Valuable object collection reveals a piece of Cuba's history before 1959

HIGHLIGHTS

Orestes Chavez has amassed a collection of more than 2,500 objects pertaining to Cuba before Castro

Some of the pieces belong to the colonial epoch

A dream of exhibiting the collection permanently at the Freedom Tower

BY ABEL FERNÁNDEZ
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Everything started 30 years ago when Orestes Chavez, at the time a young Miami Dade College Police Academy student, bought the baseball card of a Cuban player.

"The salesman asked me, 'Are you Cuban?' " recalls Chavez as a sparkle shines in his light eyes. "That was the moment in which my life changed. A monster was awoken," said Chavez, who is 52 and was born in Guanabacoa, Cuba, before emigrating when he was 4.

Since then, fascinated by the island's history, Chavez has amassed a collection of more than 2,500 objects from pre-1959 Cuba. Some of the objects belong to the colonial period and most were obtained at auctions are long periods of in-depth investigation about each piece.

"This is like the art world," said Chavez of the art of collecting. Chavez, who is now a major with the Miami Police Department, added: "You have to know about history to recognize a piece and its authenticity."

The gallery at Miami Dade College presented "The Heartbeat of Cuba," a one-day exhibit on Thursday showcasing the Historic Collection of Orestes Chavez.

Among the pieces: several original uniforms belonging to professional baseball players from Cuba, baseball mitts, antique photographs, as well as a Celia Cruz dress and a brown cape with the words "Kid Chocolate" emblazoned on it in white.

"This is the cape worn by Kid Chocolate when he won the world boxing championship July of 1931," said Chavez, pointing at the garment, one of his three favorite pieces in the collection. The others are a shirt of the now extinct Cuban Telephone Company baseball club, which he chased for 20 years, and the other is a flag flown by the Havana Club when they won the Caribbean Series in 1952.

At the start of his career as a collector, Chavez focused on obtaining items representative of the island's rich professional baseball history. As part of his research, he met several forgotten Cuban baseball players, who played in the 1940s and '50s, and established a lengthy interview with some of them.

And even though he quickly expanded his search to include valuable Cuban historical items in general, his baseball collection is highly appraised: toward the end of the 1990s it received a $1 million offer for 20 Cuban baseball player jerseys.

"I didn't accept the offer because my collection is like a puzzle," Chavez explained. If he sold, "I would have removed one part of Cuba's history."

When he broadened his interest to include other objects, his collection grew to include boxing and automobile racing paraphernalia as well as historical documents.

"We have the rare opportunity of sharing a vital piece of Cuba's history with our students and our community. Thanks to the generosity of Orestes Chavez, this formidable collection can be exhibited in his alma mater," said Malou C. Harrison, president of Miami Dade College's North Campus.

Chavez wishes that one day his entire collection, which is guarded securely in a bank safe, will be end up in a museum so that future generations can enjoy it.

"This exhibit is the closest I've been to having my collection exposed in a museum," he said. "But my dream is that one day it is permanently exhibited in the Freedom Tower, in which they processed all the Cubans who came to Miami in the 1960s, including me."

Chavez dedicated Thursday's exhibit in memory of Julian Valdes, proprietor and curator of the Little Cuban Museum of Miami, who died September last year.

"He was a great collector who dedicated his whole life to this," Chavez said. "He was also a great friend and one of the few people who shared my passion."

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