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Mr. Walker's Cabinet of Incredible Collectibles

by Steven Levy

From King James to James Bond, Chaucer to Sputnik, Internet innovator Jay Walker has a personal library like no other in the world.

photographs by Andrew Moore

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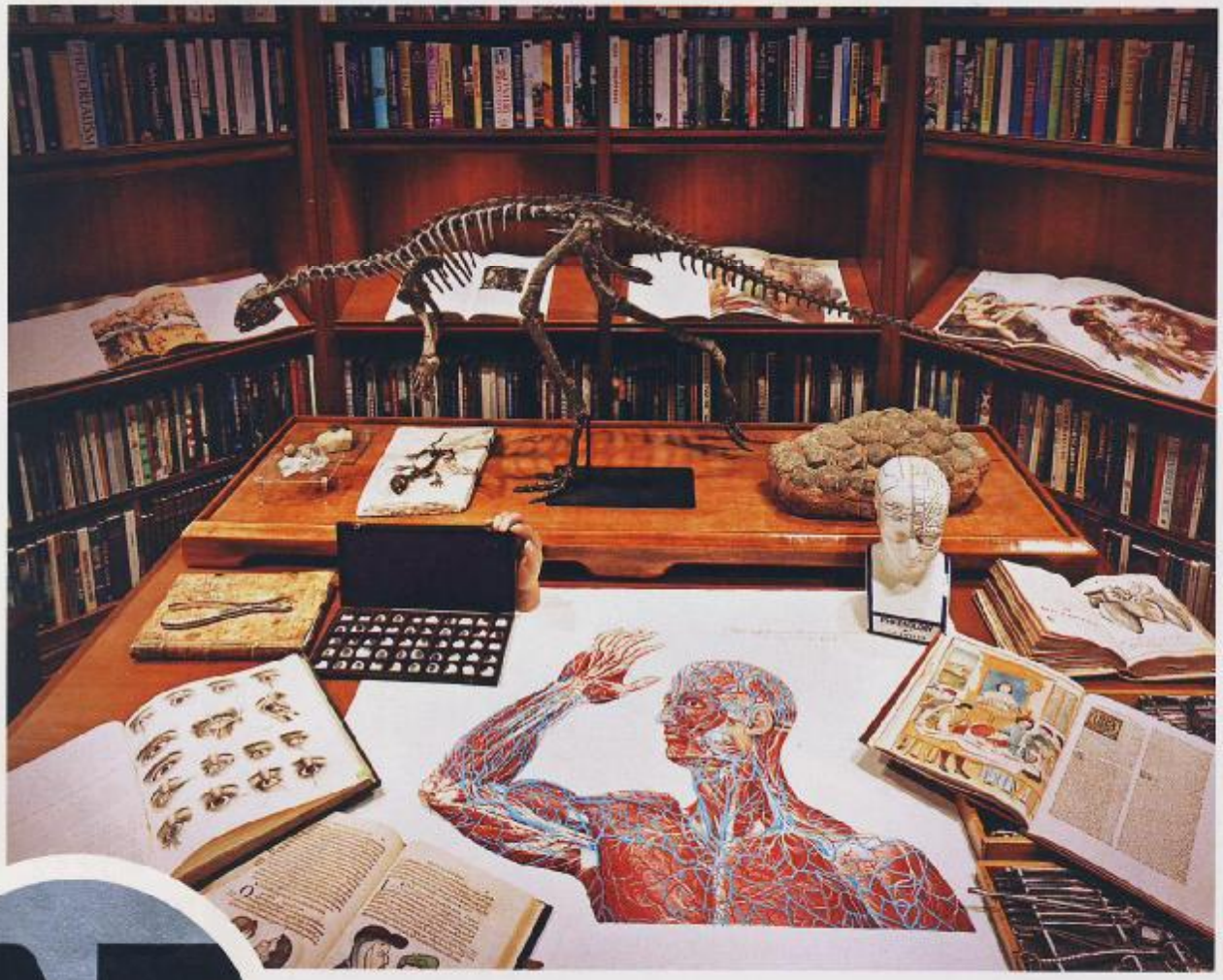
The View From Above Looming over the library is an original **Sputnik 1 satellite**, one of several backups the Soviets built. At far left is a model of NASA's experimental **X-29 jet**, with forward-swept wings. "It's the first plane that a pilot can't fly—only computers can handle it," Walker says. On the top of the center shelves are "scholar's rocks," natural formations believed by the Chinese to spur contemplation. Behind the rocks is a 15-foot-long model of the **Saturn V rocket**.



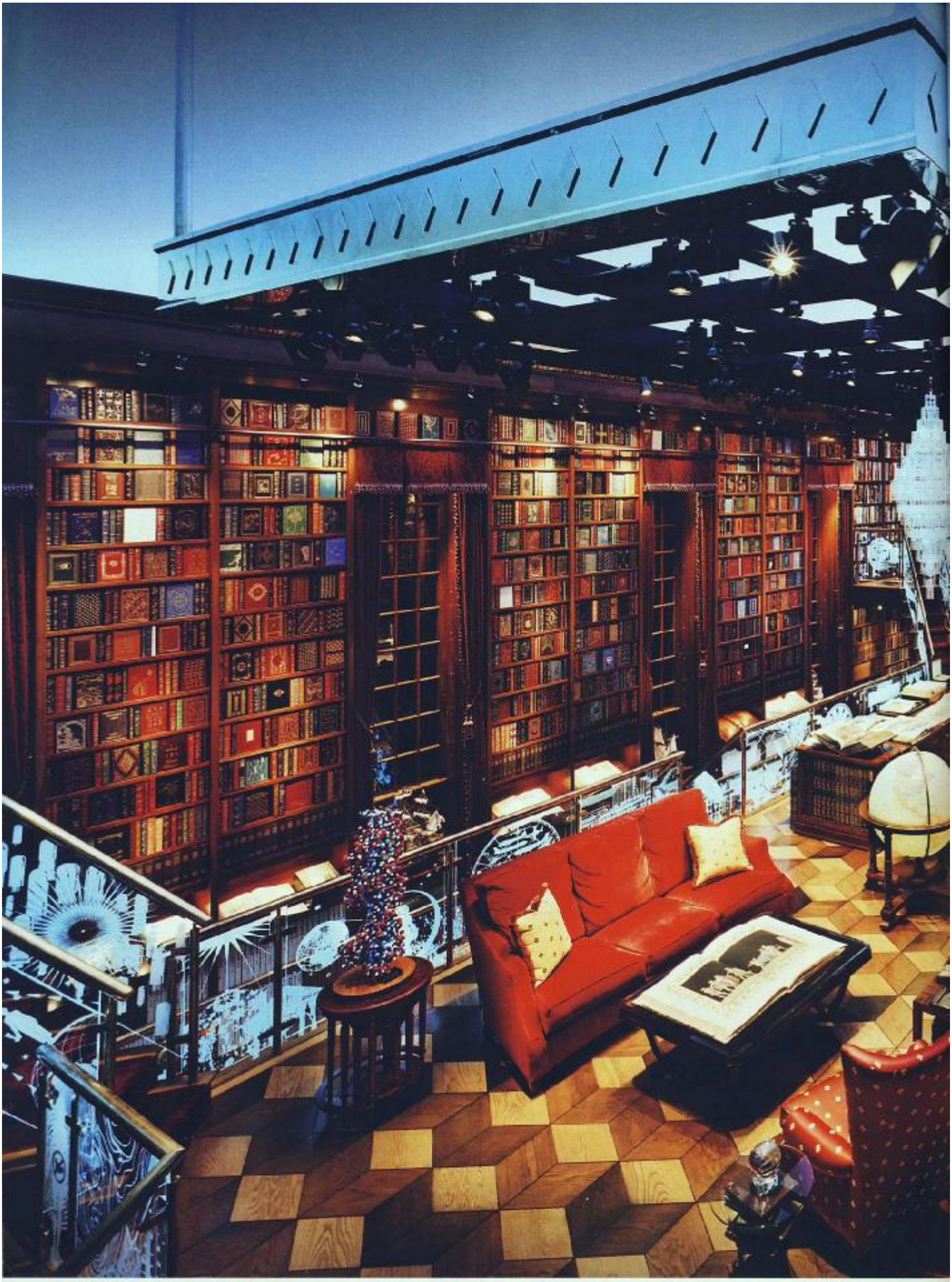
NOTHING QUITE PREPARES you for the culture shock of Jay Walker's library. You exit the austere parlor of his New England home and pass through a hallway into the bibliographic equivalent of a Disney ride. Stuffed with landmark tomes and eye-grabbing historical objects—on the walls, on tables, standing on the floor—the room occupies about 3,600 square feet on three mazelike levels. Is that a Sputnik? (Yes.) Hey, those books appear to be bound in rubies. (They are.) That edition of Chaucer ... is it a Kelmscott? (Natch.) Gee, that chandelier looks like the one in the James Bond flick *Die Another Day*. (Because it is.) No matter where you turn in this ziggurat, another treasure beckons you—a 1665 *Bills of Mortality* chronicle of London (you can track plague fatalities by week), the instruction manual for the Saturn V rocket (which launched the Apollo 11 capsule to the moon), a framed napkin from 1943 on which Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined his plan to win World War II. In no time, your mind is stretched like hot taffy. »

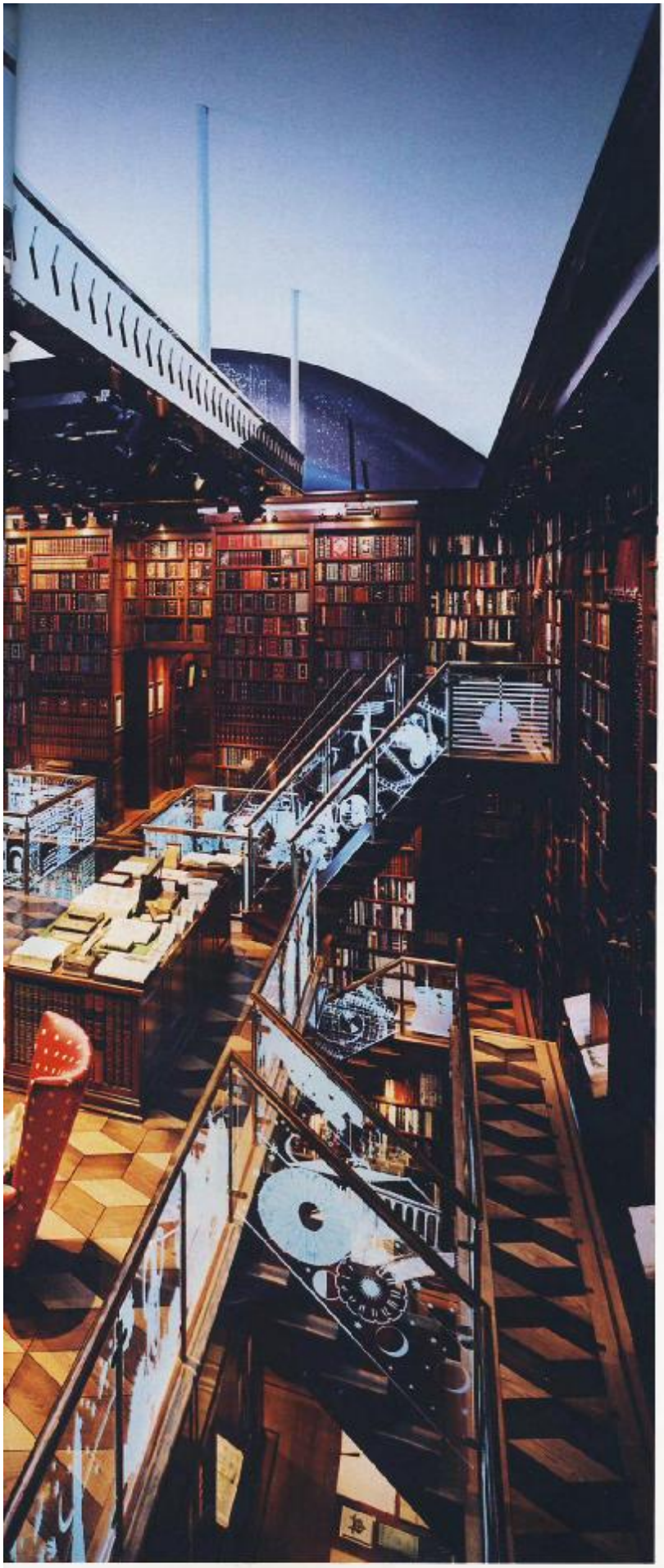
Jay's Anatomy

"What's so wonderful about our knowledge of the human body is how remarkably constrained it has been over time," Walker says. In the center of the table sits the **Anatomia universa**, an early-19th-century medical masterwork by the Italian illustrator Paolo Mascagni. At front right is a **field tool kit** for Civil War surgeons. Grasping the box of **prosthetic eyeballs** at left is the original **"Thing" hand** from the TV show *The Addams Family*, signed by the cast. In front of the 19th-century **phrenological bust** is a book, from about 1500, containing **the first published illustrations of surgery on humans.** "Pre-anesthesia, of course" Walker says. At the rear are a 300 **million-year-old trilobite fossil, a raptor skeleton,** and a clutch of fossilized **dinosaur eggs.**

Planetarium

The massive "book" by the window is a specially commissioned, internally lit 2.5-ton **Clyde Lynds sculpture.** It's meant to embody the spirit of the library: the mind on the right page, the universe on the left. Pointing out to that universe is a powerful **Questar 7 telescope.** On the rear of the table (from left) are a **globe of the moon signed by nine of the 12 astronauts** who walked on it, a rare **19th-century sky atlas** with white stars against a black sky, and a fragment from the **Sikhote-Alin meteorite** that fell in Russia in 1947—it's tiny but weighs 15 pounds. In the foreground is **Andrea Cellarius' hand-painted celestial atlas** from 1660. "It has the first published maps where Earth was not the center of the solar system," Walker says. "It divides the age of faith from the age of reason."





Wearing a huge can-you-believe-it grin is the collection's impresario, the 52-year-old Internet entrepreneur and founder of Walker Digital—a think tank churning out ideas and patents, it's best-known for its lucrative Priceline.com. "I started an R&D lab and have been an entrepreneur. So I have a big affinity for the human imagination," he says. "About a dozen years ago, my collection got so big that I said, 'It's time to build a room, a library, that would be about human imagination.'"

Walker's house was constructed specifically to accommodate his massive library. To create the space, which was constructed in 2002, Walker and architect Mark Finlay first built a 7-foot-long model. Then they used miniature cameras to help visualize what it would be like to move around inside. In a conscious nod to M. C. Escher (whose graphics are echoed in the wood tiling), the labyrinthine platforms seem to float in space, an illusion amplified by the glass-paneled bridges connecting the platforms. Walker commissioned decorative etched glass, dynamic lighting, and even a custom soundtrack that sets the tone for the cerebral adventures hidden in this cabinet of curiosities. "I said to the architect, 'Think of it as a theater, from a lighting and engineering standpoint,'" Walker says. "But it's not a performance space. It's an engagement space."

Walker shuns the sort of bibliomania that covets first editions for their own sake—many of the volumes that decorate the library's walls are leather-bound Franklin Press reprints. What gets him excited are things that changed the way people think, like Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*. Published in 1665, it was the first book to contain illustrations made possible by the microscope. He's also drawn to objects that

Inspiration Point

Walker frequently meets with the Walker Digital brain trust in the seating area of the library, hoping to draw inspiration from the surroundings. Artist Clyde Lynds (known for integrating fiber optics into his work) created the **intricate illuminated glass panels** and many other visual elements. Walker himself designed the **Escher-like tile floor**, modeled after a tumbling block pattern from the Victorian age. He bought **the chandelier** (seen in the Bond film *Die Another Day*) at an auction and rewired it with 6,000 LEDs. The open book on the table features **watercolor illustrations for an 18th-century papal palace** that was never built. The **globe** has special meaning for Walker: "It was a wedding gift Eileen and I received in 1982."

Reading Room
In the foreground are several early-20th-century **volumes with jeweled bindings**—gold, rubies, and diamonds—crafted by the legendary firm Sangorski & Sutcliffe. On the table (first row, from left) is a **16th-century book of jousting**, a **Dickens novel** decorated with the author's portrait, and (open, with Post-it flags) an original copy of the **1493 Nuremberg Chronicle**, the first illustrated history book. Second row: the **1535 Coverdale Bible** (the first completely translated into modern English), a **medieval tome** with intricate illustrations of dwarfs, a **collection of portraits** commissioned at a 17th-century German festival ("Facebook in 1610!"), a tree-bark Indonesian **guide to cannibalism**, and a Middle Eastern **mother goddess icon** from around 5000 BC.

Gadget Lab
A brand-new **One Laptop per Child XO**, far left, sits next to a relatively ancient **RadioShack TRS-80 Model 100**. In back, a **1911 typewriting machine** and a **1909 Kent radio**. The large contraption at center is the Nazis' supposedly unbreakable **Enigma code machine**. The book to its left is a copy of Johannes Trithemius' 1518 **Polygraphiae**, a cryptographic landmark. On the right is an **Apple II motherboard** signed by Woz. An **Edison kinetoscope** sits beside an 1890 **Edison phonograph** (along with three of the wax cylinders it uses for recording). Nearby is a faithful copy of **Edison's lightbulb**. The gadget with the tubes is an **IBM processor circa 1960**. In front of it stands a truly ancient storage device, a **Sumerian clay cone** used to record surplus grain.

embody a revelatory (or just plain weird) train of thought. "I get offered things that collectors don't," he says. "Nobody else would want a book on dwarfs, with pages beautifully hand-painted in silver and gold, but for me that makes perfect sense."

What excites him even more is using his treasures to make mind-expanding connections. He loves juxtapositions, like placing a 16th-century map that combines experience and guesswork—"the first one showing North and South America," he says—next to a modern map carried by astronauts to the moon. "If this is what can happen in 500 years, nothing is impossible."

Walker struggles to balance privacy with his impulse to share his finds with the outside world. Schoolchildren often visit by invitation, as do executives, politicians, and scholars. Last February, the organizers of the TED conference persuaded him to decorate their stage with some of his treasures. But he's never invited any press in to see the collection—until now.

Senior writer **STEVEN LEVY** (steven_levy@wired.com) *profiled sci-fi author Neal Stephenson in issue 16.09.*