

THE FALL AND RISE OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COLLECTING: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS

The post-war genesis of the history of collecting still awaits its historian. While it emerged out of very disparate disciplines, the new topic was orientated towards biography from the outset. In Britain and the United States, there was a boom in lives of the great collectors, stuffed with anecdote and eccentricity. Occasionally these lives were arranged into a 'gallery' of contrasts, in the manner of Aline Saarinen's study of the Gilded Age, *Proud Possessors* (1958).¹ According to *Kirkus Reviews*, the book had succeeded in 'reveal[ing] the personal idiosyncrasies of some of the most powerful and affluent Americans of the last one hundred years.'² If American studies of this stripe tended towards the journalistic, in Britain, the tone of early studies was deferential and class-conscious, as seen in the opulent itinerary afforded by *The Great Private Collections* and *The Great Family Collections* (1965), edited by Douglas Cooper.³ In France the treatment was more literary, such as the impressionistic writings of Philippe Julian, author of *Les Collectionneurs* (1966), or the novelistic portraits sketched by art historian Pierre Cabanne.⁴ No-one was perhaps more influential at mid-century in Paris than the celebrity auctioneer Maurice Rheims, whose observations of his clients' quirks were interspersed with quotations from the pages of Jean de La Bruyère and Honoré de Balzac.⁵

From a twenty-first century perspective, this interest in biography, and in the psychology of collecting, can seem intellectually passé. In the past two decades, the emphasis placed on the intentions or mentality of the collector has been abandoned as too speculative- especially when dealing with collectors in the past- or as too simplistic, exaggerating the role of individual subjectivity over the social significance of collecting practices. On multiple fronts, we have seen a marked swing away from privileging the individual mind. On the one hand, the surge of new research into the art market has allowed for quantitative and statistical answers to seemingly imponderable questions about taste and emulation.⁶ On the other hand, methodologies imported from the history of science and Actor-Network-Theory tend to situate individual collectors within a broader web of social relations. A new critical vocabulary, based around circulations and transfers, has suggested that the perspective of any one node

¹Aline Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of some Famous American Art Collectors* (New York: Hurlingham Books, 1958).

²*Kirkus Reviews*, 1 November 1958.

³*Great Private Collections* (ed.) Douglas Cooper (New York: Macmillan, 1963); *Great Family Collections* (ed.) Douglas Cooper (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

⁴Philippe Jullian, *Les Collectionneurs* (Flammarion, Paris, 1966); Pierre Cabanne, *Le roman des grands collectionneurs* (Plon, Paris, 1961).

⁵ Maurice Rheims, *La vie étrange des objets. L'histoire de la curiosité* (Paris: Plon, 1959).

⁶ Since the 1980s the contribution of the Getty Provenance Index has been pivotal; new work on cultural economics is showcased in the *Journal Art Market Studies*, founded in 2016.

matters far less than the interplay and functioning of the total array.⁷ The gains, in terms of extending the geography of collecting, and highlighting the role of many overlooked (often non-European) actors, have been tremendous.⁸ But the net result has nonetheless been to urge scholars to think about *how* collecting happens, via what mechanisms, rather than dwell on *why*.

The origins of this shift might be traced back to Krzysztof Pomian's landmark volume *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux* (translated into English in 1990). The essays inside were largely written at different points across the 1970s, and resonated with contemporary debates in semiotics and post-structuralism. As Stephen Bann noted in a perceptive review, if the name Foucault is tantalisingly absent, the thrust of Pomian's book nonetheless offered its own riff on the productive use of discontinuity.⁹ In the theoretically inflected opening essay, Pomian offered a sketch of the history of collecting over many centuries, stretching back to antiquity and even prehistory. He accented how this seemingly familiar activity had assumed a bewildering succession of guises. The generic answers offered by scholars as to why a person collects- for pleasure, prestige or knowledge- failed to account for the diversity of its manifestations. 'Aesthetic pleasure is left undefined,' Pomian complained, 'the urge to acquire historical and scientific knowledge is not explored and we never learn precisely how the possession of certain objects confers prestige.'¹⁰ The answer to what holds collecting together as a trans-historical practice lay not in commonality of motive on the part of collectors, but rather in commonality of functions: whether medieval or modern, Pomian reasoned, all collections mediate between the visible and the invisible realms.¹¹

What matters for our purpose is less Pomian's famous thesis, however, than his determination to move the field away from the focus on individuals, their tastes and their acquisitions. Only by forsaking the 'anecdotal' focus on the collector's psychology could the subject cease to be regarded as 'a narcissistic and slightly frivolous pastime.'¹² It was a fundamental error to approach taste purely in terms of one individual's aesthetic preferences, since these preferences could only be accounted for through wider political, ideological, religious and cultural conditions. 'When collections are treated solely as the guardians of works of art, or as testaments to taste, even if they seem initially to be the object of study, they will actually only be used to solve puzzles concerning an entirely

⁷The work at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, around the concept of the 'relational museum' has been influential in this regard. See Chris Gosden and Frances Larson, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. pp.1-13.

⁸ Among many possible examples, see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Tony Bennett, Ben Dibley and Rodney Harrison, 'Anthropology, Collecting and Colonial Governmentalities' in *History and Anthropology*, 25.2 (2014), pp.137-49.

⁹Stephen Bann review in *The Art Bulletin*, 73.4 (1991), p.689.

¹⁰Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris, Venise, XVI-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p.11.

¹¹Pomian, 'Entre l'invisible et le visible: la collection' in *Collectionneurs*, pp.15-59.

¹²Pomian, 'Avant-propos' in *Collectionneurs*, p.1.

different field.’¹³ Pomian’s call to go beyond individual motives, and towards a more holistic or anthropological strand of cultural history, went hand in hand with his call to do proper justice to the collection itself, as something distinct from the collector.

His fears that collecting would be written off as intellectually ‘frivolous’ have proved unfounded. The academic pedigree of the subject has been hugely boosted not just by the success of the *Journal of the History of Collections*, founded in 1989, but also by the incorporation of collecting methodologies into the analysis of crucial historical periods, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, from the East India Company to the French Revolution.¹⁴ At the same time, Pomian’s plea for a collective or comparative approach has had more partial success. The stubborn attachment to, and resilience of, the individual case-study is quite remarkable (and this edited volume is no exception). Despite conceptual fashions, most scholars continue to find biography an important, indeed indispensable, framework for describing the evolution and significance of the collections of works of art. And with biography, some concession towards questions of personality or motive is unavoidable.

This biographical optic should not be deplored; rather, one might argue that to grasp collecting in the modern period, it is indispensable. In earlier centuries, collections were admired as repositories of knowledge about nature—think of the Wunderkammer, as a microcosm of the universe— or participated in the conferral of political or intellectual authority. After the French Revolution, collections, freed of these epistemological or political functions, came to express nothing so much as the passions and character of their creators. As Pomian put it in an essay from 2001:

Ce n’est pas sur leur conformité avec un tel classement qu’on les juge. Chaque collection particulière peut donc devenir, sans réserve, une expression de la personnalité du collectionneur. Elle peut traduire non seulement son savoir et son goût mais aussi ses nostalgies, ses rêves, ses fantasmes. Elle peut être son oeuvre, ce qu’il laissera à la postérité.¹⁵

This familiar claim about the early nineteenth century has come to structure how subsequent scholarship has been written, so that collecting is seen to march in step with new regimes of selfhood.¹⁶ The problem is not biographical approaches

¹³Pomian, ‘Avant-propos’, p.4.

¹⁴ To cite just a few classic books: Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996); Arthur Macgregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007); Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850* (Vintage, London and New York, 2006); Dominique Poulot, *Musée, Nation, Patrimoine (1789-1815)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

¹⁵Pomian, ‘Collection: une typologie historique’ in *Romantisme*, 112 (2001), p.18.

¹⁶In such grand narratives, the influence of Foucault has been notable. See Elaine Hoooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

per se, but the failure to recognise that this biographical or psychologising approach is not neutral, or something universally applicable to all periods, but rather has a history of its own.

The aim of this short chapter is to revisit some old and more recent trends in exploring collectors' psychology in the modern era. It has no pretence to be comprehensive, but instead draws out different themes within scholarship published in English and French. The Leitmotif of this edited volume is collectors' 'identity', and this notoriously slippery term- which itself needs to be historicized- remains clustered with a host of cognate terms related to the subjectivity, selfhood and individualism.¹⁷ At present, the collector's psychology is a default approach in most articles on the topic, but it is rarely explicitly addressed or thematised. The sin is by no means unique to scholars of collecting. Peter Gay memorably took all historians to task for falling back on weakly theorized models of human motivation, thereby assuming that 'common sense' psychology was a sufficient tool to analyse the minds of actors in the past.¹⁸ But such is the power of stereotypes about how collectors behave, and why different types of collector ultimately collect, that historians of collecting have an extra incentive in confronting such presuppositions in order to escape from their grip.

This essay falls into three parts. First, it explores the early attempts made by scholars to read collecting through the lens of psychoanalysis, revealing how ideas derived from Freud and Lacan came to structure some of the key conceptual accounts published between the 1960s and 1990s, and the distortions this produced. Second, it considers how the psychoanalytic framework has been overtaken by new research into material culture, which has generated new lenses onto classic questions- such as the relation between collecting and (excessive) consumption, the gendered relation to objects, and forms of sentimental attachment. A short final coda explores the value of thinking more about the collector and his or her collection through some experiments in biography and autobiography. However prone to myth-making, these texts help us historicize the changing place of things in the construction and performance of identity in modern times.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PARADIGM

Freud, as is well known, was a devoted collector. Statues of ancient pagan divinities were displayed in his professional workspace, his office, and not the rooms he shared with his family; his relationship with these objects shaped his insights into the ego and its needs [fig.1].¹⁹ In an 1895 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, he drew an analogy between the old maid who keeps a dog and the old bachelor who collects snuffboxes based on the fact that both of them were searching for a 'substitute', whether for a spouse in her case, or a 'multitude of conquests' in

¹⁷ Philip Gleason, 'Identifying Identity: A Semantic History' in *Journal of American History*, 69.4 (1983), pp.910-931.

¹⁸ Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ John Forrester, "'Mille e tre.'" Freud and Collecting' in *Cultures of Collecting* (eds.) John Elsner, Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp.224-51.

his.²⁰ Freud was only one thinker in the fin-de-siècle who viewed the growing craze for collecting as symptomatic of tensions within modern civilisation: think of Richard von Kraft-Ebbing's study of the links between criminality and fetish objects, or Giovanni Mingazzini's investigation of the overlap between bibliomania and kleptomania.²¹ Scientific investigation was shadowed by the gloomy warnings of moralists, alarmed by the signs of rampant materialism that threatened to overwhelm distinctions of rank, gender and propriety.²² Max Nordau thundered that 'the present rage of collecting, the piling up of dwellings, of aimless bric-a-brac.... has established an irresistible desire among degenerates to accumulate useless trifles.'²³

If the roots of this pathological discourse on collecting reach back into the sciences of the fin-de-siècle, it was connected most explicitly with the issues of post-war society in the writings of Jean Baudrillard. *The System of Objects* (1968) remains a seminal study of the insatiable and vertiginous possibilities opened up by mass consumption in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴ For Baudrillard, collecting embodies all of the frustrations and delusions of regular consumption, but now pushed to a higher pitch of pathos and folly. Broadly Lacanian in inspiration, Baudrillard's text insisted that all collecting, like consumption, was driven by, and predicated on, desire, and therefore on a fundamental lack. 'Its dynamism derives from the ever-disappointed project now implicit in objects.'²⁵ The failure of attainment is as inevitable as it is crippling. The pleasures enjoyed by collectors can never 'get beyond a certain poverty and infantilism... collectors, invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them.'²⁶

Baudrillard insists that collecting is essentially a regressive activity, 'a discourse addressed to oneself'.²⁷ Narcissism is the most common charge he lays at collectors, accusing them of trying to ward off processes of change and decay by constructing an imaginary realm of order ('*the organization of the collection itself replaces time*'). However comprehensible in an era of growing secularization, this flight into the imaginary consolation of things, or 'refuge-seeking procedure', has to be labelled 'neurotic'.²⁸ Antiques in particular offer their buyers a reassuring sense of lineage and origin ('the return journey to the mother's breast'); unambiguous examples of 'fetish' objects, they allow the subject to feel that the material world is organised around their own interests

²⁰ Freud to Fliess, 24 January 1895. Cited in Philip Blom, *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2002), p.217.

²¹ Emmanuel Pierrat, *La Collectionniste* (Paris: Le Passage, 2011), p.136.

²² On this context see Remy Saisselin, *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

²³ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1905), p.27.

²⁴ Kirstin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1994).

²⁵ Gaston Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), p.223.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *System*, p.114.

²⁷ Baudrillard, *System*, p.113.

²⁸ Baudrillard, *System*, pp.102-03, 96.

and needs (thereby nourishing the 'phantasy of a centre-point').²⁹ Baudrillard not only routinely connects collecting with vestiges of the sacred (such as the continuous analogies he draws to relics or to talismans) but also with sexual malformation (as a perversion, or 'regression to the anal stage').³⁰

As the title makes clear, Baudrillard conceived his book under the influence of structuralism, with an eye to uncovering the grammar that might underpin social and cultural practices. Collections distilled his deeper interest in seriality, in which the individual element only acquired significance through its relation to the whole (or what he calls 'the set'). The scope for indefinite multiplication allows Baudrillard to compare the collector, in his search for concubines, to 'the master of a secret seraglio'.³¹ Such observations were offered in an unapologetically totalizing spirit, indifferent to variations of place, sex or class, and giving scant regard to the very particular French milieu in which such thinking arose.³² That said, beneath the universalist pretensions of the *System of Objects*, the evidence deployed is scant and telling. Alongside the predictable literary allusions- including to La Bruyère's manic print collector- he made substantial use of Maurice Rheims, whose impressions provided a cue for Baudrillard's wilder elaborations and amplifications (such as the comparison Rheims drew between owners' relations with their dogs and collectors' relations to their things, since both dogs and cherished possessions represent 'an intermediate category between human beings and objects').³³

This quick gloss of *The System of Objects* is a reminder that the text was highly normative, recycling much older notions about collecting as pathological, culled from late nineteenth-century literature, but also conceptually anarchic, piling one perceived deviance or misdemeanour upon another. In the spirit of '68, the cumulative effect is iconoclastic, seeking to expose a practice branded as a form of 'cultural neo-imperialism'.³⁴ More than this political flourish, Baudrillard's emphasis on collecting as an inward-focussed, narcissistic activity- a kind of partner of the mirror-stage- has proved astonishingly influential, especially among his American admirers. Susan Stewart's *On Longing* insists that by decontextualising objects, collectors dissolved the external world in order to create a private refuge: 'In its search for a perfect hermeticism, the collection must destroy both labour and history'.³⁵ James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* continues the theme, drawing on Baudrillard and Stewart to contend that 'collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self'. In this influential formulation, collecting should be understood as a

²⁹Baudrillard, *System*, p.81, 84.

³⁰Baudrillard, *System*, p.93.

³¹Baudrillard, *System*, p.94

³²On the intellectual milieu, see Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), chapter 3.

³³Baudrillard, *System*, p.95, 98.

³⁴Baudrillard, *System*, p.90.

³⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p.161.

Western fantasy to domesticate the Other, predicated on 'a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss'.³⁶

Stewart is a literary critic, whilst Clifford is an anthropologist, writing particularly about ethnographic collections. Coming to the topic from a quite different intellectual tradition was the clinical psychologist Werner Muensterberger [fig.2]. His influential study *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (1994) merged the theories of Freud and Donald Winnicott with historical vignettes and insights gleaned from first-hand observation of his friends and acquaintances (including Georg Tillmann, an enthusiast for Oceanic sculpture). Muensterberger framed collecting essentially as a mode of 'magical compensation', rooted in painful childhood experiences.³⁷ In this scheme, artefacts or artworks are always proxies. Whatever the collector acquired, the effect was the same: a shallow exhibitionism, in keeping with the needs of the phallic-narcissistic personality. 'We see them as show-offs of all kinds. They like to pose or make a spectacle of their possessions. But one soon realizes that these possessions, regardless of their value or significance, are but stand-ins for themselves.'³⁸ The chosen exhibitionists represent, either famously insatiable collectors (like nineteenth-century bibliophile Thomas Phillipps), those who documented their passion in fiction (like Balzac), or even more exotic examples (like head-hunters in New Guinea). In his review John Fowles, a noted novelist of collecting, relished the anecdotes in the book, but felt the thesis could be summarised concisely: 'However odd, however rich or humble, its deep aim will always be to reassure the frightened ego on its perilous, naked journey through life.'³⁹

Collecting: An Unruly Passion made for gripping, gossipy reading. For his critics, however, Muensterberger's pathological approach to the subject was 'a relentlessly one dimensional analysis' of 'very limited usefulness'.⁴⁰ Of course collecting can be viewed as a form of substitution or compensation- but then how does it differ from other comforting pursuits, like eating, physical exercise or sex? According to philosopher Kevin Melchionne, at the heart of the problem was the author's refusal to make any distinction between the 'measured acquisitions of a purposive collector and the mindless hoarding of your average packrat.' By reducing collecting to compulsive forms of accumulation, Muensterberger fails to engage with the attempt to construct meaning through 'the way the pieces in the collection call attention to each other.' It only by 'understanding the dialogue between members of a collection, [that] we discover what the collector wants to show us about the objects and the world.'⁴¹

Muensterberger in some ways represents the climax and eclipse of the older psychoanalytical approach to collecting. Such an approach promises to give a richer account of interior motivation, and its private satisfactions, but this often comes at the expense of thinking through how these behaviours are shaped by

³⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.218, 231.

³⁷ Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion. Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.3.

³⁸ Muensterberger, *Collecting*, p.13.

³⁹ John Fowles, 'Objects of Desire' in *Sunday Times*, 6 February 1994.

⁴⁰ Ting Chang, 'Models of Collecting' in *Oxford Art Journal*, 19.2 (1996), p.96.

⁴¹ Kevin Melchionne review in *Philosophy and Literature*, 20.2 (1996), pp.524-26.

external, socio-cultural pressures, or how these assemblages seek to communicate with external audiences. The search for an over-arching logic makes psychoanalytic accounts insensitive to the properties of specific objects, and traps collectors into doomed patterns. In an amusing review in *Artforum*, Louise Bourgeois mocked the name-dropping snobbery, cynicism and stasis at the core of Muensterberger's account. 'Collecting's only saving grace is its transitional value over the years- the way our need an energy to collect may remain the same, but the object changes,' she countered. 'The transitional shows us that collectors do not have to be arrested characters.'⁴² Archaeologist Susan Pearce acknowledges that the Freudian paradigm is 'difficult to challenge because it is so broad and all-embracing', and is further limited because it 'leaves much actual collecting process out of the account'.⁴³ After Baudrillard and Muensterberger, universal theories of why individuals collect have fallen out of favour (although some researchers hope that neuroscience or evolutionary biology may provide the big picture once offered by psychoanalysis).⁴⁴ However, there have been new and more dynamic ways of conceptualising the emotional relationship between people and their possessions from another quarter: namely the study of material culture.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE RETURN OF PSYCHOLOGY

Historically, the study of collecting has had an awkward relationship to the all-encompassing term of material culture. Collecting has been studied most intensely in relation to the 'taste of the angels', in the phrase of Metropolitan Museum curator Francis Henry Taylor in the 1940s, acquisitions that often entailed considerable amounts of knowledge, capital or connoisseurial skill, and participated in cultural hierarchies.⁴⁵ The perpetuation of such 'rare art traditions' across the centuries has been interpreted as a gauge of civilisation.⁴⁶ By contrast, the concept of material culture is the great leveller, cutting across canonical or privileged artefacts to instead think about the human interaction with the world of things in all its multiplicity, including quotidian items, commodities and junk.⁴⁷

The study of material culture has deep roots, stretching back into Victorian anthropology, archaeology and the antiquarian tradition.⁴⁸ Its

⁴² Louise Bourgeois, 'Collecting: An Unruly Passion', *ArtForum International*, 22 June 1994.

⁴³ Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p.10.

⁴⁴ See Eric Kreuter, *The Collector Mentality: Modernization of the Hunter-Gatherer* (New York: Nova Science, 2017).

⁴⁵ Francis Henry Taylor, *The Taste of the Angels: A History of Art Collecting from Rameses to Napoleon* (New York: Little Brown, 1948).

⁴⁶ Joseph Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982).

⁴⁷ For an introduction, see Karen Harvey, *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Material Sources* (Routledge, New York and London, 2017).

⁴⁸ Peter Miller, *History & its Objects: Antiquarianism and Material Culture since 1500* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

intellectual inclusiveness is combined with scepticism towards the special status conventionally attached to 'art' objects. A more disenchanted, materialist approach to works of art informed early studies of the art market in the 1960s, such as the mining of Christie's auction catalogues undertaken by Gerald Reitlinger, or the sociology of the art market developed by Raymonde Moulin.⁴⁹ But whilst such studies recognised that money was integral to the formation of collections, they nonetheless tended to respect each genre of collecting as an ecosystem with its own rules and patterns. A more expansive notion of material culture, however, cuts across these closed systems, and urged scholars to set the taste for sculpture or for paintings in dialogue with the buying and selling of other luxury goods. With categories increasingly porous, research is growing into what one important anthology calls 'a liminal object which moves first between the rarefied world of fine art and the mundane existence of everyday life, and second between the fine arts and the non-arts.'⁵⁰

Recognising collecting as a mode of consumption was hastened by the research of social scientists into contemporary practice. This approach was pioneered in Britain by the Leicester Museums Group and their famous 1993 questionnaire.⁵¹ Their focus was on acquisitions previously disdained by scholarship, such as dolls, advertisements and packaging, memorabilia or china figurines, in order to study what the purchase of such things revealed about the construction of national, class and gender identities. Many of the findings were couched in psychological terms: for Russell Belk, collections double up as extended selves, intimately tied to the owner's physical and moral integrity.⁵² At the same time, similar studies in the United States profiled not just the real and virtual environments in which such goods were traded- from eBay to yard-sales- but also some of the darker, obsessional sides of collecting in contemporary pop culture.⁵³ Present-day concerns have provided new lenses onto the past, most obviously the study of recycling and the second-hand trades.⁵⁴

Written with a deep awareness of globalisation and environmental debates, the resurgent study of consumerism also has implications for how the

⁴⁹ Gerald Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste*, 3 vols (London: Barrie and Rockcliffe, 1961-70); Raymonde Moulin, *Le marché de la peinture en France* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

⁵⁰ John Potvin and Alla Myzelev, 'Introduction: The Material of Visual Cultures' in *Material Cultures 1740-1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting* (eds.) John Potvin, Alla Myzelev (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p.1.

⁵¹ The Leicester questionnaire, and relevant essays, are gathered in *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (ed.) Susan Pearce (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵² Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, Morris Holbrook, Scott Roberts, 'Collectors and Collecting', *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15 (1988), pp.548-53; Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society: A Critical Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁵³ *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* (ed.) Leah Dilworth (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ *Modernity and the Second-Hand Trade: European Consumption Cultures and Practices, 1700-1900*, (eds.) Jon Stobart, Ilja Van Damme (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

collecting bug has been situated too. In his grand survey *Empire of Things* (2016), Frank Trentmann offers a genealogy of our changing relationship to possessions, identifying the years 1890-1920 as pivotal to 'a renaissance of the material self':

The language of the passions, of sociability, refinement and sympathy gave way to a more hands-on, private relationship with things. Mr Pooter, collecting, crafts and home furnishing, these were all elements of a renewed appreciation of the role of things in the development of the self. The self was not sealed off from the material world. It was touched and formed by things, while things in their turn carried the imprint of an individual's character and culture. Artefacts came to be seen as passageways into the self.⁵⁵

Whether works of art, or consumer comforts, around 1900, European homes became ever more crammed with things ('Everyone could be a collector').⁵⁶ In his important work on the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie, Manuel Charpy has also insisted on the interplay between the multiplication of domestic objects (knick-knacks, ornaments, souvenirs), individual self-fashioning and the production of new collective identities, rooted in class and gender.⁵⁷ The collector's pursuit of exceptional art objects occurred within an expanded marketplace of material things, raising vexed issues about discernment, disposal and control. In *Possessed* (2021), literary critic Rebecca Falkoff has offered a more charitable interpretation of those indiscriminate hoarders or 'pack-rats' excluded from the ranks of true collectors. From the early nineteenth century, she argues, the boundary between appropriate and excessive consumption is fundamentally unstable, reflecting deeper contradictions in modern conceptions of value. Whether classified as collecting, consumption, or hoarding, modernity has witnessed a proliferation of closely related 'object-orientated manias'.⁵⁸

Studies of consumption can prompt us to think about the relationship between the closed circle of prized objects demarcated as a collection, through which the owner is often still remembered, and the diverse or eclectic set of hobbies he or she pursued in their lifetimes, such as coins, stamps and autographs, which are often marginalised in scholarship. The contrasts between the esteemed and overlooked parts of the same collection do not just complicate hasty generalisations about individual taste; they also speak volumes about what

⁵⁵ Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty First* (New York and London: Allen Lane, 2016), p.231.

⁵⁶ Trentmann, *Empire*, p.227.

⁵⁷ Manuel Charpy, 'How Things Shape Us: Material Culture and Identity in the Industrial Age' in *Writing Material Culture History* (eds.), Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello (2nd ed., London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Charpy, 'Matière et mémoires: usages des traces de soi et des siens dans une grande famille bourgeoise de la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle', *Revue du Nord*, 390 (2011), pp.395-432.

⁵⁸ Rebecca Falkoff, *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

was seen worthy of record by subsequent interpreters. Only recently, for instance, have collections of ephemera begun to receive their due.⁵⁹

In contrast to the psychoanalytic model discussed above, scholars of consumption have also underlined the significance of materiality. Material culture features prominently within the 'affective turn' currently sweeping through the humanities, since it shows how emotional states are generated and expressed through the transmission of tangible props and tokens.⁶⁰ Precisely because of the psychological investment in things, the attributes of physical objects- such as softness, smoothness, lustre, coldness, texture- were integral to the way they were apprehended, not just by the eye but also by the hand. To flatten out these material differences is to miss a central dimension of the collectors' sensory experience, even if the analytic tools for trying to reconstruct such experiences are still in their infancy. As Jaś Elsner has remarked, the cultural history of the material world 'is a great experimental adventure in which few rules have yet been written, and many pitfalls and heffalump traps remain to be fallen into.'⁶¹

There exist at least two other ways in which the psychoanalytic frameworks of an earlier generation can be finessed. The first relates to what we might call the erotics of collecting, rooted in new approaches to gender and sexuality.⁶² For Freud, Baudrillard and Muensterberger, the collector was envisioned as the jealous patriarch in the harem of his own devising. But what happens to these power dynamics when we substitute the male for a female proprietor? In *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects* (2009), Diane Sachko-Macleod gives a new reading of female collectors and philanthropists of Gilded Age America. Theoretically, she borrows from Winnicott to offer her own version of the compensation thesis, claiming that art objects acted as 'soothers' to women whose social horizons were otherwise circumscribed: 'art collecting as practised by women should be redefined as a process of gathering objects that console the psyche and contribute to the articulation of self.'⁶³ However, she also develops a rival notion from Winnicott, that of 'creative play, to argue that touching, striking and fantasizing over objects was a spur to female self-understanding. This ludic dimension of women's collecting is quite different from the dynamics of mastery associated with men, and underscores its performative appeal: the bohemian heiress from Buffalo, Mabel Dodge, surround herself with works of art to stage

⁵⁹ Collecting Prints, *Posters and Ephemera: Perspectives in a Global World* (eds.) Ruth Iskin, Britany Salsbury (Bloomsbury, London, 2021).

⁶⁰ This is a booming field for all historical periods; for some modern examples see *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (eds.) Anna Moran, Sorcha O'Brien (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁶¹ Jaś Elsner, 'Objects and History' in *Cultural Histories of the Material World* (ed.) Peter N. Miller (Bard Graduate Centre, New York, 2019), p.168.

⁶² For an overview see Tom Stammers, 'Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy, c.1850-1920' in *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 31 (2020) [online].

⁶³ Diane Sachko-Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p.15.

and externalise her otherwise fragmented subjectivity.⁶⁴ Sachko-Macleod's idea of collecting-as-play also opens the door to recognising collecting as a kind of joyful, sensory collaboration within two halves of a married couple.⁶⁵

In contrast to the older model of male collector as miser, determined to preserve exclusive enjoyment, queer scholars have stressed how collecting represented a vital avenue of homosociability. It was precisely through sharing their delight in rare and curious objects from the Far East, for instance that a non-conformist subculture of 'Bachelor Japanists' emerged in early twentieth-century France and the United States.⁶⁶ John Potvin has explored the place of collecting in the construction of masculine homosexual identities in modern Britain, seeking to draw out 'subversive and alternative relationships to space, materiality and time.'⁶⁷ Potvin shows how the interiors and furnishings created by male same sex couples- such as the famous partnership of painters and aesthetes in late Victorian Britain, Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon [fig.3]- were carefully calibrated to elicit sensations and memories from their many visitors, and represent 'queer intimacy materialized.'⁶⁸

The second way in which the psychoanalytic model has been revised is to think more about the endings of collections- to switch the attention, as it were, from narratives of possession and accumulation to dispossession. Here the fieldwork by anthropologist Daniel Miller is highly influential. In *The Comfort of Things* (2008), Miller and his co-researcher Fiona Parrot provide a portrait of thirty households on a random street in south London, starting with an account of the things lying around, the clutter and the décor, before linking these objects to events in their owners' lives.⁶⁹ The aim is partly philosophical, tallying with Miller's long-standing agenda to unpick 'our common sense opposition between the person and thing, the animate and the inanimate, the subject and the object'.⁷⁰ But these engaging vignettes also underscore the way that possessions come to commemorate and mediate fundamental life-stage transitions, such as bereavement: the process of grieving is played out through the way that the belongings of loved ones are conserved, relocated, sifted through or given away. This insight underpins Leanne Shapton's brilliantly imaginative 2009 book, *Important Artifacts....*, presented in the guise of an illustrated auction catalogue. It documents the origins and demise of a romantic relationship through a

⁶⁴Sachko-Macleod, *Enchanted Lives*, p.189.

⁶⁵Sachko-Macleod, *Enchanted Lives*, p.14. See also Sachko-Macleod, 'Art Collecting as Play: Lady Charlotte Schreiber' in *Visual Resources*, 27 (2011), pp.18-31.

⁶⁶Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ John Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p.9.

⁶⁸Potvin, *Bachelors*, p.85.

⁶⁹ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

⁷⁰ Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p.5.

painfully captioned inventory of the gifts, clothes, photographs and books that once constituted the couple's lives together, prior to them being sold off.⁷¹

The earlier psychoanalytic literature was correct to note the strong thematic links between collecting and mortality, although more empirical and comparative work is needed on collectors' posthumous calculations regarding the fate of their things, whether through wills, bequests, donations or gifts. It is clear that many modern collectors take comfort from thinking about themselves as only temporary custodians of objects that have made many journeys to reach them, and that will pass into other hands after their death. In his much-cited essay 'Unpacking my library' (1931), Walter Benjamin claimed the true collector felt a heavy sense of responsibility about this succession. 'Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility.'⁷² This is an alternative to purely narcissistic impulses, or enjoyment in the here-and-now; as Martin Jay has mused of the objects in his collection, 'their likely survival through a posterity that will continue to preserve them somehow makes my passage less final, my disappearance less complete.' Like Benjamin before him, he expresses hope that his treasures will find constructive new purposes, even remember him: 'they are given a new life by the departure of their collector.'⁷³

NARRATIVES OF INTERIORITY

Psychological accounts of collecting are therefore making a quiet comeback. Whilst the rigidity of the older psychoanalytic literature has clearly lost traction, the study of modern collecting -as one dimension of modern material culture- remains entangled with issues of identity, affect, intimacy and subjectivity. The way each of these issues is conceptualised has certainly changed over the past generation, with a marked shift away from the totalizing and often pathologising character portrait, towards recognition of the contingent, performative and inter-personal dimensions of human-object relations. Rather than see collecting as a secondary symptom of some underlying personality trait (or mania), many today would deny any neat separation of cause-and-effect, and counter that the act of collecting is also highly generative of subjectivities, which it serves to sustain. In these instances, the material properties of the collection are not incidental, but integral, to the interest and pleasures these things afford their owner.

Of course the popular genre of eccentric collector biography shows no sign of disappearing- and it certainly has its place when making sense of extraordinary twentieth-century figures like Robert de Montesquiou or Alfred

⁷¹ Leanne Shapton, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

⁷² Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p.66.

⁷³ Martin Jay, 'Mementoes Post-Mori: Thoughts on the Collector's Mania' in *Salmagundi*, 180-81 (2013-14), p.57.

Barnes.⁷⁴ But there have been recent efforts to recast the biographical form to better reflect our unstable relations with the material world. In her 2009 account of the omnivorous scientific and medical collector Henry Wellcome—appropriately entitled *An Infinity of Things*—Frances Larsson subtly probes Wellcome’s inability to create an ordered narrative of his life, just as he failed to ‘complete’ or impose unified meaning on his collection. She intends her book to be a dual biography, of a man and also of his stuff. It is not a heroic, linear life, but one in which the engagement with the material world came to overwhelm its would-be master: ‘both collector and collection were mutually constitutive: one did not exist beyond the other.’⁷⁵

Innovative biographies like Larson’s suggest that whilst questions of psychology remain valid and vital, they need to be carefully historicised. Wellcome’s obsessions are inseparable from the era of capitalist and imperial expansion in which he lived. If, as so often alleged, collections are a critical tool of self-fashioning, we need to clarify what the material supports for fashioning selfhood were in distinct periods of time. In a brilliant recent study, Sean Silver has explored how notions of mind and cognition in early eighteenth-century Britain were developed through analogy with collecting apparatuses (like cabinets) or collecting processes (like classification and cataloguing).⁷⁶ In its combination of epistemology, collecting and personhood, Silver’s approach might act as a prompt for greater reflection among scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about how material resources continued to condition the understanding of self in their own period. Beyond the impact of new technologies, such as photography or the cinema, one clear trend is the reciprocity between the domestic interior, and notions of psychological interiority. In this blurring of physical and imaginary space, the furnishing and exhibition of a room became a mode of self-portraiture.⁷⁷

This is a well-known observation to readers of modern literature, since it acts as a leitmotif running through the novels of major authors of the fin-de-siècle, such as Henry James, Guy de Maupassant, Marcel Proust and Gabriele D’Annunzio.⁷⁸ But it also informs the autobiographical writing of many notable twentieth-century collectors. In light of the canonical status attached to every sentence in the writings on collecting of Benjamin, it is surprising that this

⁷⁴ Howard Greenfield, *The Devil and Dr Barnes: Portrait of an American Art Collector* (London: Viking Press, 1987); Edgar Munhall, *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995).

⁷⁵ Frances Larsson, *An Infinity of Things: How Henry Wellcome Collected the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.287.

⁷⁶ Sean Silver, *The Mind is a Collection: Case-Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁷⁷ For a classic discussion of the psychologised interior, see Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁷⁸ Janell Watson, *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michel David, ‘L’éthos collectionneur de D’Annunzio, d’après Il Piacere’ in *Les Collections: fables et programmes* (ed.) Jacques Guillerme (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1993), pp.63-77.

corpus of texts is not better known or studied, for it is distinctive to the modern period to have such a wealth of ego documents on hand. Rather than having to infer evidence of motive from the sometimes dry catalogues, bills or inventories, there is a substantial body of writing by nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century collectors in which they reflect on and rationalise their desires. Naturally, these texts do not offer unmediated access to the collector's innermost thoughts and feelings: they are often highly calculated textual performances.⁷⁹ However, it is by studying the elements out of which they are constructed that the psychological stakes of collecting become clear.

To illustrate this point, let me close by mentioning the writings of Italian literary critic Mario Praz about his apartment-museum in Rome [fig.4]. Curiously, Praz appears in Muensterberger's book as a classic case of collecting as a consolation for earlier traumas, including the consequences of a clubfoot and failed marriage: 'early sensitivity, largely prompted by the consequences of his own congenital impairment, encouraged compensatory gratification: since his body was imperfect, he chose to acquire and surround himself with impeccable objects.'⁸⁰ However, Praz's 1958 autobiography, *The House of Life*, does not confirm this diagnosis. Childhood might have launched his 'manias', including dolls, stamps and Russian literature, but he did not want to get bogged down in 'the psychology of the collector, a matter which has already been studied by others,' usually in unflattering terms ('there is something positively egotistical and limited in him, something positively avaricious').⁸¹ For Praz, his own psychology is not a topic separable from his itinerary through the collection itself: it is something to show, not just tell.

The House of Life is structured by the journey through the contents of the apartment in the Palazzo Ricci, one room at a time. This is not a linear progression; rather, the story of the different objects in the house acts as a trigger to recall different episodes not just in the author's personal life, but also how it was shaped by his celebrated acquaintances, and the often threatening environment of Rome outside (during the Fascist and wartime years Praz gave sanctuary to an Austrian-Jewish critic, whilst the collections assembled by his stepfather were looted).⁸² Through the evocative description of his possessions, Praz moves seamlessly between real and imagined architectures. In his study, he dwelled on the watercolour interiors of Caroline Murat's palace in Naples during the Napoleonic Empire:

These two small pictures representing rooms in the Royal Palace at Naples in the time of Murat, now hanging in my house, seem, as it were, a magically prolonged extension of the house itself, so that these rooms in miniature, into which I can only penetrate in imagination, end by being no less real to me than rooms that actually exist. It is as if I were to open a

⁷⁹For some distinguished recent examples see William David King, *Collections of Nothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (ed.) Sherry Turkle (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011).

⁸⁰Muensterberger, *Collecting*, p.42, 232.

⁸¹Mario Praz, *The House of Life*, trans. Angus Davidson (Methuen: London, 1964), p.26

⁸²Praz, *The House*, p.30, 155.

secret door in the room in which I live, and then penetrate into the wing of a deserted palace, into a second home of my own, as it were, with shadowy coffered ceilings that no longer echo to the sound of human voices.⁸³

In this mise-en-abyme, the watercolour views allow Praz to access a myriad of hidden, long lost places, which become a second home. The collection sets the boundaries of his imaginative excursions, just as the list of mirrors, drawers and secret doors in his apartment captures the recesses of the self and its search for an elusive ideal. In the remarkable closing sentences, having reached the end of the tour, Praz pictures himself in retrospect as a collectible, his life identical with the inventory of things:

....I see myself as having become an object and an image, a museum piece among museum pieces, already detached and remote, and that, like Adam in the graffito on the marble floor of the church of San Domenico at Siena, I have looked at myself in a convex mirror, and have seen myself as no bigger than a handful of dust.⁸⁴

He gestures towards the time after his death, when the house and its contents, although deprived of their strange vitality, will endure as a public museum. Their persistence affords some hope of his own survival. Praz here echoes Benjamin's insight that it is not his objects that 'come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.'⁸⁵

⁸³Praz, *The House*, p.287.

⁸⁴Praz, *The House*, p.350.

⁸⁵Benjamin, 'Unpacking', p.67.



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