

VISION from the PAST

**Eyewear museum
carries 3,400 frames
and five centuries
of memories**

A diamond-studded platinum frame worth over \$21,000 . . . a wood and brass frame of Chinese origin that's nearly 500 years old . . . a folding lorgnette, carved from tortoise shell, harkening to gentler times a century ago: these are the things that memories are made of. At least at American Optical's recently-opened eyewear museum.

Through hard work and perseverance, volunteers, most notably AO product manager John Young, who serves as curator of the unusual museum, have assembled a stunning collection of 3,400 antique frames.

More than 800 are on display at the company's eyewear museum, which is open to the general public.

The \$21,000 platinum frame designed by Schiaparelli takes center stage. One of only four frames created in 1955 to promote the Schiaparelli design, a precursor of signature lines, the frame contains 201 diamonds and weighs in at a hefty 7.75 karats.



Tortoise shell lorgnette, the fashion craze at the turn of the century (top);

Sportglasses circa 1880: sunglass in pince-nez hard rubber rims with a blue steel hoop ring, shooting glasses with all but the center of the lens left unclear to help marksman concentration and sun visor painted on lenses (second row, left);

Eskimos carved tortoise shell (and bone) spectacles to cut the glare of sun and snow. And unusual for any era, blue steel sunglasses with spring attachment and a scissor mechanism for adjusting glasses when attached to a visor (second row, right);

Beauty and simplicity from 1820, in sterling silver (third row);

Very rare scissor glasses of genuine tortoise shell (far left);

Five centuries old, these Chinese frames of wood and brass are the oldest in the collection (immediate left).

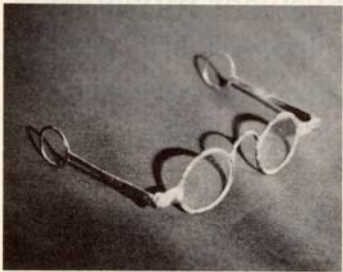
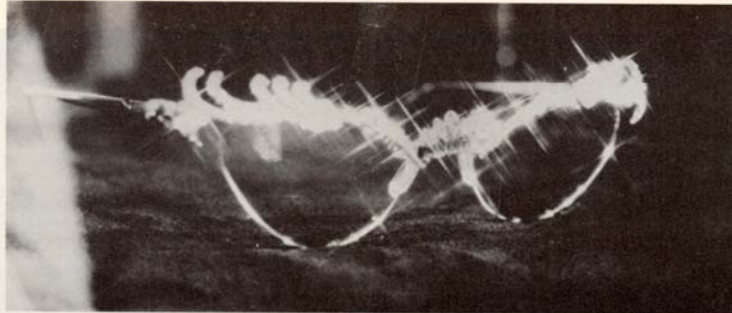
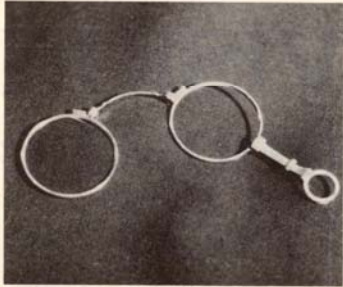


Ripe with the history of eyewear, the compact area at AO's Southbridge, Mass. headquarters sports all kinds of memorabilia for eyewear professionals: a bench leg from 1915, a belt-driven grinding and polishing machine from the turn of the century, and Le Mare's optometer, to name but three.

Le Mare's optometer dates to the days when opticians and jewelers were often one and the same. The early device was used around 1880 as a means of testing vision and determining the appropriate spectacle powers.

The optometer contained 36 pairs of lenses, each of which could be rotated into viewing position by turning a wooden handle on the side of the box.

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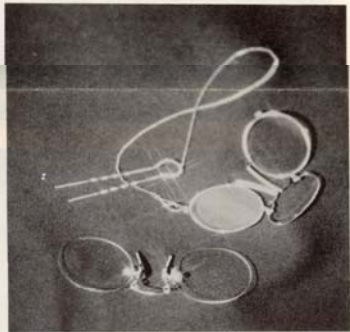
Locked securely behind a glass case, the Schiaparelli designer frame (top row, right) is valued at more than \$21,000. The diamonds alone would cost \$11,800 to replace; Pince-nez, like the rimless with a reduced Hempler guard or the American made model of yellow gold wire with solid gold chain were popular items during the late nineteenth century (center of page). Le Mare's optometer tested vision circa 1880 (bottom, left). Turnpin spatula temples give this 1750 silver frame a distinctive look (bottom, right).



One would simply look through the device at the card in the rear and rotate the lenses until the card could be seen clearly. The two wooden doors on each side of the eyehole could be swung to closed position so each eye could be tested separately.

This device is probably of French origin and the lenses in this device and those sold by Le Mare through its use were made of rock crystal, not glass as used today.

Dispensers are welcome to visit the museum, either during regularly scheduled hours of noon to 4 p.m. Saturdays or by special appointment. Southbridge is in western Massachusetts, about an hour's drive from Boston.



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