different way, is the Dutch cage which appears upon page 290. In this instance the cage, instead of being of carved wood is of old Delft with scenes of Dutch domestic life painted under the glaze. A little panel painted in a geometrical design is the end of a tiny drawer in which is placed the bird's food. One can hardly imagine pottery of any kind being used for such a purpose, but the patient craftsmanship of the old Dutch potters was far beyond our understanding, and the achievements of their cunning were never more interesting than in this old bird cage. Another cage, also of Delft and similar in some respects to this in Mr. Drake's collection, is treasured in the Metropolitan Museum, although it is there regarded as an example of ceramic art rather than as a bird cage.

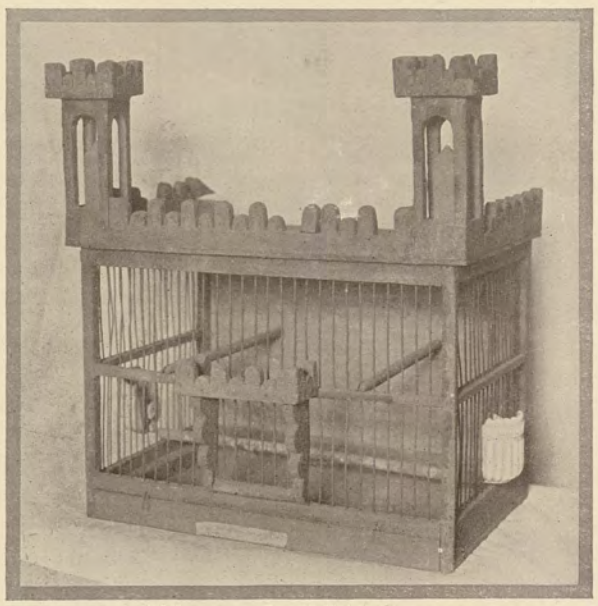
An early Dutch bird cage of Delft ware, with decoration of Summer and Winter scenes. Drake collection

The domestic and decorative arts of Russia possess an individuality and interest which is especially their own, and one of several of Russia's contributions to this collection is the bird cage shown upon page 292. The cage is modeled after a home in Russia; a weather-vane adorns the uppermost point

of the roof, while just below the gable there looks out an antlered head cut from the wood in high relief. Switzerland is represented by a cage of wood which is a chalet in miniature. The broad overhang of the eaves shelters several tiny balconies placed upon different levels such as one expects and generally finds upon real chalets. The Swiss are famous wood carvers and toymakers, and the clever artisans of the tiny mountain republic excel in all the arts of simulation and clever make-believe. To make the cage resemble as closely as possible a chalet such as may be found in any village in Switzerland, the outside of the cage is decorated in red upon a background of a kind of clay-white. From China and Japan, and from some of the islands of the Philippine group have come cages of bamboo or reed which has been reduced to a state of sufficient pliability and then woven into imitations of the airy and fantastic towers and pagodas with roofs piled one above another according to the custom of the countries. Several of the Chinese cages are possessed of feet of teakwood carved in a pattern which shows much openwork; the feet are obviously decorative and are doubtless intended mainly as ornaments to relieve the otherwise extreme simplicity of the cage. Carved teak appears in another cage which appears upon page 292. This cage is modeled, apparently, after a Spanish or Portuguese church or where it figures also as a decorative adjunct, but here in the form of doors and balusters across the façade and as tiny brackets or corbels placed in the angles of openings. One of the chief charms of primitive Chinese or Japanese architecture lies in the rare taste and discrimination with which ornament is used—they have a wonderful knack of using only the merest suggestion of adornment and yet attain an effect of finish and symmetry—it is never over-done.

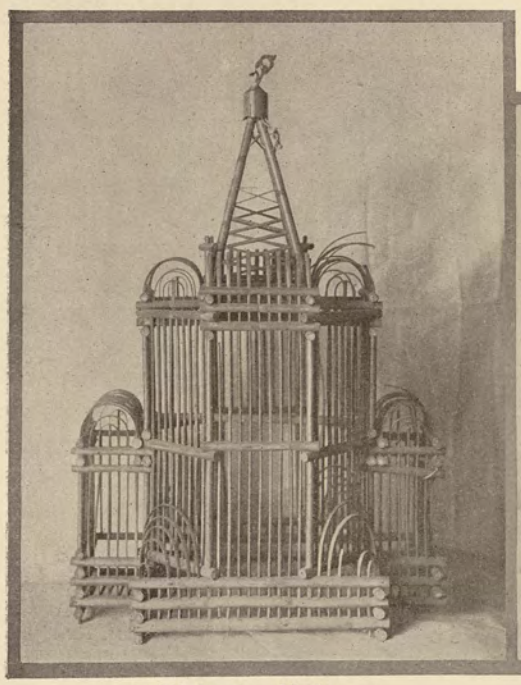


This cage from Switzerland is patterned after a chalet



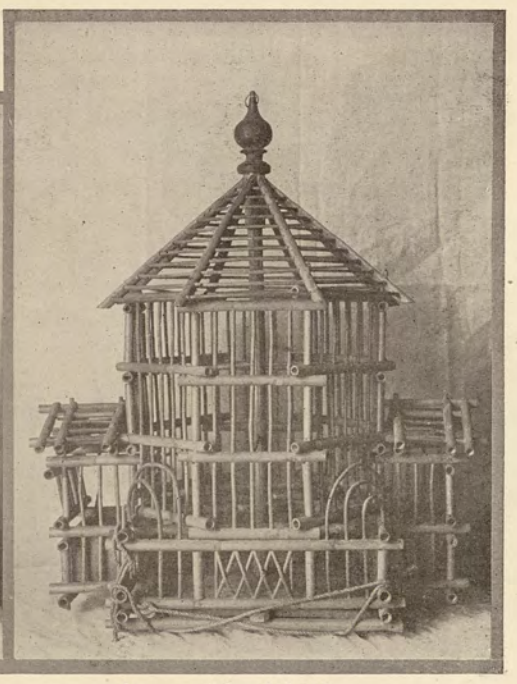
"Norman Castle" bird cage

Upon page 292 is shown a little English skylark cage which with its "bow window" suggests the house fronts of such quaint old cities as Chester or Bath. In this instance the receptacles for food are of glass and are not very different from those used with cages being made to-day. A Mexican cage of reed which is the work of an old peasant man, suggests the broad, horizontal lines of the Spanish architecture which prevails in Mexico. As compared with some of the cages in Mr. Drake's collection it is somewhat clumsy and crude, and to some of us it might seem to be lacking in that grace which we like to associate with things Spanish. Another cage which suggests the arts of Spain or of Portugal is that from the Azores



A Philippine bird cage

A Mexican bird cage. Drake collection



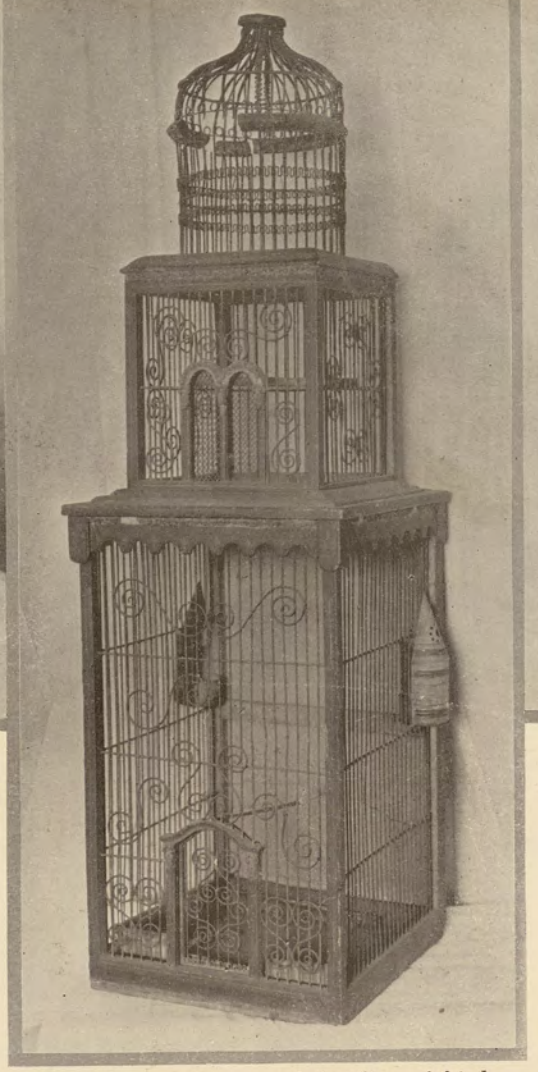
Azores Island bird cage

An octagonal cage with domed roof

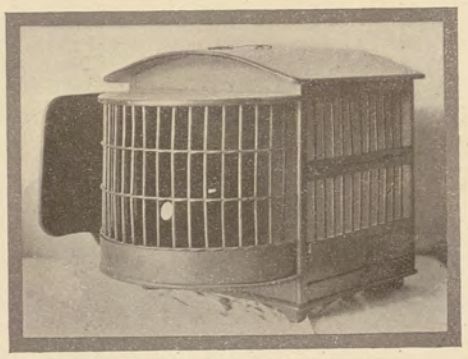
cathedral, where often a lofty circular "lantern" crowns the crossing of nave and transepts.

America's chief gift to this cage collection consists of a wooden cage patterned after an old church in Astoria, Long Island. It is typical of a certain form of ecclesiastical architecture popular during the last century which is sometimes known as the old "wooden gothic" style. One may regret to see American architecture represented by a type which is at best somewhat melancholy, but it must be admitted that the example is true to the period, even to the dials of the clock in the wooden belfry. The old German cage upon page 292, immediately suggests the domestic architecture of Germany of today. The entire absence of ornament and the turning to account in a decorative way of the necessary openings on the cage, is here characteristically German.

One is apt to think of cages as used chiefly for birds. So they



Storied cage for several families of birds

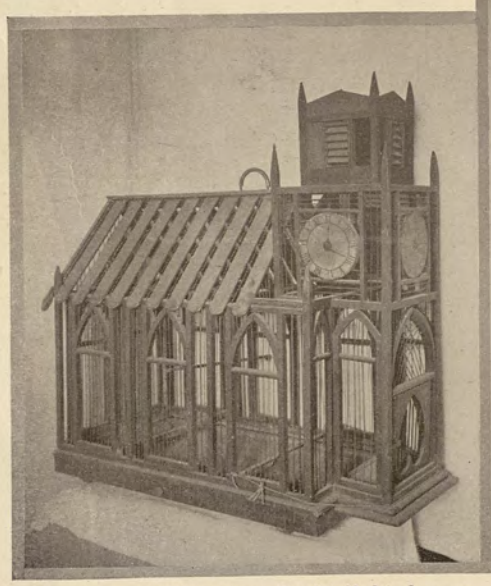


English Skylark cage

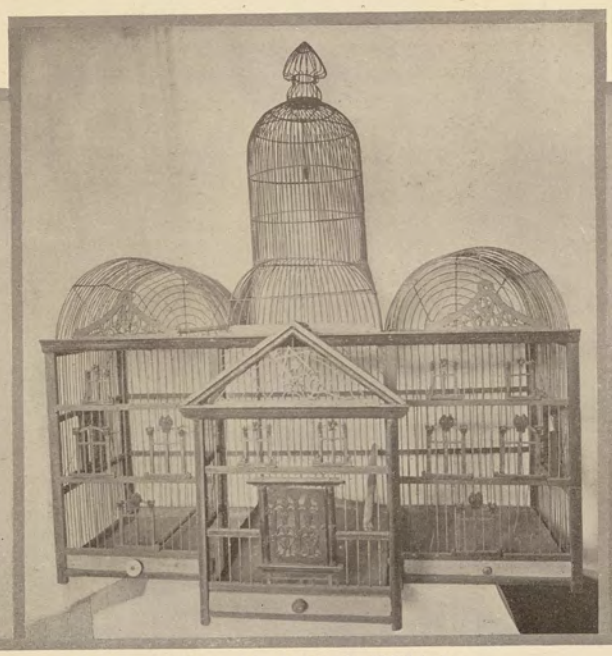
A German bird cage

are in America, but in many oriental countries as well as in certain parts of Europe they are made for certain insects, the singing of which is regarded as musical. The people of the Dragonfly Islands value the music of many insects, particularly the Kirigirisu, which has been the theme of many poems and which is considered the prophet of frost as well as of separation. Many of the insect cages from Japan and China, and sometimes those from India are set or mounted upon tiny wooden stands which somewhat resemble those often used as pedestals for vases or jars of oriental porcelain. Where insect cages are of a tall and slender shape, they have been designed for high-leaping insects—"high vaulters in the sunny grass" when out of doors.

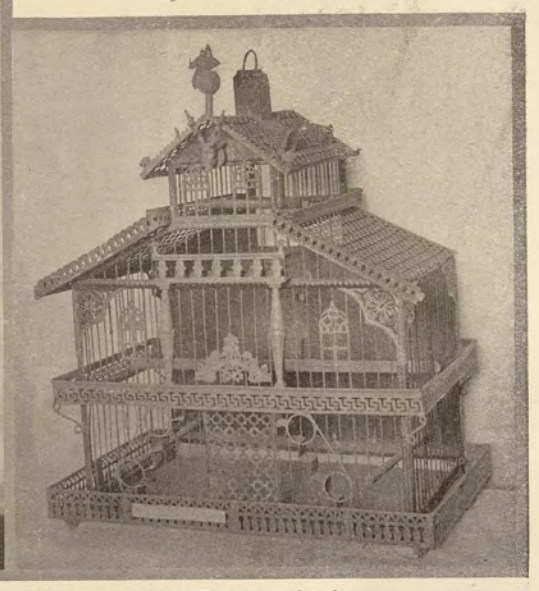
If a collection represents the fruit of much journeying and travels into strange places, such is particularly true of an assortment of such household objects as these cages of birds.



American "Wooden Gothic" bird cage



A "Spanish Cathedral" bird cage



A Russian bird cage