

A Companion to
Museum Studies

Edited by
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Collecting Practices

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Collecting – including the assembly, preservation, and display of collections – is fundamental to the idea of the museum, even if not all “museums” directly engage in it. Equally, I suggest, the idea of the museum has become fundamental to collecting practices beyond the museum. Furthermore, collecting is variously entangled with other ways of relating to objects and according them meaning and value – that is, to wider epistemologies and moral economies of objects.

There is now an enormous literature on collecting, encompassing the history of collecting, including biographies of individual collectors and tomes on specific collections, as well as on the anthropology, psychology, and sociology of both museum and popular collecting. Rather than submit to a collector’s urge to try to gather and order all of this (and risk the failure inherent in such an ambition), my aim here is to highlight some of the main – and changing – epistemological and moral economies in which museum collecting has been implicated. I do this primarily via a schematic account of the history of collecting, from the curiosity cabinet, via discussion of research on popular collecting, to debates and innovations in museum collecting today. First, however, I address the fraught question of what is meant by collecting.

What is Collecting?

Collecting is sometimes seen as a basic urge or instinct, and as a fundamental and universal human (and, indeed, sometimes also animal) activity. This, however, does not explain very much and it ignores important differences in the nature of, and motives for, different kinds of gathering or accumulation of material things. Moreover, it naturalizes the museum, casting it as an inevitable expression of the collecting urge rather than seeking to understand its various manifestations and flourishing in specific historical and cultural contexts. Museums and related forms of collecting practices need to be interrogated in the same way as do practices that initially seem less obvious to Western observers, such as the famous *potlatch* ceremonies recorded in the early twentieth century in North-West America, which involved first accumulating and then giving away or even destroying vast quantities of objects, in rituals that culminated in a kind of obverse of collecting: a conspicuous dispersal. Just as

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such practices raise questions about the specificity of cultural and historical contexts, motives, and implications, as well as about possible similarities with other practices, so too does museum collecting and its relatives (cf. Clifford 1988).

There have been useful attempts to distinguish collecting from related practices, such as gathering or accumulating. In archaeology, for example, there have been debates over the status of objects amassed in grave sites, and it has been argued that these should properly be regarded as “hoards” or “accumulations” rather than “collections” on account of the fact that these are probably artifacts gathered for their individual significance and perceived function in the afterlife rather than to form a set of related objects in itself (Bradley 1990). Collecting, according to this perspective, should be seen as a practice in which the intention is to create a collection; and a collection in turn is a set of objects that forms some kind of meaningful though not necessarily (yet) complete “whole.” Although delimiting “collecting” to activities intended to form “a collection” might at first seem tautologous, it serves to identify a distinctive type of object-oriented activity in which items are selected in order to become part of what is seen as a specific series of things, rather than for their particular use-values or individualized symbolic purposes. While in everyday language we might use the terms “collecting” and “collection” loosely to cover a wide range of practices (for example, collecting tax), it is analytically useful to distinguish “collecting” as a self-aware process of creating a set of objects conceived to be meaningful as a group. Exactly how “groupness” is perceived is not the defining matter: collecting is as much about creating a rationale as filling it.

Museums play an important role in institutionalizing this conception of a “collection” as more than – and different from – the sum of its parts. In forming collections, museums *recontextualize* objects: they remove them from their original contexts and place them in the new context of “the collection.” This recontextualization of objects primarily in terms of other objects with which they are considered to be related, is a fundamental aspect of the kind of collecting legitimized by the museum. In a collection, objects take on additional significance specifically by dint of being part of the collection; and, in most cases, the life of objects once in a collection is notably different from their pre-collection existence. In particular, objects in collections are less likely to be available for use or purchase than they were previously: they enter into a new stage in their biographies (Kopytoff 1986). Their separation from other objects and their status as a collection are generally culturally marked by distinctive forms and levels of attention, including particular technologies of storage, cataloguing, and display. Moreover, collections are typically formed with the ambition of being kept long term or even in perpetuity, so simultaneously establishing a likely terminal phase in objects’ biographies and attempting to give them a more lasting life and significance.

Collecting and Differentiation

This is not to say that collecting should be seen as a homogeneous practice. Indeed, as described below, there are variations in the principles involved, and collecting may blur into other practices. Much collecting research has included identifying types of

collecting and highlighting different impetuses that may be concerned; and mapping collecting types onto social differences (for example, of gender or class) is prevalent in academic approaches and collectors' own discourses. Many distinctions have been produced. For example: between the taxonomic and the aesthetic, the clinical and the passionate, the systematic and the eclectic, the authentic and the inauthentic, the planned and the impulsive, the institutional and the individual, the connoisseurial and the fetishistic, the high and popular cultural, the dealer and the true collector (see, for example, Danet and Katriel 1989; Pearce 1995). Such attempts to make distinctions between types of collecting, and to prize "real" or "proper" collecting from its perceived counterfeits, are often infused with implicit or explicit moral judgments in which some types of collecting are valued as relatively worthy and others dismissed or seen as signs of pathology.

In literary accounts, particularly since the nineteenth century, the figure of the collector may act as a trope for certain, generally negative, character traits. In John Fowles's *The Collector* (1964), for example, collecting is contrasted with a genuine love of life and things, and cast as a reprehensible "deadening" activity in which mastery through possession dominates any kind of real sensibility to that which is collected. The museum, too, has sometimes been characterized in this way, particularly in the analogy with the mausoleum.

That collecting attracts such moral judgments should not, however, be regarded as evidence of its actual moral status but instead of the fact that it is a culturally significant and morally charged activity which is about more than the mere gathering together of things. Collecting is the performance of a certain form of human-object relations: a particular approach to the material and social world. For this reason, it needs to be understood also in relation to other kinds of human-object relations; and, as we will see below, its development and moral evaluations of it are intertwined with other modes of relating to both things and people.

Renaissance and Early Modern Collecting

Histories of collecting have identified various periods and places in which forms of collecting can be found (Rigby and Rigby 1944; Impey and MacGregor 1985; Clunas 1991; Pearce 1995; Bounia 2004). These include Ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe and the Edo and Ming periods (beginning about the mid-sixteenth century) in China and Japan. I begin my account, however, with the flourishing of collecting in Renaissance and early modern Europe because this is widely seen as a precursor to modern museum collecting, though also as distinct from it in interesting ways (see chapter 8), and because, as I discuss in the final part of this chapter, there have been some recent arguments that we are today seeing a return to some aspects of this form of collecting.

During the Renaissance, a new passion for collecting developed among a learned elite, and this extended the sites of collections away from the specifically royal (the regal treasure) or religious (for example, the collection of saints' relics), and saw the formation of dedicated spaces for collection and display – specialized cabinets and rooms. By the early modern period, new collecting technologies, such as the

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inventory and catalogue, had been devised. Spurring on the new collecting was “the empirical explosion of materials that wider dissemination of ancient texts, increased travel, voyages of discovery, and more systematic forms of communication and exchange had produced” (Findlen 1994: 3). Collecting was a means of bringing together and reveling in the newly discovered, and also of trying to make some sense of it.

To the modern eye, the collections of objects produced sometimes seem eclectic and even haphazard, mixing together, perhaps, items such as corals, statuary, books, animal skeletons and – a favoured item – the horn of a unicorn. Yet these were not merely randomly accumulated things (Hooper–Greenhill 1992). While the specific organizing principles by which objects were brought together might vary, these were themselves governed by ideas of objects as having intrinsic meanings that had been laid down during the Creation, and of the collection as ideally constituting a “micro-cosm” or “mirror of nature” that would aid in the interpretation of the divine text. As Foucault (1970) pointed out, various notions of “resemblance” now unfamiliar to us were central to sixteenth-century epistemology; and collections of objects into cabinets and the like allowed for the bringing together of things that could be arranged according to notions of meaningful proximity, juxtaposition, or alignment that might indicate underlying symbolic resemblance. Curiosities, which became a special target of collectors’ attention in this period (Pomian 1990), were those things “new, unknown or unseen, that needed to be integrated into the existing perception of the world” (Prösler 1996: 28). They were also seen as evidence of God’s “power to alter the course of nature” (Shelton 1994: 184–5), and thus as potentially particularly telling signs of divine logic.

Taxonomy and System

During the seventeenth century, new ideas about how to organize and order objects into meaningful collections began to supersede some of those that had informed earlier practices. In particular, the idea that there were multiple forms of resemblances, connected by complex and cryptic linkages, came to be replaced largely by the idea that evident physical similarities or dissimilarities between things could themselves point directly to the natural scheme (see fig. 8.1). The systematic observation and comparison of objects became a key feature of natural science; and the cabinet and museum maintained and even strengthened their role as principal means of bringing together and organizing objects in order to attempt to map the world’s patterns. The curiosity ceased to be such a focus in these newer epistemologies, and notions of typological mapping, or what Foucault refers to as “tabulation” (1970), and “coverage” gained ground. Taxonomies flourished, and some categories of choice for collecting waxed and waned with fashion. For example, in The Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, there was a craze for collecting tulip bulbs (Schama 1987), and in early eighteenth-century France, ancient medals came to be a particular focus among some groups of collectors (Pomian 1990). It should also be noted that the collecting of the curious and the eclectic did not disappear entirely, and that non-systematic collecting also persisted, different principles existing alongside one another.

Evident in all of these collecting practices are the notions that objects are meaningful and that collecting and organizing them can be a means of making sense and gaining knowledge of the world. Removing objects from their pre-existing worlds of use and arranging them in a designated space allowed meaning and order to be discerned in the unruly and teeming world of things. But, as with later collecting practices, these early forms were not only about gaining knowledge of divinely inspired nature and of the new worlds that were being opened up through increased travel. Collecting was also partly a celebration of objects both in themselves and as evidence of divine skill, and this could disrupt classificatory schemes.

Moreover, collecting worlds were also social worlds. Collecting produced not just new knowledge but also new kinds of social practices (for example, of trade in exotic artifacts, and of gentlemanly visiting of noted collections) and social relationships (for example, between collectors and their patrons). Possessing a collection became a mark of status, injecting a new dynamic possibility into existing social hierarchies; and the relative qualities of collections themselves became a basis for identifying and expressing social distinctions. Collecting was a means of fashioning and performing the self via material things; and the new social figure of the collector became the epitome of the then relatively novel idea that personal identities could be made rather than being definitively ascribed at birth (Findlen 1994: 294).

Modern Collecting and the Museum

Much of the early modern European complex of notions and practices concerning collecting has persisted into the present, but it has also been extended and changed both over time and as it has spread across the globe and beyond its elite origins. Particularly important in the systematization and diffusion of collecting practices was the development of the modern, and especially the national, museum in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

National museums acted as symbols of the existence of the newly forming nation-states (see chapter 10); and although many were based on existing collections that had been created by individual collectors, they helped to materialize the new political-cultural forms into being. They did so in part by positioning the new nation-states as “collectors,” signaling their identity and indeed very existence by their ownership of collections. As in relation to individual collectors, the collections of nations were simultaneously expressions of belonging to a worthy and educated club and of being individually distinctive. Collections allowed nation-states to show their possession and mastery of the world – something that colonial powers were especially well able to demonstrate through the accumulation of material culture from the countries that they colonized (see, for example, Coombes 1997; Barringer and Flynn 1998; Gosden and Knowles 2001). They also gave them the opportunity to amass and present evidence of their own pasts, so turning their histories into “objective” fact and legitimizing their right to exist. This same complex of ideas was extended to other entities, especially the city, and the nineteenth century saw a massive explosion of new museums, both national and civic, across Europe and beyond.

Collecting and the public

Although earlier proto-museums had been available to some visitors, a hallmark of the modern museum was that it was open to the public. Indeed, the modern museum can be seen as one of the technologies through which “the public” as an aggregation of self-directed citizens was imagined into being (see chapters 8 and 16). The museum was able to perform this task in part by positioning members of the public as collectors. They were collectors insofar as it was in their name that the museum project was conducted: they were the “owners” of the collections. Furthermore, museums encouraged members of the public to conceive of themselves as autodidactic collectors of knowledge, and the museum made visible suitable classifications and taxonomies into which that knowledge could be organized.

The museum also played a role in encouraging the public literally to become collectors of things. The collections of the new museums were created not only from the collections of wealthy aristocrats but also by the collecting activities of the newly educated middle classes, especially by literary and philosophical societies. As Didier Maleuvre has observed, this was a period in which collecting was democratized and the “museum penetrated the cultural consciousness . . . The nineteenth-century mania for collecting was not merely a public concern: domestic collections flourished, and remodelled interior spaces into esthetic and historic museums of themselves” (1999: 4). Special items of furniture, such as the “Empire cabinet” and “whatnot,” were produced for citizens to display their own collections in their own homes (1999: 180), thus showing off their good taste, education, and social status.

Creating a collection required the ability to make careful selections from the profusion of objects that had become more widely available during the eighteenth century and especially into the nineteenth. Not only were there still enormous quantities of exotica and novel things to cope with, there were also new, mass-produced goods. New things became more easily available to a wider range of people than ever before, especially in the department stores that sprung up alongside museums in the expanding cities. Museums and department stores sometimes borrowed design features from one another; and both put objects on display through the tantalizing technology of the vitrine or glass case, in which things could be seen and admired but not touched, the possessive appetite thus being whetted but not immediately satisfied. The shop, though, made possession a real possibility; and the new production of “collectibles” – items designed specifically to be collected – tapped into this possibility and market. The perceived danger, however, was that people would be so dazzled by the new acquisitive possibilities that they would not know when to stop or how to select responsibly. This was articulated especially clearly in the disease of “kleptomania,” which first came to be identified at the time, and which was a particular affliction of middle-class ladies in department stores (Abelson 1989).

Museums had an ambivalent position in relation to bourgeois acquisitiveness. On the one hand, they encouraged a collecting urge, supporting the idea of amassing aggregations of objects that might never be used. On the other, they could act as a kind of moral antidote to unfettered consumption by illustrating careful and meaningful object selection. Moreover, in a world in which novelty and cycles of fashion

acted as motors for yet more production and consumption, museums could stand for a different kind of relationship to objects: one that was both more lasting and more meaningful. As Walter Benjamin puts it: “To [the collector] falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them” (2002: 19).

Disciplining collecting

The museum faced its own problems of selection: of how to identify the significant and meaningful amidst the excess of both things and information. Collecting needed to be carried out with care, sifting the meaningful from the dross, on the one hand, and seeking to be properly comprehensive, on the other. Certain categories, such as “Etruscan” and “Old Masters,” emerged, which were to be found in most self-respecting generalist museums, and which were used not only to organize existing material but as a spur to the museum’s active collecting. The idea of collections as potentially complete series became widespread alongside evolutionism in the nineteenth century, some museums choosing to fill in the gaps in series of sculptures or of skeletons with plaster casts or other replicas, though in others the idea of the “real thing” was a primary filter. In art museums, the new discipline of art history informed a novel means of organizing galleries from the late eighteenth century, the works typically being presented as exemplifications of particular styles, themselves classified by both “period” and “civilization” or “nationality,” and this being spatially organized such that visitors could take an educational tour through the progress of art over time, crossing continents, and experiencing characteristic differences, as they did so. Museums of anthropology, ethnology, natural history, and science and industry also frequently employed forms of classification based on evolutionary chronology and territory-based difference (Bennett 2004; see also chapter 5), thus also helping to naturalize these as ways of apprehending the world in all its manifestations, and to create rationales for selection.

The growth of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines, such as art history or palaeontology, and of particular figures such as the art critic, helped produce principles and practices for selecting and organizing what was worthy of keeping, though it remained a struggle (Siegel 2000). Moreover, as museums and universities drew further apart toward the end of the nineteenth century, and as the idea of objects as a privileged route to knowing the world went into decline, collecting began to lose its status as a worthy intellectual pursuit, especially in the sciences. The really interesting and important aspects of science were increasingly those invisible to the naked eye, and the classification of things collected no longer promised to produce cutting-edge knowledge (Conn 1998). The term “butterfly collecting” could come to be used with the adjective “mere” to indicate a pursuit of secondary academic status.

Collecting did not fall out of favor in the same way in all disciplines and areas. In art, it continued to play a vital function in art markets, collectors being central to the definition of the significant through their purchases. Individual collectors remained important here, reinforcing notions of individuality with which collecting was also, and perhaps increasingly, associated. The collecting of “old things” also remained respectable and even took on new resonance in the nineteenth century. Although

earlier museums had often contained old or ancient items, the notion of museums as a kind of haven for things of the past – and of the aged as especially worth collecting – became much stronger. In part, this was informed by a new historicism – the sense of the past as a “foreign country” to which we could never return (Lowenthal 1985), as well as by the organizing principle of the temporal series. The turn to the past and to things of the past was part of a rescue attempt: to save what might otherwise vanish in what was now increasingly perceived as swiftly coursing, transient time. And as perceptions spread of time as non-reversible and of change as ever-more insistent, “the past” came to be conceived of as increasingly recent. New things, correspondingly, came to be seen more quickly as “old.”

Collecting Dilemmas

During the twentieth century, especially its later decades, questions about the legitimacy of existing classificatory categories for organizing collecting and about the pedagogical role of collections were raised increasingly in museums. Challenges to the notion of “the canon” and the sense of an overwhelming “information glut” contributed to the unease. At an international conference aimed at addressing the dilemmas facing museums as they moved into the new millennium, one museum director suggested that the problem of what to collect had become so fraught – and decisions so hard to make – that a possible solution might be to try to collect an example of everything produced, pack it into a big warehouse, and leave the selecting for curators a hundred years or so into the future (Cossons 1992).

For others, the fact that more and more collections were confined to storage, rather than being on show, was itself a dilemma. In many museums, a gap had opened up between collecting and exhibition. A growing lack of confidence in the pedagogic potency of objects – both in themselves and as part of collections – led to increasing use of exhibitions based on “stories” or “narratives” rather than collections, and these used dioramas or text panels as the main structuring device, with objects only as illustration. This undermined the rationale of collecting in many different kinds of museum, especially those which gave priority to their educational role. Toward the end of the twentieth century, questions not only about what to collect but about the very purpose of collections came to be asked with increasing frequency and urgency (for example, Knell 2004).

While many established museums began such questioning, however, numerous new, generally fairly small, local, collection-based museums were being established. These were typically run independently or by local branches of the state (for example, local authorities in the UK). Rather than exhibiting collections of the rare and exotic, such museums mostly collected and displayed the material culture of the everyday and more recent past, especially that of working-class and minority communities. This proliferation was testament to the continuing salience of the idea of collecting and displaying material culture as a means of reinforcing and giving legitimacy to group and place-based identities. It was also a function of an escalating sense of “the past” arriving ever more quickly, provoking fear of cultural amnesia (Huysen 1995). Gathering up the material fragments before they were forgotten was

a means of holding onto pasts, values, and cultural forms whose future felt uncertain (Macdonald 2002).

Individual and Popular Collecting

Individual collecting, especially of the recent past, everyday and mass-produced, also escalated in the same period (Martin 1999: 14), and, indeed, some of the new museums, as had been the case for earlier museums, were effectively based on the collections of single individuals. Many of the same themes – a new valuation of “ordinary” culture, saving the past, materializing distinctive identity – seem likely to apply at individual level too, and to be sustained by the broader museological discourse. The study of individual collecting practices, however, also addresses variations among individuals, including the question of why some people become collectors at all.

Individual collecting

One of the most common attempts to account for differences between individuals is a loosely psychoanalytic perspective that understands collecting as a result of childhood experience, especially sexual experience or its repression, and thus as an expression of either sublimated need or pathology. There are variations in the kinds of account offered and their degrees of subtlety, and some should be regarded more as part of the moral evaluation of collecting discussed above than as the results of research. Baudrillard, for example, notes that collecting often occurs more intensely during life phases in which sexual activity is less, and as such can be seen as “a regression to the anal stage, manifested in such behaviour patterns as accumulation, ordering, aggressive retention and so forth” (1994: 9). Such a regression can take a pathological turn when it exhibits a compulsive or fetishistic overwhelming attachment to collected objects. Freud himself offered only a few comments on collecting, suggesting that it was a substitute for erotic activity; though he was himself a collector – of (following the death of his father) ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Greek figurines and other antiquities, as well as of non-material items such as jokes or slips of the tongue (Forrester 1994; Barker 1996).

In his sensitive analysis of Freud’s own collecting, John Forrester offers a more wide-ranging account, exploring the differentiations between Freud’s collecting of the material and the non-material and that which he made public and kept private, and covering various psychological motivations and cultural conditions, some of which derive from a wider museological discourse, including a response to loss, collecting as a subscription to enlightenment ideals, and objects acting as both sites of memories and as means of “effacing the past [by] building a new timeless world of the collection” (Forrester 1994: 244). This is a multi-faceted account that avoids reducing collecting to a single motive or cause, though much of what Forrester discusses could loosely be described as relating collecting to identity.

The idea that collecting can be seen as an expression of individual identity is one of the most widespread, and above we have touched on some of the historical and

museologically entangled background to the emergence of this notion. Narrowly understood, this perspective casts the urge to collect as a function of a drive to express individual distinctiveness (analogous to the impetus for nations to express their collective distinctiveness), and thus argues that a collection can be seen as a set of clues about an individual personality. Baudrillard expresses both of these ideas concisely when he writes: “It is inevitably *oneself* that one collects” (1994: 12).

Like Forrester’s account of Freud’s collecting, the best of the studies of individual collectors, including Susan Stewart’s (1994) account of Charles Willson Peale and Stephen Bann’s (1994) of John Bargrave (and see also contributions to Shelton 2001a, b), take a broader approach, providing sensitive discussion of historical context as well as of the individual life, and of the specific lived realization of collective identity categories (for example, of gender or class), thus throwing light on more general aspects of collecting, while illustrating the rich mix of factors at work in the activities of any one collector.

“Ordinary” collecting

In addition to these studies of single individuals, a small number of studies has begun to address collecting by looking at a wider population. Surveys led by Russell Belk in the US and Susan Pearce in the UK, conducted in the 1980s and 1990s respectively, show that collecting is far from being the preserve of rare personalities (Belk 1995/2001; Pearce 1998). On the contrary, it is widespread, with around one-third of the adult population regarding themselves as engaged in it (Pearce 1998: 1). Moreover, rather than being an expression of the relatively unusual or esoteric, both Belk and Pearce show that collecting is linked to other, ordinary and everyday, practices and experiences: for example, of shopping or home-making, of being a member of a club or a circle of friends or a member of a family, and of particular life-stages. Both do so not only via their own original empirical material but also via wide-ranging discussions of other literature (see also Pearce 1995). In both cases, their analyses are multi-faceted, drawing on a range of theorizing, primarily sociological, though also some psychological, and seeking to show the mix of factors that may be involved in any particular case.

Belk, however, conceptualizes collecting particularly as a form of consumption and argues that collecting gives legitimacy to the emphasis placed upon consuming and upon material things in contemporary society. Moreover, he argues, the motives, skills, and experiences involved in collecting are in many ways those of other forms of “consumption writ large. It is a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods. It is a continuing quest for self completion in the marketplace. And it is a sustained faith that happiness lies only an acquisition away” (Belk 2001: 1). This leads him to highlight a range of notions bound up with collecting as a form of consumption, including possession as an index of success, the honing of skills of discrimination, the thrill of the hunt, and emotional complexes of pleasure and guilt involved in material acquisition. He also acknowledges, however, that collecting can sometimes act, as I have suggested above, as a kind of challenge to consumerism and materialism (2001: ix); and, as such, his account seems to support a characterization of collecting as a multivalent set of meaning and value-imbued object practices. This is a

perspective shared by Pearce, who regards collecting as a kind of language through which a whole range of meanings may be articulated.

Both Belk and Pearce discuss the expansion of popular collecting in the late twentieth century, but this is most extensively explored by one of Pearce's students, Paul Martin (1999), whose work included in-depth interviewing as well as participant-observation in popular collecting worlds – the collectors' clubs, societies, and fairs that mushroomed in the late twentieth century. On the basis of this, and drawing on Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Martin argues that collecting is a type of "masquerade" (1999: 23), a form of denial, providing solace in a time of increased anxiety. The rise in popular collecting in the late twentieth century is, he says, a reflection of social fragmentation; and he finds that collecting is particularly prevalent among those "who have traditionally felt themselves to be an integral part of society, but who have been increasingly disenfranchised or alienated from it" (1999: 9). Narratives by such collectors seem to suggest attempts to connect with past happier times in order to cope with the "uncertainties of the future" (1999: 9).

Martin's use of collectors' narratives – looking at the ways in which they talk about collecting and the things that they choose to relate it to – also represents a partial analytic shift from Pearce's main conceptualization of collecting as a linguistic system to be decoded through structural techniques (see especially Pearce 1995; and see chapter 2). A narrative approach to collecting, as argued for particularly by Mieke Bal (1994), puts its emphasis, by contrast, on process and the indeterminacy of meaning. This serves to unsettle some of the existing framings of collecting analyses (and, indeed, some of the problems of survey-based approaches). In particular, it highlights the fuzziness of the distinction between "when collecting begins to be collecting . . . [and] say, buying a thing or two" (Bal 1994: 100), as well as the elusiveness of motive, which may change according to its place in the narrative being told, and which needs itself to be understood as part of the telling rather than as an "objective" fact to be unearthed. A narrative approach also opens up the possibility of further exploring the kinds of stories that people may tell through and about objects, and how meanings, morals, and museums, as exemplars of a certain object-value-meaning complex, are implicated in them. These are areas to which future work in this field may be dedicated.

Reconfiguring Museum Collecting

All of the studies of popular collecting discussed in the previous section observe that during the late twentieth century "ordinary" collectors became involved in museums to a new extent, in particular by opportunities to have their possessions put on public display. A well-documented example is that of the "People's Shows" held in many museums in the UK between 1992 and 1996 (Pearce 1995, 1998). These entailed the temporary display of the collections of non-elite collectors, such collections typically being of mass-produced items – for example, beer-mats or sweet-wrappers – or in non-museological categories, such as "Do not disturb" signs, or items in the shape of frogs or tortoises (Lovatt 1997). There were similar shows elsewhere in Europe, North America, and beyond (Belk 2001). At the same time, established

museums themselves began to collect more mass-produced and everyday items, the Smithsonian, for example, acquiring a collection of airline sick-bags (Belk 2001: 147); and more museums opened based on non-elite collections, often of relatively everyday items, such as lawnmowers, pencils, or packaging.

Such developments are linked in part to the challenge to the idea of a canon discussed above, and in turn to both changing epistemologies and socio-economic restructurings, sometimes described as postmodern (see chapter 31). They are part of an increased claiming of the museum form, and existing museum space, by different groups; and of a changing museum-society relationship in which museums have come to be seen less as offering up preferred or superior culture and more as responsible for representing society in its diversity. Including the material culture of diverse groups and of everyday life is seen as a means of democratizing the museum, of showing its responsiveness to, and inclusion of, various possible constituencies. However, it only adds to the dilemmas discussed above of how to establish limits to potentially limitless collecting.

Some of these dilemmas have begun to be addressed through practical measures, such as the greater use of recording, especially 3-D imaging, and coordinating collecting across museums, producing greater specialization and less encyclopedism. They have also been addressed by other strategies, including reflecting on the process of collecting itself.

Reflecting on Collecting and Re-centering Objects

Exhibitions that specifically address the question of collecting, highlighting it as located cultural activity rather than assuming its inherent legitimacy, have been gathering pace since the 1970s (see also chapter 5). Such exhibitions may focus on the activities – and individual proclivities, as well as social backgrounds – of particular collectors, or make experimental interventions that raise questions about the status or categories of collecting (see Putnam 2001). They include the work of Fred Wilson, whose installations, as in his exhibit for the British Museum multi-sited exhibition *Collected* (1997), for example, raise questions about the impartiality and objectivity of collecting and display (Putnam 2001: 102); or the intervention of Mary Beard and John Henderson in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, in which they questioned the legitimacy of the museum contents, and how authenticity and value are bestowed, by such interventions as placing plastic Venuses bought from a store alongside the existing statuary and putting price tags onto the classical vases (Beard and Henderson 1994). In one gallery at the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen, the arbitrary nature of classification is highlighted by displaying objects alphabetically (fig. 6.1).

Alphabetical display also effectively puts more emphasis on the objects themselves rather than on the meaningfulness of their mode of ordering. This “re-centering” of the object is a paradoxical consequence of questioning the legitimacy of collecting rationales. Stephen Bann has suggested that of the many various new approaches evident in museums at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a new emphasis on “curiosity” is particularly indicative of challenges to earlier museum orthodoxy, and especially to historicism. He writes: “Curiosity has the



Figure 6.1 Case “Sp” in the alphabetical display of the North Gallery of Scottish Ethnography in the Marischal Museum, Aberdeen. The exhibition was devised by Charles Hunt and opened in 1990. For further details of the exhibition, see www.addn.ac.uk/virtualmuseum. Reproduced courtesy of the University of Aberdeen.

valuable role of signalling to us that the object on display is invariably a nexus of interrelated meanings – which may be quite discordant – rather than a staging post on a well trodden route through history” (Bann 2003: 120). Objects understood as curiosity, rather than as exemplars of an underlying system, exhibit what Bann calls “typological exuberance” (2003: 125), and draw attention to questions of their selection (by making this unclear or indeterminate) and to their possible multiple meanings and associations. By undercutting the rationale of the chronology or taxonomy, objects themselves come to the fore. *They* are the “nexus of meaning” rather than its illustration. As such, they can become the beginning point for analyses that trace links and cross boundaries in ways that defy more conventional approaches, as has been argued for the new material culture studies (Thomas 1991; Miller 1998) and illustrated particularly well in relation to memory (Kwint et al. 1999; Crane 2000).



Figure 6.2 A contemporary curiosity cabinet, containing anatomical specimens, models in plaster and wax, and a selection of fetuses, body parts, and bones, from the collections of the Humboldt University of Berlin; part of an exhibition entitled *Theater der Natur und Kunst: Wunderkammer des Wissens* (2000–2001). For further details of the exhibition see www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/kulturtechnik. Photograph © by Thomas Bruns.

Moreover, as curiosities, objects become more open to both apprehension through, and analysis in terms of, the sensory or existential (Bann 2003). In exhibitions of objects as curiosity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including those in which actual or surmised cabinets of curiosity and early museums are recreated, as well as those deploying curiosity as an organizing motif (fig. 6.2; see also chapters 16 and 18), there is a glorying in individual objects – even those not produced to be unique – and in the ultimate eclecticism of collecting.

Conclusion

Collecting is a set of distinctive – though also variable and changing – practices that not only produces knowledge about objects but also configures particular ways of

knowing and perceiving. It is a culturally recognized way of “doing” – or rehearsing – certain relations between things and people. Moreover, collecting produces and affirms identities and acts as morally charged commentary on other ways of dealing with both objects and persons.

This chapter has sought to highlight various kinds of museological collecting practices in order to illuminate some of the ways in which collecting may be implicated in according meaning and value to objects, not only in the museum but also beyond it (for example, in commodity consumption). Museum and individual collecting have been argued to be mutually entangled, not only literally, with individual collections sometimes entering or even forming the basis of museums, but also in more subtle and ramifying ways. Museums have promoted and legitimized individual collecting practices and have provided exemplars for them. Moreover, they have helped to define the potential value of objects and their salience for identity work, and have established a cultural model in which collected material performs individual distinctiveness.

Over the past two decades, there has been a considerable expansion of research on collecting, which has included many disciplines and approaches, and has been evident in developments such as the *Journal of the History of Collecting* (founded in 1989), as well as in works cited in this chapter and the works to which those in turn also refer. In recognition of this, it has been suggested that we are seeing the emergence of “a new field of enquiry, Collecting Studies” (Pearce 1998: 10). My argument here, however, is that collecting is fundamentally museological, whether the museum is directly involved or not. This is not to say that there was no collecting before the birth of museums, but that the museum inevitably infuses collecting thereafter. For this reason, rather than fragmenting into a separate area of collecting studies, it seems to me that the study of collecting – whether undertaken by a museum or not – is best carried out under the rubric of museum studies.

Studying collecting, however, also means expanding museum studies. The new forms of collecting and exhibiting discussed here – including focusing on the object and tracing its multifarious links, engaging in critical and reflexive questioning, and boundary-crossing – also seem to offer models for a museum studies that moves beyond the museum as a physical site and traces its entanglements, and its significance, across space and into other practices.

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