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Interpreting Objects and Collections

Edited by Susan M. Pearce



London and New York

The urge to collect

Susan M. Pearce

Forming a worthwhile definition of what makes a collection, and distinguishing it from other kinds of accumulation, is difficult, not least because all such definitions tend to be self-serving and circular, and so leave out much interesting material for reasons which do not bear much investigation (for example, many accumulations created by women fall outside the traditional view of what constitutes a collection). Nevertheless, definitions have been attempted, and some of the most important are given here. Some useful characteristics (rather than a new definition) of collecting arise in the course of discussion.

In a world of objects, different people will take different things into their hearts and minds, and so objects cross the threshold from the outside to the inwardness of collection. A number of definitions of what makes a collection have been attempted, and although definition-making is an arid affair at best, with each definition inevitably open to a variety of niggling objections based on specific examples, definitions are a useful way of gaining a perspective on the subject, both of itself and of the way in which it has been regarded. In 1932 Durost, one of the earliest students of collecting, offered:

A collection is basically determined by the nature of the *value* assigned to the objects, or ideas possessed. If the *predominant* value of an object or idea for the person possessing it is intrinsic, i.e., if it is valued primarily for use, or purpose, or aesthetically pleasing quality, or other value inherent in the object or accruing to it by whatever circumstances of custom, training, or habit, it is not a collection. If the predominant value is representative or representational, i.e., if said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, or objects, or ideas, such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class, then it is the subject of a collection.

(Durost 1932: 10)

This holds the valuable distinction between objects held for use, with a helpfully wide idea of what constitutes 'use', and objects held as part of a sequence: it is the idea of series or class which creates the notion of the collection. Probably Durost had in mind collections, like those of butterflies or cigarette cards, in which the notion of series is particularly clear, but in an extended form in which sequence is a largely subjective creation of the collector, the idea has a potentially wide application.

Alsop has offered a refreshingly simple approach. He says: 'To collect is to gather objects belonging to a particular category the collector happens to fancy . . . and a collection is what has been gathered' (Alsop 1982: 70). The stress here is laid on the mentality of the

collector, for essentially a collection is what he believes it is, provided there are at least some physical objects gathered together. This expresses the essentially subjective element in collecting very well. The late 1980s have produced two further efforts at definition. Aristides offers: 'collection . . . [is] "an obsession organized." One of the distinctions between possessing and collecting is that the latter implies order, system, perhaps completion. The pure collector's interest is not bounded by the intrinsic worth of the objects of his desire; whatever they cost, he must have them' (Aristides 1988: 330). This recognizes the subjective element in its use of the word 'obsession', and suggests that the crucial difference between 'possessing' and 'collecting' is the order and possibility of completion which collecting possesses. This is open to a number of objections: a group of working tools, for example, will have order and may be complete, but they do not hold the place in the imagination which a collection would occupy.

Belk and his colleagues have arrived at the following: 'We take collecting to be the selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings, or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute' (Belk *et al.* 1990: 8). This definition takes on board the idea of the interrelated set, Durost's series or class, and adds to it the notion that the collection as an entity is greater than the sum of its parts, an important contribution to the discussion. It brings in the actively selecting collector, with his personal or subjective slant on what he is doing, and it recognizes that collecting is a prolonged activity, extending through time. We might take issue with the unglossed use of the word 'active'. The study of collectors makes clear that collections can creep up on people unawares until the moment of realization: it suddenly dawns on a woman that the old clothes at the back of the wardrobe constitute an important group of Mary Quant or Carnaby Street dresses, which then in her mind becomes a collection to which she may actively add. Even more difficult to bring into Belk's and the other definitions are the collections of personalia or memorabilia: the little group of German helmet, bayonette, piece of shrapnel and shell case cigarette-lighter which represent somebody's memories of the Somme, or the lifetime's accumulation of an important figure like Thomas Hardy. Perhaps the real point is that a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms.

A good deal of ink has been spilt in the effort to pin down the difference between 'collecting' and 'accumulating' or 'hoarding'. Baudrillard suggests:

Le stade inférieur est celui de l'accumulation de matières: entassement de vieux papiers, stockage de nourriture – à mi-chemin entre l'introjection orale et la rétention anale – puis l'accumulation sérielle d'objets identiques. La collection, elle, émerge vers la culture . . . sans cesser de renvoyer les uns aux autres, ils incluent dans ce jeu une extériorité sociale, des relations humaines.

(Baudrillard 1968: 147–8)

Perhaps notions of anal retention should be taken with a dose of salts, but 'accumulating' is usually seen as the simple magpie act, the heaping-up of material without any kind of internal classification, often covered by some pretence at a utilitarian purpose. Belk quotes the case of a man in his seventies who had accumulated three garages full of miscellaneous possessions and was facing pressure from his family to begin to discard these things so that they were not faced with the burden of doing so after his death (Belk 1988: 13). Nevertheless, the line between collecting and accumulating is a very fine one, which individual groups of material can cross in each direction, depending upon the view taken by their owner at different points in his life. Motive is

all-important, and motives change. Hoarding is more difficult. In everyday use it means the gathering of material like Baudrillard's old papers or tins of food, sometimes carried to miserly excess, which comes within the accumulation mode just discussed. However, to archaeologists it means the deliberate gathering of selected materials for clearly social purposes, even if we do not know for certain what these purposes were: this kind of hoarding in ancient Europe is best regarded as an ancestor of modern collecting. The term is therefore liable to confusion and, except in relation to the ancient past, it will be avoided here.

From this discussion we glean that ideas like non-utilitarian gathering, an internal or intrinsic relationship between the things gathered – whether objectively 'classified' or not – and the subjective view of the owner are all significant attributes of a collection, together with the notion that a collection is more than the sum of its parts. At some point in the process the objects have to be deliberately viewed by their owner or potential owner as a collection, and this implies intentional selection, acquisition and disposal. It also means that some kind of specific value is set upon the group by its possessor, and with the recognition of value comes the giving of a part of self-identity. But collecting is too complex and too human an activity to be dealt with summarily by way of definitions.

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