Interpreting the Phenomenon of Collecting – Version II*

Some Brief Observations

Provisional definition: An iterative phenomenon of appropriation usually contained within a set of classes numbering from one to the open-ended (hoarding) with a commitment to such appropriation that is either occasional, episodic, or relatively permanent. (1)

Motivation: Difficult to pinpoint, but, as a phenomenon it seems to implicate some of the following, in different ways for different people, namely, status, distraction in the form of goal-seeking behaviour, reconstituting your personal environment, investment, preservation of the historic, nostalgia, inspiration, admiration, philosophical identification by means of an 'anchoring' in time through the apparent evocation of a period of time you either once were witness to or could not have been a witness to; as symbolized through the objects that were created in that period of time or reproduced in the styles of that era and culture, etc. On further reflection, and from helpful comments made to date, I would add connoisseurship and enjoyment gained from research, problem solving, discovering provenance, etc. In parallel to status, we also have the enjoyment of the hunt or chase, beating the competition at an auction or the finding of a much better piece with or without the assistance of a dealer, and so on. (2)

As an analogy or complex metaphor: being viewed on a 'genetic' basis as the possession of a recessive collecting gene in single or double recessive versions.[1] Not to be confused with the divestor gene (in its single and double forms) which may or may not co-occur with the former.[2] The double recessive version of the collector gene can be problematic for the individual afflicted, and those around them, but, a much more difficult combination, for all parties, is for the afflicted person to possess both collector and divestor genes.[3] A problem further accentuated in a relation-

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[1] I am making a humorous point that need not be taken too literally. On the other hand, humour has an uncanny way of focusing on the reality of the situation. Humour also has a 'point' that can also 'prick' and hurt and in exploring the attempt at being humorous we usually need to ask ourselves just how sharp is that point or points implied, and, who or what might be the target of that 'pointed stick', i.e., either the person telling the joke, the immediate audience of the joke and/or an implied third party, and/or an institution or some other potential party.

[2] An interesting observation that was pointed out to me was that perhaps dealers were a good representative of this phenomenon of being both collectors and divestors. My experience with dealers is that some are genuine collectors and can be reluctant to sell some of their collection but probably prefer to keep their better pieces. At the major auctions some of the best collections have been acquired by people who have used their passions to collect iconic pieces to the best of their ability both financially and as connoisseurs. On the other hand, some of the dealers in chasing a quick dollar are not as intensely aware of the 'true' value of their wares as an earnest collector might be, either over-estimating or under-estimating a deeper, more long-term sense of market worth.

[3] Taking a realistic position on this comic point I feel it is possible for people to possess both tendencies at the same time but not necessarily being expressed simultaneously. We could note that some people could be anxious and sad one day and some time later might be less anxious and euthymic. In mood disorders we find various types of overlapping between depression and mania with manic-depression and agitated-depressions, etc. (as well as sometimes overlapping with cognitive disorders [e.g., schizophrenia] and trans-cognitive or judgmental disorders [sociopathy]). Or, as another analogy, in the eating disorder of bulimia we find such sufferers observing periods of over-eating followed by purging and anorexia. Back to collecting, some people might unkindly compare this phenomenon to an obsessive-compulsive-like disorder. On the other hand, we have the phenomenon of minimalism being sold to the public in books preaching the virtues of downsizing (and obviously playing on a cultural anxiety about the possession of having too much 'stuff'). Without a doubt this is a strain of cultural thought that runs counter to both consumerism and materialism, and various motivations behind the complex phenomenon of collecting.

ship where the parties concerned individually or collectively possess a mix of both collector and divestor genres; especially if they are unable to resolve and accommodate such differences. (3)

A Mnemonic Device for the Serious Collector:

Aesthetic: Is reviewed as 'aesthetic'.
Authentic: Is what it presents itself as and/or as presented, be that either period or reproduction.
Iconic: Is essentially representative or indicative of an epoch, genre, artist or school of artists.[4]
Historic: Has provenance that can be determined in full or in part.
Classic: In its original condition plus age without (too much) damage/restoration.[5]
Artistic/Technologic: Displays a wonderful artistry and/or a well-integrated, complex crafting.
Economic: Is it being or can it be traded at a good proportion of a re-perceived market pricing.
I.e., beautiful, real, stylistic, history, condition, skill, and, hopefully, a 'bargain'.[6] (4)

I am suggesting, through the formulation of this mnemonic device, that a collector is going to invoke some elements on this list, and, for a desire to be systematic it could well be used to either confirm an acquisition, compare one possible acquisition with other, or, as a way of rejecting the possible making of an acquisition. In effect, making an appeal to the head more than the heart, or, rejecting a tendency to merely add one more bargain to a bevy of such items.

A reflection as a collector: Serious collectors are more inclined to collect the perceived 'holes' in their collection. Where a collecting field or 'set', is either limited or open-ended. (5)

To collect or not to collect? A collector has 'a foot in the door' so to speak through 'living with such objects', whereas, a non-collecting academic may well have the advantage of 'contact with the real' through the course of their research. For the collector, etc., both routes are advised.[7] (6)

Noël Tointon, Wentworth Falls, 3.9.20/10.9.20.

* This Second Version has been rewritten in the light of a number of helpful comments from Iain, Larry, and Josefa. The latest version of this text can be found posted:
www.homestead.com/noelshomepage/noelshomepage5.html

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[4] Some people feel 'representative' is a better word than 'iconic'. However, the mnemonic is structured on words ending in '-ic'. However, we need not read 'iconic' so much as 'like an icon' as more 'essentially representative' of an era, artist, school (of painting, e.g.), nationality or tribal identity, etc. In my experience, a collector would much rather prefer to buy an iconic piece rather than a less iconic piece, and, that this observation is often reflected in price, in turn, a reflection of demand. E.g., in a range of Chinese Ching wares in an auction or sale, recognizable scholar items are usually sold with a premium.

[5] I have finally settled on this expression 'classic' for a single expression indicating 'condition'. The word 'condition' might be preferred, but, I am thinking here of how objects brought to market in an untouched condition are sometimes better appreciated than those that are restored, rejuvenated, etc. That a piece showing its history, having some wear and tear, but, without too much damage, if at all, is often quite acceptable, especially in the field of furniture.

[6] An ideal list, but, more often than not, we have to compromise which can be very personal.

[7] Such reflections are a pandora's box of problems in the field of collecting. I am thinking here of the concerns a scholar in a museum might have with collecting similar things to their field of expertise. But, such concerns also extend to institutions collecting non-contemporaneous forms of production, etc. Even to the extent of having museums that have no acquisitions whatsoever, and, only have exhibitions of borrowed items, do research etc.