
The **COLLECTING** Phenomenon
A Curious Affliction

As this is my maiden voyage as a Chit Chat Club essayist, let me say first of all how much I have enjoyed these evening discussions. Allow me also to express my appreciation for the warm welcome and courtesies that have been extended to me by each of you since my joining a year ago.

I have, perhaps foolishly, elected to abandon caution this evening by delving into a form of mildly pathological behavior of which I am myself a victim; an odd, though relatively common human weakness; an idiosyncratic compulsion that takes a number of different forms but is not particularly well understood; a psychological quirk that I have chosen, for purposes of our discussion, to label "a curious affliction".

No, I am not a late-night television addict nor am I an abuser of drugs, either prescription or illegal, unless a fondness for wine with dinner and a post-prandial brandy or two can be so considered. I am not into kinky sex or sado-masochism, avoid crossword puzzles, and seldom play cards or gamble, though the obsession of which I am a victim appears to bear some familial relationship to gambling, something to which I shall return later.

My problem, rather, and the subject I would like to explore with you this evening, is *collecting*: I am a compulsive, though selective, gatherer of objects, a sort of human magpie. I am obsessed with acquiring things I regard as interesting, unusual, rare or beautiful and spreading them about. I have absolutely no need and very little room for any more such objects, but I am equally certain

that I shall be unable to resist the impulse for further acquisitions.

Whole libraries have been written about the history of art, and vast tomes exist describing the wonders of specific collections, but relatively little serious scholarly attention has been paid to the phenomenon of collecting itself. To the extent time permits, I would like this evening to delve briefly into the history of collecting, and touch as well on its psychology, and on the social, economic and cultural elements which affect and circumscribe it.

Early Collecting

Collecting in some form or other has existed since the emergence of *homo sapiens* as a communal being. Early hunter-gatherer societies habitually accumulated bones, skulls and teeth, both human and animal, as well as other assorted items like shells, tusks, tools and weapons. Among some of the Papuan Gulf tribes of New Guinea and those of the Nagaland region of North-East India and Burma, it has been possible even in recent years to find whole galleries of human heads and skulls displayed on the walls of communal gathering places.

Anthropologists advise us that among early societies such items were thought to contain supernatural or spiritual forces, or *mana*, a notion that continued into the Christian era with the collection of relics. In fact, no primitive collection of relics can compare in size and diversity to that gathered in the Middle Ages by certain Catholic orders, most notably the Capuchin fathers. Not just the bones, nails and hair of saints, but such *esoterica* as splinters and nails from the True Cross, fragments of the Holy Shroud, the Holy Prepuce (or foreskin), the Chalice of the last supper, the Crown of Thorns and the like were treasured (and therefore also manufactured in great number) for their mystical properties and potency.¹

Classical Period

The first unquestioned evidence of true art collecting is to be found among the ancient Greeks. Joseph Alsop, the late political columnist who was himself a

prominent collector of Asian art and who wrote extensively, and, in my opinion, far more convincingly, on art and archeology than he ever did on politics, tells us that the extraordinary creative surge that produced the unrivalled Greek art of the seventh, sixth, and fifth centuries B.C. was followed perhaps as early as the fourth century B.C. by the collecting of art in a form similar to what we know today.² (It seems noteworthy, incidentally, that Alsop, rather than a scholar with traditional academic credentials, is the author of the most authoritative work available on the history of collecting, his *The Rare Art Traditions*, published in 1982.)

The Earliest Collector

The earliest documented art collector, according to Alsop, was Attulus I, the somewhat obscure third century king of Pergamon.³ A far more renowned, though less well documented, early collector was Noah, he of the ark. The latter accomplished something few collectors ever do: he assembled a complete set of what he was after; if any land dwelling creature missed the boat, so to speak, it presumably drowned and consequently remains unrecorded. (The fish, one assumes, did not have an equivalent concern.) Also largely unrecorded are the exact collecting habits of such brilliant early civilizations as those of Egypt, Assyria, Sumeria and Babylon.

The ancient Romans were also collectors of great vigor; plundered material from the far reaches of the empire was traded with abandon. Greek treasures of the preceding centuries, correctly deemed as the most meritorious, were particularly sought after. Greek statuary, glassware, gems, and even textiles were consequently faked in great number to meet the demand.⁴

The Renaissance

If a golden age of collecting had to be named, the Renaissance would likely be most deserving of the honor, since the profound curiosity which so characterized the period was matched by a manic acquisitiveness. Collecting habits tended toward the encyclopedic; collectors were often as interested in the

classification of their objects as in their aesthetic value. By the end of the fourteenth century a great appetite existed for such things as classical carved gems, coins, and medals as well as shells and other *naturalia*, as they were called. The French duke, Jean de Berry, a member of the royal family and one of the most aggressive and renowned collectors of the period, gathered, among other things, Christian relics, illuminated books and manuscripts, porcelain, tapestries, coins and medals, carved stones and precious jewelry, seals and cameos, narwhal horns, ostrich eggs, sculptures in ivory, and oriental perfumes.⁵

Most of the great fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance collections were formed through the device of patronage. Princely families like the De Medicis and d'Estes competed to pay large sums to the best - or at least most fashionable - painters, sculptors and jewelers. The storehouses of treasures thus amassed added the grandeur to their palaces that was so much a mark of that lush period. The size and quality of the patronage bestowed upon artists and craftsmen was regarded as both the measure and the public symbol of wealth and prestige. As the English historian R. J. W. Evans has noted:

“Art notoriously underpins power: Need we seek for an explanation for royal collections beyond the desire of monarchs and their ministers to be perceived as magnificent, splendid, and above all puissant, and also to indulge themselves in conspicuous ancestor worship and piety?”⁶

The Bourgeoisie

The rise of a prosperous merchant class in the seventeenth century brought with it a return to a more normal and sensible appraisal of works of art. They were again judged by their evident inherent value rather than by the status of their sponsor, though a distinguished provenance continues strongly to influence the value of a work even today. Collecting of a wider and more general sort soon displaced aristocratic patronage in importance. Art historians view the beheading of Charles I in Whitehall in London in 1649 as a landmark event in this transition. The monarch's enormous collection was disbursed at auction to settle the debts of the new republican regime, with the then princely sum of two

thousand pounds being paid for just one painting, a depiction of the Holy Family by Giulio Romano.

Tulipomania

The rise of collecting among the European bourgeoisie was particularly notable in seventeenth century Holland. The Dutch, after shaking off Spanish rule, experienced an enormous surge of energy and confidence. With it came great prosperity, which in turn expressed itself in artistic creativity and frenzied bursts of collecting. Contemporary paintings were the focal point of interest, but curios of all sorts, classical antiquities, and rare natural objects were also much sought after. This frenetic activity culminated in the famous period of collective madness now referred to as *tulipomania*. Tulip bulbs, newly introduced from Turkey and Persia, suddenly became showy status symbols. With normally sober Dutch burghers giddily trading and speculating, bulbs literally became worth their weight in gold.⁸

Although collecting grew gradually among the prosperous bourgeoisie of the other Western nations as well, the nobility and aristocracy continued to dominate until the end of the eighteenth century. Royalty like Britain's Charles I, France's Louis XIV, Spain's Philip IV, Austria's Josef II, wealthy German princes, and powerful aristocrats like Richelieu and Mazarin in France and Arundel, Pembroke and Buckingham in England aggressively formed magnificent collections, much in the style of their Renaissance predecessors.

The Grand Tour

Many of the greatest treasures of these collections were purchased in Italy. The immensely wealthy English upper classes were particularly active. English agents (Gavin Hamilton and Thomas Jenkins were the most renowned) operating out of Rome, managed, with the connivance of influential Italians, to produce sizeable gaps in Italian export restrictions. Huge shipments of antique works,

particularly sculptures, found their way to the great English country estates. Hadrian's Villa was virtually emptied in this fashion.⁹ The tradition of English purchases of Italian art continued into the nineteenth century with the custom of the "grand tour", in which wealthy young Englishmen travelled leisurely through the Mediterranean countries buying and shipping home cultural souvenirs as they went along. Remarkably, considering the massive movement of art from the South to the North of Europe, particularly to England, during this period, the experts agree that, with one or two exceptions, all of the most celebrated antiquities remained in Italy.¹⁰

Before leaving this brief and perforce spotty historical survey, I should, in deference to the currently fashionable multiculturalism, stress that the collecting phenomenon has by no means been restricted to Western nations. Art collecting is recorded in China as early as the second century, B.C. and spread to other Asian countries not long thereafter. Extensive collecting also existed at various times and places throughout the Islamic world.¹¹

The Anal-Retentive Type

What are the basic impulses that underly behavior of which there is such widespread historical example? Although I count myself among those deeply skeptical of Freudian theory, a quick glance at the insights provided by the psychoanalytic community is doubtless in order, particularly since Freud was himself an avid collector. The patient lying on Freud's famous day-bed saw on the wall to his left an Egyptian mummy portrait and a copy of a Roman frieze depicting Gradiva. Antiquities of every size and description filled the room as well as all the other rooms of the apartment.¹² With the master himself so badly bitten by the collecting bug, it is no wonder that his disciples have found cause to delve into the subject.

Dinner is only just behind us, so I am reluctant to penetrate the psychoanalytic view too deeply as much of it seems to deal with bodily functions. Not unexpectedly, we learn that collectors fall into the anal-retentive category. In

the view of Werner Muensterberger, a New York psychiatrist who has written on these matters, "The typical collector represents an 'anal type' who gains satisfaction from symbolic equivalents, much like the toddler who builds mudpies instead of playing with his excretion."¹³

Just so!

Muensterberger also argues that objects, be they a doll or merely a thumb, give a child relief from distress and that this sets a pattern for later life.

"The subjective significance of such objects", he claims, "implies the reduction of ... anxiety... In some instances not only does an object's original meaning undergo a telling transformation, but the object itself may be preferred to human companionship"¹⁴

I shall leave it to others better predisposed than I to assess the merits of such arcane speculation; for the moment we have little solid on which to base a judgement. Nor, to my knowledge, have geneticists yet to identify a particular genetic configuration or some errant or degraded gene that can be blamed for the collecting impulse.

Regional Variations

The exact factors propelling individuals to collect thus remain obscure, but their immediate environment doubtless affects how they go about it. Although the types and range of collecting now indulged in by Americans are almost endless, there are demonstrable variations by region: Southwesterners collect Navaho artifacts and specimens of early barbed wire; Alaskans petrified walrus tusks and Eskimo art; Louisianans French furniture and decorative objects; New Englanders early American furniture and scrimshaw.

Sociological Variations

Sociological variations are also fairly predictable. At the upper end of the

collecting spectrum are found such rarefied items as old master drawings, rare books and manuscripts, antique architectural maquettes, early or exotic musical instruments, pre-Columbian textiles, etc.

Examples of lower end collecting would be license plates, post cards and baseball cards, Coca-Cola bottles and advertisements (of which Jimmy Carter is perhaps the most famous gatherer), beer cans, airline sickness bags, and comic books.

In the wide middle range are such broadly popular items as stamps and coins, Staffordshire pottery and Meissen china, oriental carpets, sporting prints, old theatre and advertising posters, folk art and sculpture, fossils, meteorites and minerals, arms and armor, vintage wine, vintage cars, vintage cameras, vintage watches, vintage almost everything.

Money

These obviously quite arbitrary categories are not necessarily delineated by the financial capacity of the collectors. Both expensive and inexpensive items can be found in virtually all of them. Rare Coca-Cola bottles sell in the thousands of dollars, as do some comic books. A 1920's watch with a chic brand name may cost tens of thousands even though something that looks about the same and keeps far more accurate time can be picked up at the corner drugstore for fifteen. A 1933 Leica 250GG sold at auction in June for over \$100,000 although any new \$300 thirty-five millimeter is vastly more sophisticated and takes far better photos.

As in other areas of life, money is a necessity for most forms of collecting, but is not everything. In fact, in collecting the situation is sometimes reversed because if the collector's supply of disposable funds is too ample, the gratification accompanying a new acquisition may well be diminished. A purchase accomplished too easily, in other words, erodes the thrill.

A central part of the collecting experience involves testing the limits of what is financially feasible, rational, or acceptable. The most prized items in a

collection are often those that were a “find” or bargain; conversely, they may be those that represented a significant sacrifice. The nineteenth century French aesthete and collector, Count Robert de Montesquiou, made this point with a decidedly brusque and histrionic flourish while visiting a wealthy acquaintance whose house was stuffed with expensive gewgaws. Asked to sign the visitors book, he wrote: “We deserve only those things for which we have suffered”.¹⁵

Price vs. Quality

The availability of too much money can lead to another sort of difficulty. It becomes easy to slide into the fallacy that paying a high price assures high quality. There is obviously a correlation between price and quality. In fact, any experienced collector becomes quickly suspicious when an object appears to be too great a bargain; this is invariably a sign that something about it must be wrong. But in areas of collecting where pricing for rare pieces is highly variable, the correlation between cost and quality can be very thin. Unscrupulous dealers, of whom there is no shortage, love nothing better than grossly inflating prices or inventing other elaborate schemes to victimize the free spending collector.

The Getty Museum, with its virtually unlimited acquisition funds, is known to have fallen prey to various scams. With so much money available, its trustees are said to have had a bias toward buying only the most expensive works. Perhaps as a result, the museum now stands accused by some of having paid excessive amounts for overrated items and of having aquired some hugely expensive forgeries in the process.¹⁶

Price vs. Reality

Quality aside, many areas of collecting are, unhappily, now out of reach for all but the mega-rich. If you had your eyes on a Leonardo da Vinci notebook which was available recently, you would have had to outbid Bill Gates, who paid \$30.8 million for it.¹⁷ Even that is a relatively paltry sum compared to what your most fashionable paintings now sell for: \$82,500,000 is the record for a Van

Gogh, \$78,100,000 for a Renoir, and \$49,200,000 for a Picasso.¹⁸ (Prices peaked in the late 1980's and then fell off, particularly after high-rolling Japanese collectors retired from the marketplace. Prices are now returning gradually to earlier highs.) Antique furniture, you may be pleased to learn, is considerably less expensive, though as much as \$15 million has been paid for a seventeenth century Italian desk and \$12 million for an American one made in Newport in the eighteenth century.

Motivation

We have guessed at some of the factors that drove collecting in previous eras. Precisely what prompts our contemporaries to pay extravagant sums for works of art - items which produce no direct financial returns - is difficult to nail down precisely, since motivation varies with individuals and circumstances and is seldom without complexity. High on the list are such matters as social prestige or one-upmanship, financial speculation, calculated hedges against inflation, tax gambits, etc.

Personal - or sometimes commercial or quasi commercial - publicity is probably an even more important factor. It is not uncommon for an attention-seeking collector to pay more than is required to obtain a work in order to win some notice for himself. Liquor dealers regularly spend some absurdly high sum buying an ancient bottle of Mouton Rothschild or Petrus at auction. They remain quite untroubled by the fact that the wine is almost certainly undrinkable since their intent is not to savor the wine but rather to savor the publicity their profligacy will gain them in their local newspapers. A few months after the purchase the bottle is quietly returned to the auction house so that some other merchant can use it to the same advantage.

Record prices make the best headlines. Collectors whose interest in making the news is greater than their interest in the actual acquisition are, therefore, compelled to go for the record. This practice can be expensive, of course. Wanting to beat the world record price for a Rembrandt, the late conglomerator,

Norton Simon, is said to have bid against himself several times when he purchased *Titus* for two and a quarter million dollars at Sotheby's in London in 1965. (Despite these efforts, he fell short of the record by \$250,000).¹⁹

Among the rich and ambitious, the desire for personal recognition sometimes extends beyond the temporal. Individuals of this type view a collection as a means to grander and more permanent havens. They want their names etched, if not in the annals of art history, then at least in stone on a museum's portals. The late art dealer Joseph Duveen was renowned for cunningly playing on his rich clients' vanity. He presented them with expensively bound catalogues of the works he had sold them. He found it an easy way to impress them with the timelessness of their collections. As S.N. Behrman, in his biography of Duveen notes, Duveen was not merely selling "social distinction ... he was selling immortality".²⁰

Collecting, Pure and Undiluted

Seen from the pristine vantage point of pure collecting, motives and practices such as this are naturally regarded as vulgar and deeply suspect. A principal defining characteristic of the true collector is that he is driven by an urgent but narrow passion and desire to possess, an urge undiluted by ancillary requirements or exigencies. In other words, the collector's devotion is to the works themselves, not to any tangential benefits that may flow from them.

Edward Root, the son of Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Elihu Root, was a fine example of a pure collector of this sort. Root formed a premier collection of American art at a time when it was being neglected and overshadowed by European works. In *The Proud Possessors*, her biographic study of American collectors, Arline Saarinen wrote of him:

"He collected things in order to observe them intimately, study them, analyze them, understand them and by this profound appreciation and love come closer to the excellence of life. They were instruments of faith."²¹

Attributes

There are a number of other attributes commonly found among serious collectors. These are not necessarily universal, nor are they restricted to collectors alone. The collecting phenomenon does, however, seem to bring forth these qualities in an intense or exaggerated form. Let me enumerate some of them:

1. Romanticism

Collectors tend to be romantics. They fall in love: with paintings, with antique automobiles, with butterflies, with old silverware and countless other items. Possibly - to revert to psychobabble for a moment - they transfer the affection that properly belongs to people to things, palpable yet inanimate objects. The latter are, after all, less capable of disappointing or fighting back.

A collector in love is much like an infatuated teenager. And if someone else has discovered or purchased the object of his desire first, or beat him out at auction, he is as desolate as a youth whose beloved has left him for another.

2. The Don Juan Syndrome

For many collectors the thrill of the search exceeds the satisfaction derived from actual possession. To the lustful eye of the collector the object he covets attains a subjective value that is inversely related to the ease with which it can be acquired. That is why a collector infected with the Don Juan virus is driven crazy when he enters a gallery and sees little red dots on works of art. He is certain that the only truly desirable items are the ones that someone else has already bought and are therefore unattainable.

For a collector of this temperament, the excitement is in the hunt, the pursuit, the discovery, the negotiation with the seller, the challenge of closing the deal on favorable terms, the strategy employed at auction, the victory over a competitor, etc. In this respect, the yearning of the collector, like that of Don

Juan, is never fully gratified. As Muensterberger puts it, he is “forever trying to gain reassurance from objects”.²² Are these symptoms very different from those of Ymelda Marcos and her hundreds of pairs of shoes? For that matter, are they very different from those of the middle-class *hausfrau* whose car bears a bumper sticker that reads “Born to Shop” and who drives to the local mall the moment she gets depressed? Alas, the answer appears to be probably not.

3. Connoisseurship

Confidence and expertise are important hallmarks. If the area of interest is paintings or works of art, the collector will pride himself on his “eye” and on his visual memory. The serious collector is also almost always knowledgeable about his field. Not infrequently the depth of his knowledge in his specialty rivals or exceeds that of dealers, curators or academics. Equally important is the notion of discrimination; the objects the collector is after must meet the standard of quality he has set for himself.

4. Competitiveness

Whether Renaissance prince, billionaire investor, or run of the mill citizen, competitiveness is a commonly found attribute. Dealers as well as auction houses thrive and play upon the need many collectors have to outdo each other. The zest of battle seems to invigorate such collectors and causes some to pay many times the real value of a work in order to keep it out of the hands of a competitor. There are collectors who will do virtually anything to fill a gap in their collection or gain possession of the object of their desires

Doing virtually anything includes spending recklessly. At the Jackie Kennedy Onassis auction at Sotheby’s last April one Peter Lerner, a Toronto executive, paid \$37,000 for a dozen initialed ashtrays of no particular distinction. “That was insane”, he declared afterwards, “I get carried away. Good thing I don’t believe in building up assets in a bank”.²³ At the same event Marvin Shanken, the publisher of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine, paid \$574,500 for a quite

ordinary humor. "I went a little nuts", he admitted to the *New York Times*.²³ Going a little nuts in this fashion is of course exactly what auction houses thrive on. It is also the type of irrational and compulsive behavior that convinces me that collecting and gambling are kissing cousins within the realm of abnormal psychology.

5. Fanaticism

At some point competitiveness shades into fanaticism. Fanatical behavior among collectors is not limited to reckless spending. Collectors will seemingly do anything to fill gaps in their collection or outwit competitors. An anecdote is told about a bibliophile with a collection of unique books who learned that a New York dealer had available for sale an item identical to one of his own prized volumes. He purchased the book and then burned it in the presence of a notary so that he could place a formal attestation of the destruction inside the first volume.²⁵ Also fabled is the British collector of Egyptian art who was so devoted to his collection that he left instructions in his will that parts of it be buried with his mummified body near the right forepaw of the Great Sphinx at Gizeh.²⁶

Fanatical collecting can also lead to unethical or illegal activity. Museums as well as private collectors routinely buy material they know (or suspect) to have been illegally smuggled out of archeological sites. Or, to take another sort of example, J.P. Morgan is reliably reported to have arranged the manufacture of sophisticated copies of Medieval treasures lodged in European churches or private collections. He would then have his agents surreptitiously swap the fakes for the real articles, which would become a part of his own vast treasury.²⁷

This sort of singlemindedness is not infrequently accompanied by a contempt for institutions the larger society regards as positive and beneficial. Many collectors despise museums, for instance, because their purchasing power raises prices and permanently whisks coveted items off the market. They lament as the objects they so crave are imprisoned forever behind glass cages for the benefit of vacant-eyed Philistine hordes, or even worse, stashed away in museum

cellars or storerooms never to be seen again.

6. Loneliness

Most collectors have opportunities to gather with others sharing their interests at showings, in galleries and salesrooms, at auction viewings and the like. Yet there is unquestionably a certain loneliness to many forms of collecting. This is not necessarily because the items the collector seeks are so rare or so arcane, but that their attraction for him is so intensely personal. He stands alone in his sensibility; he is isolated in his passion and pursuit because no one else entirely shares or even understands it. (I am occasionally amused when a friend, trying to pay me a compliment, commends some item in my own modest collection. The object being complimented is invariably of far less interest than some nearby unnoticed work.)

The collector's feeling of isolation is perhaps also enhanced by his awareness that the works he has so painstakingly gathered are likely to be dispersed at his death. Children seldom inherit the identical collecting urges, and unless the collection is of a stature that a museum would guarantee to display it intact, it is fated to be recycled.

7. Paranoia

Forgery

No aspect of collecting is as demoralizing as the problem of authenticity. It is difficult to describe the horror that strikes when one finds that some prized possession is a fake. Even worse, in some ways, is the lingering unease that sets in when a work becomes suspect, when a question mark hangs over it, when there is doubt but no resolution as to its pedigree or authenticity. Following a sort of Gresham's law, the poison that a fraudulent work exudes can spread and threaten to debase an entire collection.

No area of art collecting is entirely immune from forgeries, but some fields such as antiquities and Medieval and Renaissance art are particular minefields. The question of what precisely constitutes a fake is not always easy to answer. Some works are old copies of even older works. In the nineteenth century, furniture was routinely and quite openly made in admired eighteenth century styles without any intention to defraud. Such pieces, now also antiques, are often difficult to tell apart from the period models.

Greek sculpture of the classical period was routinely copied by Roman sculptors; the latter's efforts were then copied by Renaissance period artists which were in turn copied in the nineteenth century. In addition, many ancient works were so massively restored in the eighteenth century that it is often difficult to sort out what is actually original. Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum, claims that as many as ninety percent of all the "Roman" statues in the world's great collections were reworked in the eighteenth century, though others dispute this figure as grossly exaggerated.²⁸

Paintings: A Vexing Continuum

The situation is even murkier when it comes to paintings, since here the collector must face up to a vexing continuum: paintings entirely painted by an artist of high pedigree; paintings painted partly by the artist and partly by his assistants; paintings which, though painted by such an artist, were later trimmed, overpainted or clumsily restored; paintings of the same period but only attributed to the artist; paintings attributed only to the "school" of the artist; and outright copies meant to deceive. Which of these categories a work falls into can be an entirely subjective matter, depending on which particular expert or auction house is rendering a judgement.

A somewhat amusing example is provided by the group of Dutch scholars who have been examining the paintings of Rembrandt in museums and, where they still exist, in private collections, in order to formulate a *catalogue raisonnee*. Their consensus judgement of whether a Rembrandt is truly a Rembrandt could well change as members of the group retire and are replaced by

experts holding different opinions. Proprietors of Rembrandt paintings are not uniformly pleased with the scholars' decisions. The situation is a bit reminiscent of the man recovering in a hospital from a serious operation who receives a note from his colleagues at the office reading: "We wish you a speedy recovery, by a vote of five to four."

False Documentation

Documentation purporting to authenticate the provenance of a painting is not of much help, either, since such papers are as easily forged as the work itself. A scam even more audacious than simple forgery came to light recently at London's Tate Gallery when it was discovered that research material there had been tampered with. Accomplices of forgers were found to have doctored the museum's archives in such a manner that when consulted by a prospective buyer of a painting or sculpture the record would show a fraudulent work to be authentic.²⁹

Given the presence of so much fraud and deceit is there any wonder that some collectors are driven to distrusting everything? I had a friend in Washington, a prominent tax lawyer and distinguished collector of early European wood sculpture and English furniture, who fell victim to this disease. He doubted the authenticity of virtually everything he saw. On one occasion, when he was about to leave on a trip to Paris, I suggested that he visit the left bank gallery of a certain Mme. Jacqueline Boccador, a leading French expert on early furniture with a highly regarded collection. On his return, I asked him what he had thought. "Everything she has is fake!", he sneered, with a dismissive wave of the hand.

Nor is authenticity the only matter that causes nervousness among collectors. Questions concerning the legality of title or ownership sometimes arise. And since antiques and works of art are normally one of a kind, values fluctuate wildly. Rare indeed is the collector who is not convinced that he has paid too much for an item or who does not think that he has been conned by a

smooth talking dealer.

A Bi-Polar Dimension

Romanticism, the Don Juan syndrome, connoisseurship, competitiveness, fanaticism, loneliness, paranoia - all these are common attributes to be found among collectors. But an additional important dimension marks the collecting phenomenon, and this one is bi-polar in nature. Collectors tend to fall into one of two categories, which, for want of a more felicitous terminology, I shall call selectors and accumulators.

Selectors

Selectors seek out objects of quality and of a precise and delineated character. Collecting, for the selector, is a means of expression, a way of assembling a limited grouping of material in such a way that, when taken together, it reflects his taste, sensibility, and individuality. For the painstaking selector, putting together a collection can be as creative and satisfying an act as composing a sonata or writing a novel. A collection so assembled is marked by a perceptible discipline and cohesiveness.

One may recall, in this connection, the remark attributed to Winston Churchill, who, after tasting the sweet presented to him in a restaurant, called out to the server, "Waitress, take back this pudding. It has no theme!" A carefully formed collection, like a good dessert, has a perceptible theme, though this does not mean that the collector must stick to a narrowly defined subject matter. We are not talking about the little old lady down the street who collects only paintings and porcelains depicting pussy cats.

Some of the most urbane and impressive collections are highly diverse and eclectic in nature, yet still possess a unique flavor and internal consistency reflecting the identity of the collector. The items within are joined by a conceptual or aesthetic glue, an invisible adhesive which causes *the whole to*

become more than the sum of its parts.

Alastair Martin

Such a collection reveals - or even magnifies - the selector's personality, sometimes in new or unsuspected ways. Alastair B. Martin, an eminent private collector based in New York, who assembled the distinguished Guennol Collection (Guennol is Welsh for marten), states in its catalogue that:

“In collecting, the greater the effort made, the more one mirrors one's own personality. Nothing should be more disappointing to the collector than to find someone, expert or novice, who likes all his collection.”³⁰

The Guennol Collection is multi-faceted, and Martin insists that it is important to understand the aesthetic relationships between diverse areas. He writes:

“Though one is told it is impossible to compare quality in objects of different cultures and periods, it is precisely this that a serious collector must do. If there is a message in our collection it is that diverse objects may be compared.”³¹

Eugene Thaw

Eugene Thaw, formerly a New York art dealer, is a good example of a collector who selects rather than accumulates. Thaw, who now lives in New Mexico, has formed distinguished private collections of old master paintings and drawings, American Indian art and architectural models, among other things. He looks for what he calls the “aesthetic center of gravity” in the artworks he collects, the characteristics that enable him to group them so that all of them are visually enhanced. His satisfaction comes, Thaw says, when he “can take beautiful objects and somehow impose order on them, somehow bring them together in a way that makes sense of the past.”³²

Selectors like Thaw make their own judgements and rely on many sources:

dealers, auctions, and other private collectors. They avoid becoming dependent on particular dealers or the advice of a single expert. "A good client is a bad collector", Alastair Martin warns. Auction house experts and museum curators are particularly suspect because of divided loyalties or conflicts of interest. Some selectors go so far as to eschew expert advice altogether. Although Martin does not go to that extreme, he does recommend against allowing "one person to screen objects ... for then you will be forming his collection, not yours."³³

Accumulators

An accumulator, though indisputably a collector of sorts, is an entirely different sort of individual, with totally different aspirations and appetites. Although equally driven to possess, the accumulator is impelled by some inner need to collect in quantity. An example illustrates the difference. Here, in its entirety, is an item that appeared in the *Sunday Times* magazine in November of last year under the title of "Junk":

"Mitchell Wolfson Jr., whose family made millions through an entertainment conglomerate, has spent nearly his entire life accumulating some 70,000 ... well, *objets*. What to do now? Charge admission. The \$10 million-plus Wolfsonian museum, which opened last weekend in Miami Beach, will show off Wolfson's eclectic collection of items dating from 1885 to 1945, including the first Scotch tape dispenser, a Braille version of 'Mein Kampf' and King Farouk's matchbook collection."³⁴

If an aesthetic or conceptual adhesive exists that brings cohesion to the first Scotch tape dispenser, the Braille version of "Mein Kampf" and King Farouk's matchbook collection, I, for one, fail to perceive it. Some accumulators confine their collecting to a single field, but their acquisitions are characterized by bulk purchases rather than painstaking choices.

In her historical novel, *The Volcano Lover*, Susan Sontag uses a hunting metaphor to help draw the distinction. Writing about Sir William Hamilton, the

fanatical collector who served as British ambassador to Naples during the last three decades of the eighteenth century, she notes that:

“To collect is to rescue things, valuable things, from neglect, from oblivion, or simply from the ignoble destiny of being in someone else’s collection rather than one’s own. Buying a whole collection instead of chasing down one’s quarry piece by piece [is] not an elegant move. Collecting is also a sport, and its difficulty is part of what gives it honor and zest. A true collector prefers not to acquire in bulk (anymore than hunters want the game simply driven past them), is not fulfilled by collecting another’s collection: mere acquiring or accumulating is not collecting.”³⁵

Buying a whole collection may be an inelegant move, but selling one is not equally stigmatized. Resourceful individuals, having assiduously formed a distinctive collection, will sometimes sell the entire thing at a handsome profit and move on to an entirely new field. The formers of such sellable collections are normally, of course, selectors rather than accumulators.

Renowned American Collectors

If thematic unity and aesthetic order are applied as a standard of judgement, then those famous and immensely wealthy American collectors of a century ago, whose regal collections now constitute the backbone of our major museums, must also be placed in the category of accumulators rather than that of selectors. It is true that some among the Morgans, Fricks, Altmans, Walters, Huntingtons, Mellons and others of that formidable collecting generation became highly knowledgeable in their own right. But their collections were heavily influenced, and in some cases entirely formed, by hired curators who often went out and bought up entire European collections on behalf of their employers.

Powerful dealers like Duveen and Knoedler also played an important role in molding the tastes and manipulating the purchases of these self-made millionaires, who, although tough and enormously successful in business, were often uncertain or insecure when buying art. The domineering Duveen was particularly influential in pushing these men away from Victorian kitsch and

Barbizon school sentimentality toward the old masters. It was a shrewd move, for, as S. N. Behrman notes, they felt a need to merge “their newly acquired domains with more ancient ones; they wanted to veneer their *arrivisme* with the traditional.”³⁶

William Randolph Hearst, who indiscriminately imported the whole contents of chateaus, was unquestionably a prototypical accumulator, but many other examples can be cited. Samuel Kress, the founder of the five-and-dime store empire, was so used to wholesale purchasing that he bought paintings from even the most expensive dealers like Duveen and Wildenstein in lots. Similarly, Henry Havemeyer, who controlled the sugar trust, in acquiring works of art, seemed to believe, in Aline Saarinen’s words, “that if one is good a dozen are better.”³⁷

Joseph Hirshhorn

A more contemporary example is Joseph Hirshhorn, the Latvian-born New York financier who amassed a huge fortune investing in Canadian gold and uranium mines. Hirshhorn, had an insatiable appetite for contemporary painting and sculpture. He habitually left business meetings to make a sweep of galleries and studios where he would bargain for and sometimes walk away with everything on display.

In 1966, Lyndon Johnson, using his legendary powers of persuasion, convinced Hirshhorn to bequeath his enormous collection of over six thousand works to the Smithsonian Institution, where it is now housed in a doughnut shaped building on Washington’s mall. Hirshhorn later left the museum (which he had insisted bear his name) an additional 5,500 works. But because of his shotgun method of purchasing, the museum contains an exceedingly high ratio of second-rate works, most of them mercifully consigned to the cellar.

Rene di Rosa

A somewhat similar local example is provided by the case of Rene di Rosa. Di Rosa, an idealistic and courtly resident of Napa (whom I have had the pleasure of meeting), is a throwback to the days of large-scale patronage. His noble goal over the last three decades has been to support Bay Area artists. Having by now amassed some eighteen hundred works, he is currently engaged in building a museum to house them. Unfortunately, the muses swishing about the studios of late twentieth century California were not quite up to those that inspired the artists of fifteenth century Florence or *fin de siecle* Paris. It is unlikely that there were one hundred and eighty works of transcendent merit created here during this period, much less eighteen hundred. Poor di Rosa has thus accomplished the opposite of what he intended.

I earlier argued that in a carefully chosen, high quality, collection the whole assumes an aesthetic dimension that transcends the sum of its parts. Somewhat regretfully, I now urge upon you the view that the reverse is equally true: in an accumulation of secondary works *the whole is inferior to its parts*. Such superior works as may be found in this sort of collection are diminished by the sea of mediocrity that washes over them. Di Rosa's collection, meant to glorify the contemporary art scene, actually lays bare its aridity. He has, in all likelihood, given birth to a cultural white elephant composed of 1800 mostly flabbly parts.

Fortunately, it matters little. "It has become the mode to have taste," the American collector James Jackson Jarves proclaimed a century ago, but hardly anyone took notice.³⁸ Few agreed with him then; fewer still would agree with him now, even if there existed some general notion of what it really meant. As both the wise and the weary have conceded over the centuries, *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

Fallen Martyrs

There is, finally, a type of collecting I have previously touched on that requires elaboration because it has been so much in the news of late: the gathering

of items associated with fallen martyrs. Examples of such collecting have always existed. At the outset of these remarks I referred to the predilection of early man to gather about him objects thought to hold mystical properties. During the Middle Ages, the relics of saints were prized for similar reasons. In the nineteenth century, souvenirs commemorating Napoleon flooded the French market place and Lincoln memorabilia were common in this country.

In recent times, souvenirs relating to such cult figures as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Andy Warhol have been avidly sought by their admirers. Just last week, the Los Angeles branch of Butterfield & Butterfield held the third in a series of auctions of Elvis Presley clothing and paraphernalia which have yielded proceeds in the millions of dollars. A so-called "thunderbird" stage cape was one of the items sold; it netted \$50,000.

An even stranger auction took place earlier this year in Newport Beach. This one disposed of items belonging to Kurt Cobain, the drug addicted leader of a hard-rock group who had killed himself not long before. Among the items which sold in the hundreds of dollars were a bottle of acne medication and a discharge form from a detoxification center. According to the Los Angeles Times, the auctioneers withheld the spoon Cobain used to cook his heroin on the grounds that selling it would be in bad taste.

The Jackie Kennedy auction this past April was much in the same tradition. What else is one to make of this bizarre event? The mesmerized hordes who attended the affair were seeking spiritual succor no less than those pouring into Lourdes or Mecca. These were not collectors after rarities of genuine value, but cultists desperate for relics possessing, by virtue of their hallowed previous ownership, magical gifts. Was the \$65,750 golfing putter anything but a twentieth century version of a splinter from the True Cross? Was the shabby little footstool, valued by Sotheby's at \$100 to \$150 which sold for \$33,350, not a sort of contemporary Holy Shroud? And what of the rocking chair, identical versions of which can be found in almost any hardware store catalogue for \$98.50, that fetched \$442,500? Was it not some delusional individual's equivalent of the

Crown of Thorns?³⁹

Interestingly, the insurance companies asked by purchasers to insure these items failed to see their spiritual value. “We will have qualified appraisers reevaluate the objects as if they were not part of an auction” announced the spokesman for one of these iconoclastic organizations.⁴⁰

A Linear Progression

So there you have it. We have come full circle from pre-historic gatherers of skulls and bones to the gatherers of Kennedy family trinkets. Or, perhaps, we have only travelled in a straight line, after all; there were collectors then and there are collectors now, no matter that their tastes are sometimes odd.

Whatever it is that propels this strange obsession is deeply anchored in the human psyche, by now I hope you will agree. But at its best, collecting can elicit enormous joy, for it can make one the happy possessor of a stirring part, albeit usually only a very tiny one, of some brilliantly creative civilization.

“Our concern with the work of art”, wrote the late art historian Meyer Shapiro, “however touched by vanity or greed, is an homage beyond self interest. Through it we surmount, if only at rare moments, the limitations of our striving, possessive selves and, as an old poet says, ‘into glory peep’.”⁴¹

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