Interpreting Objects and Collections

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No two alike: play and aesthetics in collecting

Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel

This paper is a conceptual analysis of the elements of play and aesthetics in collecting. The main focus is on the process of collecting as a form of human experience among both children and adults. It draws on materials from popular literature on collecting as well as on interviews with about 165 adult and child collectors in Israel. The paper analyses the process by which objects become collectibles and the basic aesthetic principle that guides the construction of a collection. The central hypothesis of the paper is that collecting is a means to strive for a sense of closure, completion or perfection.

One of the most famous collectors in our time was the writer Vladimir Nabokov. A lifelong avid collector of butterflies, who published his findings in scientific journals, Nabokov began collecting as a young child growing up in a wealthy household in Russia. In his autobiography, Speak, Memory, he wrote:

"From the age of seven, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the moment was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender. The original event had been banal enough. On the honeysuckle, overhanging the carved back of a bench ... my guiding angel ... pointed out to me a rare visitor, a splendid, pale-yellow creature with black blistercles, blue crenels, and a cinnamon-eyed rim over each chrome-rimmed black tail. As it probed the inclined flower from which it hung, its powdery body slightly bent, it kept restlessly jerking its great wings and my desire for it was one of the most intense I have ever experienced."

(Nabokov 1969: 94)

Although few collectors are as eloquent as Nabokov about their passion, or as scholarly in their approach, collectors of all ages share his intense emotional involvement. In our work on collecting in Israel, we find that both children and adults are extremely eager to talk about their activities. Whatever people collect - and the range is truly remarkable, from stamps to key chains to empty soda cans, from pipes to old Dutch tiles to Chinese snuff bottles, from rare books to butterflies to Betricellis - collectors of all ages also share a distinctive pattern of experience.

ACADEMICS DISCOVER COLLECTING

Until very recently collecting was only rarely the subject of serious academic research. There is an abundance of novels, biographies and autobiographies about collectors and collecting, and several popular general treatments exist. There is also a huge number of handbooks and guides for different kinds of collectors. In contrast to all this popular literature, until the mid-1980s there was remarkably little academic research on collecting. Suddenly, in the latter half of this decade, there has been a spurt of publications in a number of academic disciplines, for example Belk (1982) and Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook and Roberts (1988) in consumer research; Stewart (1984) in the interface between folklore and literature; Dannefer (1980, 1981), Olmsted (1987a, 1987b), Fine (1987a, 1987b) and Moulin (1984) in sociology; Robinson (1987) in human development; MacLeod (1987) and Sainsel (1982) in art history; Clifford (1985, 1988), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1982, 1987), Moody (1985), Spooner (1988) and Thompson (1979) in anthropology; and Stocking (1985), Lummis (1988), and Impy and MacGregor (1988) in museum studies.

This proliferation of research on collecting is one expression of a new interest among many academics in material culture in modern society. When sociologists traditionally think of the concept of culture, for example, it is usually norms, values, behaviour patterns - what people carry around in their heads - that come to mind, not material objects. The pioneering work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) on the symbolic meanings of domestic objects in American middle-class homes has helped to put material culture on the agenda of contemporary social science. We concur with these authors that "to understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished and why, should become part of our knowledge of human beings." (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 1).

In contrast to all this new work on adult collecting, childhood collecting remains neglected. Of the above studies, only Mechling's pertains to childhood, focusing on collecting in the Boy Scouts. There was a passing flurry of interest in children's collecting in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century (Burk 1907; Whiteley 1929; Witry and Lehman 1930). Three more recent studies - Furby's (1976) work on the psychology of possession and ownership, Surron-Smith and Rosenberg's (1971) study of American children's game preferences, and an English study of 7-year-olds (Newson and Newson 1976) - treat collecting only secondarily at best.

PREVIEW OF THE PAPER

This paper aspires to add to the current intellectual ferment about collecting by elucidating two aspects not yet explored in the depth they deserve, the elements of play and aesthetics in the activities of collectors. Unlike virtually all those now writing about collecting, we shall treat both children and adults. The work this paper draws upon is based in Israel. We are studying adult and child collectors, mainly among urban Jewish Israelis. To illustrate various points, we will provide examples from our materials from interviews with approximately 85 adult and 80 child collectors.

Our approach is primarily qualitative and phenomenological. The goal of the research is to illuminate the nature of individual collectors' experiences. The data are gathered mainly through semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews and are supplemented with observations of auctions and collectors' clubs. The approach is comparative in that, unlike Dannefer's (1980, 1981) or Fine's (1987a, 1987b) studies of the worlds of old-car and mushroom-collecting, respectively, we focus not on a specific type of collectible but on collecting as a general phenomenon. In addition, our research deals specifically with the collecting of material objects. We suspend the conventional distinction between high and low culture; thus the collecting of corkscrews, hatpins and old Coca-Cola machines is of as
much interest to us as the collecting of fine paintings and sculpture. We are more interested in the experience and process of collecting than in the product—the collection.

The remainder of the paper will be divided into six sections. First, we analyse the elements of play in collecting. Next we discuss the processes by which objects become collectable. Third, we formulate a set of rules that constitute the collectable, and the construction of a collection. The fourth section develops the hypothesis that collecting, that collectors use to pursue closure. Finally, in the concluding section we offer some speculations on the significance of collecting as a cultural form.

COLLECTING AS PLAY

Like Stewart (1984), we view collecting as a form of play with classification. In its prototypical form it is voluntary activity, engaged in for its own sake (Huizinga 1955). It is a form of private leisure, outside the bounds of role obligations and the serious business of everyday life, in which the individual is free to develop an idealized or self-conceived world. In Caillois's (1977) terms, collecting provides a "flow" experience: there is a merging of action and awareness. Nabokov's experience of butterfly-collecting is an extreme example: the envy he experienced was nothing less than that houses also collect, they will be excluded from this paper since for these activities work, not leisure. While there are potentially addictive aspects of collecting, and collectors are sometimes obsessive about the objects of their devotion, our approach stresses the social definition of the activity as voluntary.

Context is another feature of play frequently discussed in the literature (e.g., Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1955). It is present in the competition among collectors for the best choice items. Similarly, there is tension in auctions when those interested in the same item attempt to outbid each other. An especially dramatic example of the tension is both works of art and a good deal of "junk." The sale took place in an atmosphere that can only be characterized as hysterical.

There is often competition among collectors as to who has the best collection of a given type. Collectors are also a means to demonstrate or claim high social status, and social distinction to the collector (cf. Baudean 1981; Bourdieu 1984). The pinnacle of achievement is to have one's collection displayed by a museum.

Like many forms of play, collecting is fraught with paradox. One of these paradoxes is the tension between rationality and passion. Dannefer (1980) showed that the two exist side by side in old-car collectors. In fact they exist in all collectors. Rationality is present, for example, in the careful assessments collectors make about price in relation to quality and rarity, in the analyses they carry out to test authenticity, and in the budgets they set for new acquisitions. It is also present in the attempt to create a collection as a means to an end, for instance, as means to gain status or make a good financial investment. At the same time there is much passion in collecting. Collectors fall in love with objects, cannot resist buying them when they see them, go to great lengths to hunt for them, devotedly care for them, wax rhapsodic when talking about them, and so forth

Still another feature of play is the presence of chance—in the outcomes of certain kinds of activity (Caillois 1961). If context is an expression of the skills and power of the actor, chance is the very opposite: outcomes are outside the control of the actor. It is a matter of chance what objects will be on view at a given flea market or auction, and who one's competitors will be.

As-freeness, or the element of make-believe or fantasy, is present in many aspects of collecting. Among adults, collecting toys—teddy-bears, dolls, miniature trains—is sometimes a way of rationalizing oneself back to childhood. Thus, an Arab Israeli university lecturer who collects erasers especially treasures one in the form of a lantern, just like the lantern his family used when he was a child and before his village had electricity. Fantasy is also involved in adult collecting of objects from an exotic culture, such as primitive art or Japanese sword fittings, the objects being a way of imagining oneself in another time and place. Among adult collectors we interviewed in Israel, as-freeness was especially prominent in a 30-year-old collector of Chinese snuff bottles who wears a genuine eighteenth-century Chinese dragon robe and accessories to the annual banquet of the International Society of Snuff Bottle Collectors. Some people collect real objects while others collect imaginary representations of objects. Thus, while Nabokov hunted real butterflies in the fields, the Viscountess Lambton created a total environment for herself in which not only her clothes but nearly every item in her home had a butterfly emblem on it (Johnston and Beddow 1986).

We found a similar phenomenon in the collection by an Israeli writer and retired diplomat of images of roosters. His roosters number 400 and fill not only the balcony but also the entrance hall and his study, creating a total environmental fantasy object.

As-freeness is also present in the tendency for collectors to personify the objects of their devotion. A collector of Biblical archaeological objects we interviewed, a Franciscan priest, spent years of walking in the desert with a group of tourists he was guiding, and when suddenly his eye caught sight of an object half buried in the sand; he continued walking, but in the end he had to go back because the object 'kept calling' him. Old teddy-bears have recently become fashionable collectables. According to a staff member of a London auction house, buyers are attracted to them because 'they look lonely.'

TYPES OF COLLECTABLES

Collecting always involves one or more of the five senses, and in our view is an effort to transcend the ephemerality of experience. At first glance it seems possible to make a sharp distinction between the ephemeralness of sensuous experiences and the durability of material objects. In fact, however, the physical durability of objects is also relative, as is eloquently put in Shelley's famous poem 'Ozymandias', about the ruined monumental sculpture of an ancient ruler. Only the trunkless legs remained standing. 'Round the decay/Of that colossal wretch, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.' Viewed metaphorically then, concern with the durability of objects is also concern for the ephemeralness of one's own existence.

Ephemeral experiences

Some people collect jokes, proverbs, tall tales. The recording of various genres of folklore necessarily involves one's sense of hearing and is meant to transcend the existential fact that sounds are inherently evanescent. By recording words, one keeps them from being forgotten.
Humphrey, an ethologist who has speculated about the possible biological roots of collecting (Humphrey 1984, chapters 9 and 11), recalled his own boyhood habit of standing on a railroad bridge to list numbers of trains as they went by (p. 143). Children sometimes do the same thing with licence numbers of automobiles. Birdwatchers collect sightings of birds. Stuffed specimens seen in natural history museums or even live ones seen in zoos don’t count in this context.

The classic Don Juan collects sexual experiences, each one with a different woman. Thus Tomas, the protagonist in Kundera’s (1984) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, seeks to collect the millionth part of every woman that is unique. The senses of taste and smell are central to connoisseurship in wine-tasting, cigar-smoking and gourmet eating. Visual aspects may also be important: the connoisseur of wines pays attention to colour, and the gourmet to the composition of aures and shapes on the plate. Mushroom-collecting resembles bird-watching in that its standard is important, but it is also a form of gastronomy since collectors eat their discoveries.

The sense of smell is central in the collecting and connoisseurship of incense and snuff. In medieval Japan the aristocracy cultivated the collecting and connoisseurship of incense (Earle 1986: 60). Eighteenth-century French men and women collected snuffs, which were valued for their provenance, much as the provenance of a painting contributes to its value. A certain Madame de Verrue had more than sixty containers of different snuffs (Rigby and Rigby 1944: 216).

Material objects, animate and inanimate

More durable collectables may be animate or inanimate, and if inanimate they may be objects from the natural world such as shells, rocks or manufactured artefacts such as sculptures or antique hardware. A zoo is a collection of animate and inanimate objects, of species. A cactus garden may bring together many types of cactuses from around the world, juxtaposing shapes and colours. The conservation of material objects is a concern of all types of collectors (cf. Dannenfield 1980). It is most paramount in the case of 'ephemera', defined as the manual for collectors as 'the transient and everyday items of paper — mostly printed — that are manufactured specifically to use and throw away' (Rickards 1978: 7).

Although the senses of sight and touch are probably the ones most often involved in the collecting of material objects, the other senses may be involved too. For example, Israeli children are interested in the smells of erasers, a popular collectable among them. Similarly, smell is important to collectors of soaps or perfume bottles, like 36-year-old Era, an Arab boy who proudly displays his soap collection. One type of soap in Era’s collection smells like chocolate; he keeps it wrapped in aluminium foil to preserve the smell.

THE RULES OF THE COLLECTING GAME

In everyday parlance, the terms 'saving', 'hoarding' and 'collecting' are sometimes used interchangeably, as when we say, 'I've collected a lot of clothes over the years; I really should give some away.' More precisely, the term for this activity is 'saving' — keeping that which one already possesses. In this paper the term 'collecting' is used more narrowly, to refer to a certain type of attitude of activity to collect is to set up an agenda for future action of oneself. Hoarding too is future-oriented, but while the hoarder is interested in quantity, the collector is interested in quality. Even though collectors are often interested in quantity too, the distinctive feature of their activities is their concern with making fine discriminations about items that may or may not enter the collection. Such discriminations are a product both of the general rules that define the collecting game and of individuals' evolving personal tastes.

We have formulated four general rules that constitute prototypical collecting activity: the Reframing rule, the Classification rule, Procedural rules and the Discrimination rule.

For an object to become part of a collection it has to be reframed as a collectible, that is, as a potential member of a category of objects that can be treated as aesthetic objects. Different cultures and eras may have different definitions as to what can become a collectible.

For an assemblage of objects to become a collection, they must be defined as belonging to a superordinate category. Subcategories may be recognized within the superordinate one.

For collecting to be a socially appropriate activity, collectors must create and follow procedures for cultivating the collection. These procedures relate to the ways in which new objects are acquired, the care and display of objects, and the place of collecting in individuals' lives. The over-passionate collector is considered crazy, sick, etc., whereas some minimal level of activity is required for a person to be considered a collector. 'An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to have' is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies — to make 'good' collections (Clifford 1988: 218).

For an assemblage of objects to be considered a collection, each item must be different from all others in some way discernible to the collector. We call this the Principle of No-Two-Alike. This principle, which is critical to collecting as an aesthetic experience, will be elaborated on in the next section.

COLLECTING AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Reframing the object

Collectables as aesthetic objects

To relate to an object or an experience as a collectable is to experience it aesthetically. There is a long tradition of analysis of the features of the aesthetic attitude (e.g., Bellough 1957, Kant 1914; Maquet 1986; Osborne 1970; Stoithitz 1960). Hoppers summarized three overlapping views of the nature of the aesthetic attitude as (a) non-practical, (b) non-cognitive, and (c) non-personal. The object is perceived for its own sake and not in order to pursue some goal by means of it; cognitive knowledge about the object is analytically distinct from immediate sensory experience of it; finally, the experience is disinterested — one experiences a portrait not as a picture resembling someone one knows but in terms of its formal characteristics (Hoppers 1969: 4–5).

From rubbish to collectables

It is a distinctive feature of contemporary collecting that many people collect recycled, formerly functional objects such as old telephones or Coca-Cola bottles. Following Malraux (1947, 1967) and Maquet (1986), we will speak of two types of aesthetic objects: those that are aesthetic objects by destination and those that become aesthetic objects by metamorphosis. Paintings and sculpture are aesthetic objects by destination — they
were made to be objects of aesthetic contemplation; Coca-Cola bottles and old tools were not.

Thompson (1979) distinguishes between three categories of objects: transients, rubbishes, and durables: symbolic, not physical durables. Transients are objects of utility whose value declines over time as a result of wear and tear or obsolescence. When they are no longer considered to be of value, objects are relegated to the rubbish heap. The process by which objects are rescued from the rubbish heap and promoted to the status of durables, objects of lasting value, is a social and symbolic one — only in small part dictated by the physical qualities of the object, or even not at all.

There is yet another category of symbolic durables, of relatively recent vintage and deserving of research in its own right: the production of commercial, mass-produced ‘instant collectibles’ like those made by the Franklin Mint in Pennsylvania such as figurines and miniature railroad cars. Mass advertising entices individuals to subscribe to receive entire sets of items over time and even to purchase the display stand specially made for the collection. Commercialization and manipulation of collectors exists in the world of stamps too. National postal services produce catalogues that specify which special stamps and commemorative envelopes are issued each year. Still another example is the recent craze among children in Israel the past year that distributors passed out free albums in schoolyards in order to stimulate motivation to buy.

Ironic reframing: the pursuit of ‘kitsch’

Collectors may play with the reframing process itself, as is true of the person who collects objects he or she regards as kitsch. Thus, he draws from his inner repertoire of visual experiences and from the rich history of kitsch to arrange his own collection in the manner of a ‘kitsch addict’. He may pursue items such as a pillow with the word ‘Mother’ embroidered on it or a pepper grinder in the form of the Eiffel tower. The uglier, the more grotesque, the more the author of the collection makes it the more the author of the collection makes it ironic.

Aesthetic distance and objective distance from necessity

Theorists who stress the importance of disinterestedness in aesthetic experience often use the phrase ‘aesthetic distance’ to characterize the orientation of the perceiver of the object (Kretzler & Kretzler 1972: 281–4). Bourdieu (1984) has taken this notion one step further by linking it to class relations and to freedom from economic necessity.

The aesthetic disposition, a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves.

Recontextualization

To treat an object as a collectable is to take it out of its natural or original context and to create a new context for it, that of the collector’s own life-space and the juxtaposition with other items in the collection. As Stewart (1984) has written,

The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art.

The principle of non-two-alike

Reframing and recontextualizing individual objects do not in themselves make an individual into a collector. A person may hang an African mask on the living-room wall or place an antique copper cooking-pot on the shelf, to be admired as aesthetic objects, and yet not be a collector. In addition to orienting oneself to objects aesthetically, there must be a more or less conscious decision of the individual to acquire many items belonging to the same general category, and far more important, to acquire many different items belonging to this category.

Same-but-different: how objects rhyme

No matter what their ages or what they collect, collectors, at least of material objects, are usually not interested in having two of anything. Duplicates are usually viewed as spares to trade or sell, or to have just in case the best exemplar becomes damaged and needs replacing. This tendency to seek out items that are the same-but-different is so basic to collecting that we highlight it by calling it the Principle of Non-Two-Alike. The items are ‘the same’ because the collector perceives them as belonging to the same linguistic or cultural superordinate category (e.g., stamps from Finland, African masks, Coca-Cola paraphernalia). At the same time, each item is in some way discernible to the collector as different from all the others. If the Coca-Cola collector concentrates on bottles, for example, he or she will want exemplars of all the shapes produced by different factories, in different countries, in both green and white glass, etc.

The occurrence of repetition, of sameness-in-difference, within the flow of ever-changing experience creates the illusion of beauty. In Kundera’s (1984) The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the chance recurrence of the number 6 in different situations becomes an integral part of the relationship between Tereza and Tomas, the protagonists: on the day they met, the church bells had chimed 6; on a later occasion bells chimed 6 just as he came to the door of their flat. So great was the impact of the coincidence on Tereza that ‘a sense of beauty . . . cured her of her depression and imbued her with a new will to live’ (Kundera 1984: 78).

Following the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1959), Humphrey has suggested that the paradigm for the experience of beauty in sameness-within-difference is rhyme. Just as a poem rhymes, so objects may rhyme:

Consider the nature of a typical collection, say a stamp collection. Postage stamps are, in structuralist terms, like man-made flowers: they are divisible into ‘species’, of which the distinctive feature is the country of origin, while within each species there exists tantalizing variation. The stamp-collector sets to work to classify them. He arranges his stamp in an album, a page for the species of each country. The stamps on each page rhyme with each other, and contrast with those on other pages.

Humphrey (1984: 132)

It should be evident that this preference for sameness-in-difference is a case of the more general aesthetic principle of unity-in-diversity (Gombrich 1984).10
Collecting and classifying objects and experiences is a source of joy to both children and adults. In children this sense of joy is fresh and spontaneous. Witness the poem written by 9-year-old Dana from Haifa who, like many Israeli girls of her age, collects erasers:

I collect erasers
All kinds of kinds
All kinds of colors
I have lost of erasers,
Each one is different;
One is round and one is square,
One is purple and one is pink,
I have many erasers and each one is different.

Asked whether they sometimes think that collecting is silly or crazy, our child interviewees retort, 'Don't be ridiculous! Collecting is marvellous! It's beautiful! It's fun!' While in adults this simple pleasure in classification often becomes intertwined with many other satisfactions and preoccupations, and may appear buried under layers of sophistication, it is invariably present in them too. At the same time, for many adults there is often a good deal of ambivalence about collecting. Although the snuff-bottle collector mentioned earlier thinks collecting is 'marvellous', quite a few other adults we interviewed spoke of it, metaphorically, as 'a disease', or 'a madness'.

Exceptions apparent of real?

There are some apparent exceptions to this general tendency to seek out items that are the same-but-different. For example, a collector of salt and pepper shakers we interviewed buys them two at a time, virtually identical items of the same shape and style. In this case the pair, the set, is the collectible, not the individual salt or pepper shaker. Also among our interviewees, a pipe-collector was observed to own two identical enamel opium pipes from Iran. However, he displayed them with different groups of pipes in different rooms. If an item is particularly rare and fine, a collector might take special pride in owning and displaying two exemplars even if he or she doesn't particularly think of them as a set. As for the phenomenon of buying a sheet of stamps that are all alike, here, we would argue, one should think of the sheet as the collectable, and not the individual stamp. The more important trading is to collectors, the more likely they will keep a separate large stock of spares.

Dominance and aesthetics in collecting

In a fascinating analysis of the interrelations between dominance and affection, Tuan (1984) showed that the imposition of one's will is subtle, and sometimes not so subtly, present in a wide range of aesthetic and play phenomena, from the creation of gardens to the domestication of pets. Viewed through Tuan's lens, collecting is not an innocent activity. Collections are like pets: objects of affection; they are also objects of domination and control. It is not surprising that most collectables are animate objects. It is easier to dominate an animate object such as an antique typewriter than a living organism such as a plant; plants grow, change shape, die.

Collectors are in fact quite open about the centrality of control to their activities. Thus, when asked why owning objects was preferable to seeing them in a museum, a stamp-collector physicist stated, 'It's mine [the collection]. I can do with it what I want. I can arrange it in the album the way I want. I can display it in exhibits.' Ownership is also essential for another reason: the sensuous aspects of collecting - handling, touching, playing with, caring for the collection - are made possible by it. According to one woman collector of Judaica, 'the most important thing is that you are able to handle it, because once it's in the museum you can't - this way you can take it and feel it and look at it.'

Ownership of material objects is also a prerequisite for the sense of accomplishment that is one of the satisfactions of collecting. When asked 'What is the fun in collecting? Why do you like it?' quite a few children replied that they like to look at the collection and to think, 'Gee, I did all that! I collected all those coins [or erasers, or whatever].'

The theme of dominance is also reflected in the rules collectors have as to who may touch the collection. Nearly every child we interviewed specified some limitation, for example, 'Only my parents, not my brother, because he's little and might break things' or 'Anyone can look at them, but only I can take them out of the drawer'. An extreme illustration of the same point is the behaviour of an adult collector of Judaica - in his case spice-boxes used in the service to conclude the Sabbath. Not the collector himself, but a friend of the family whom we also happened to interview, revealed that he keeps his collection of about 400 spice-boxes locked in a special room in his home, and even his wife may not enter!

The preoccupation of many collectors with owning rare or unique items may also be an expression of a desire to dominate. Stewart recounts an often retold story of a book collector who paid another collector a huge sum of money for a book, only to throw it into the fire, just so he could be sure that his was the only copy in existence (Stewart 1984: 160). Since owning unique items is seldom feasible except for art objects, collectors often make do with rare ones. Even young children value rarity; young Avigail, a 10-year-old stamp-collector, was so proud of her rare stamp from Hitler's era in Germany that she mentioned it again and again. Feelings of dominance may be mixed with the sense of social distinction that comes from owning something unique.

STRIVING FOR CLOSURE

As for the aesthetic dimension of collecting, the central hypothesis of this paper is that the attractions of collecting have to do with the possibilities they offer for the pursuit of a sense of closure. Closure in turn has to do with tension and tension reduction.

Tension and tension release in collecting

In a synthesis of four main theories of the psychology of art, psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, information theory and behaviourism, Kreitner and Kreitner (1972) highlighted the role of tension and tension release in the experience of art. Tension and tension release are important in collecting too; collectors intentionally create an agenda for the production of, and reduction of, manageable tension. Our materials strongly suggest that collectors toy with, pursue, aspire to, and sometimes actually manage to create a sense of closure, completion, perfection. As Gombrich has written, we must ultimately be able to account for the most basic fact of aesthetic experience, the fact that delight lies somewhere between boredom and confusion, if monotony makes it difficult to attend, a surfeit of novelty will overload the system and cause us to give up... It is different with hierarchies which we can master and reconstruct. The very ease of reconstruction allows us to go on and enjoy that unity in complexity that has always appealed to pavers and other pattern-makers.
Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel

If the relatively passive taking-in of pattern in decorative art is pleasing, then the active construction of pattern, of sameness-in-diversity, of a kind chosen by the collector, must be at least as pleasing.

Drawing on the gestalt theory of perception as well as writings on music and language, Herrnstein-Smith analysed the rhetorical devices that poets use to convey a sense of 'Alien' when a thematic connection or opposition is to some degree reinforced by syntactic correspondence and formal repetition, the linguistic structure so formed appears "Look before you leap" from the flatness of 'Look before you jump' is simply the sense of closure.

Herrnstein-Smith goes beyond Hopkins (1959) and Humphrey (1984) by suggesting that just as poets may strive towards closure via language, collectors strive about this. When asked about the satisfactions of collecting, she replied, 'There is much the aesthetic aspect.'

Five ways to create a sense of closure

We have identified five types of strategies that collectors can use to work at producing a sense of closure. They are listed in Table 28.1. Note that the various strategies are pertinent to features of individual objects.

Completing a series or set

The first strategy is to strive towards completing a series or set. Even very young children can articulate their interest in completing series; virtually all the stamp- and coin-collectors we interviewed, both children and adults, told us this is something that interests them, usually very much. But why this fascination with series among collectors? In Stewart's words: "To play with series is to play with the fire of infinity." (1984: 159).

The need for closure no doubt varies with the personality of the individual. It may be that those with a particularly strong need for closure will choose types of collectables that have been attracted to stamps, one stamp-collector we interviewed replied, 'because you closure might choose instead to collect, say, scissors or thimbles - collectables that do not come in ready-made series.

A variation of this strategy is to aspire to acquire all of something. Thus a record-collector we interviewed set as a goal the acquiring of all recorded performances of a given sports stamp, and therefore I will acquire every stamp in this area of all editions ever published of, say, Alice in Wonderland would be another example.

Table 28.1 Strategies to pursue closure/completion/perfection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing a series or set</td>
<td>Completing a series of stamps acquired all editions ever published of a book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembling exemplars of subcategories</td>
<td>Collecting examples of pipes made by different manufacturers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting together items that 'go together'</td>
<td>Furnishing a room with country furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filling a space</td>
<td>Filling a wall with a displayed collection of plates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a visually pleasing, harmonious display</td>
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The Armand Hammer collection of Honoré Daumier's drawings, lithographs and bronzes shown in 1987 at the Israel Museum includes 'all Daumier's known lithographs and woodcuts, not counting the duplicates' (Ronnen 1987: 12) - some 4,000 works!

Sometimes collectors choose to pursue only selected subcategories out of a range of possible ones. Thus a woman collector of ceramic plates in our study collects only handmade pottery and porcelain. A pipe-collector also chose this strategy, aspiring to have examples of the products of certain factories. Another variation is simply to assemble items that the collector perceives as going together in some fashion, for instance furnishing a room with pieces that all belong to the general category of country furniture, though they constitute neither a set nor exemplars of a fixed set of subcategories. Along the same lines, a collector of antique jewellery we interviewed creates what she calls suites. Say she has bought an antique coral necklace and earrings; she will then hunt for a ring, pin and bracelet to match the exact colour, texture, quality and style of work. In contrast to coin or stamp series, here the items were never intended by their makers as a series, it is the collector who has created the series.

Filling the space

A second, simple strategy is to identify a space as needing to be filled and trying to fill it, whether a page in a stamp album or the entire album, a shelf or a space on the wall.
Among the children we interviewed, Dorit, a young collector of stickers, was eager to fill the doors of her wardrobe with stickers. Similarly, an 8-year-old girl who collects stamps likes to paste many examples of the same stamp on a page. Better socialized stamp-collectors would smile at her behaviour; they would say she does not know how to collect stamps. Interest in filling the space is present in adults too. The collection of ceramic plates just mentioned fills an entire wall in the collector's dining-room. And the rossette collector described earlier fills a three-dimensional space. A biologist collector of antique travel books on the Holy Land and spoke of how much he enjoys sitting opposite his now-filled shelves and 'taking in' how his collection fills them.

Creating a visually pleasing, harmonious display

Many collectors are interested in creating pleasing displays of their collections. Under what conditions does display become important to collectors? There is at least preliminary evidence that it may be a more important concern in the West than in the Far East (Altoe 1983: 104-5; Clifford 1988).

Display is a prominent theme in many of our Israeli interviews. Our plate-collector put great stress on the importance of creating a harmonious pattern on the wall. In choosing what to put where, she seeks to mix smaller and larger ones, to contrast colours and designs, and to leave spaces in between them that are 'not too big and not too small'. And a collector of earrings took great pains to arrange her collection on three triangular shelves hung on her bedroom wall, with the various earrings arranged not in pairs but apart though symmetrically hung at opposite sides of the shelf.

Concern for creating visual pattern is particularly prominent in the collection of Islamic copperware being run as a hobby by an executive in his 50s whom we interviewed. The collection is displayed on specially designed Perspex shelves.

Manipulating the scale of objects

One way to work towards closure is to manipulate the scale of objects (Strategy 4 in Table 28.1). This strategy is intermediate between those stressing relations between items and those focusing on the individual object, because some aspects of both are involved. There is probably the hint of an answer here to the intriguing question of why people are so often attracted to miniature objects. If one thinks about it, a good many collectables are in fact very small. In part of course, this is a matter of logistics, of having room in one's home to store them. Collectors also appreciate the virtuous of the producers of tiny objects. Japanese netsuke for example, once used as toggles or counterweights to hold tobacco pouches and medicine cases to the belts of Japanese men, are now prized as fine miniature sculptures.

But there is another reason for the fascination of dolls' houses and their accessories, of thimbles, netsuke, Chinese snuff bottles, tin soldiers, keys and other such small collectables: they facilitate the creation and perception of a small, coherent world. Smallness facilitates taking in the whole gestalt all at once. 'There are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product, the produce of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to the physical world' (Stewart 1984: 53).

So popular is the idea of collecting and displaying miniatures today, among both children and adults, that commercially produced cabinets simulating printers' boxes are widely available for this purpose. It is also pertinent that a miniature world is a more perfect world; the smallest objects visible to the naked eye in life-size objects are no longer visible. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1982, 1987) has noted the special interest of elderly people in miniatures: the easily grasped gestalt they have created helps to give them a sense of transcendent wholeness and unity, which is especially meaningful as death approaches.

Collecting objects that are very large can also, paradoxically, facilitate a sense of closure, this time by providing an entire frame within which the collector can transport himself or herself into a different world. Dannefer observed this in his vintage car-collectors for financial and logistic reasons they may have only one car, but one is enough to slip into the 1920s or 1930s. To compensate for what they don't have in their 'stable', some of these car-collectors also collect miniature models (Dannefer 1980).

Striving for perfect objects

A fifth strategy towards closure is to include only perfect objects. One can strive either for physical or for formal/esthetic perfection, or for both. Thus, child stamp-collectors are taught by their parents and older siblings that one should collect only stamps whose teeth are intact and which are free of rust. The correct number of teeth is also considered to be important. Similarly, 'To bring top dollar, [beer] cans usually have to be clean, dent free, and have no major scratches or rust' (Hughes 1984: 107). And the most desirable trade cards (commercial cards to advertise products and services, produced in the years 1870-1900 in the US) 'are crisp, clean, and free from any crease marks, tears, or creases' (Hughes 1984: 103-4).

One variation on the preoccupation with the physical condition of objects is the interest in restoring them to mint condition. In an adult education class on collecting observed by Katriel, the class was taught that if there is something physically wrong with an object, its value goes down. The teacher was not just informing prospective buyers about criteria of value, enabling them to avoid being cheated; they were also being socialized to the idea that whole or perfect objects are to be valued over blemished ones. In Dannefer's research on vintage car-collectors, he concluded that the process of restoration is the most valued aspect of the world of cars. 'There is ambivalence about finishing the job, not only because peers may find fault with the work, but also because the car will never be this good again' (Dannefer 1980: 403).

Quite a few of our Israeli collectors are involved in activities that maintain and preserve items, dusting, cleaning, and so on. Thus a collector of Haggadahs airs out the collection once a few months, dusts it, repairs tears, and, if necessary brings especially antianstudent ones in for professional conservation. Restoration and conservation are a way of seeking closure by turning back the hands of the clock so that the inexorable process of decay will be slowed down at least to some degree.

The pursuit of aesthetically perfect, formally beautiful objects is another course to take. Collectors of painting and sculpture typically come to mind here. They strive to become connoisseurs of their chosen objects, to be able to make very fine discriminations about the merits of individual objects and therefore are highly selective as to which items may enter the collection.

Systematicity, so prominent in stamp- and coin-collectors, can at the same time go with connoisseurship of individual objects. Consider a record-collector, a lawyer and recent immigrant to Israel from the United States, who aspires to own a recording of every performance ever recorded of a Mozart piano concerto. By listening to many different interpretations, he has taught himself to make very fine discriminations and to develop reasoned opinions as to what constitutes the best interpretation.

Another variation on the theme of striving for perfect objects is to improve the physical or aesthetic quality of what one has. Thus a stamp-collector might replace a slightly rusted...
Man desires above all a predictable and ordered world... and this is the motivation behind the role of the scientist. But because man desires such a world so passionately, he is very much inclined to ignore anything that intimates that he does not have it. Only in protected situations, characterized by high walls of psychic insulation, can he afford to let himself be aware of the disparity between his interests... and the data his interaction with the environment actually produces.

(Peckham 1967: 313)

Like art, we believe collecting is a sheltered way of confronting chaos and the ephemerality of human existence.

COLLECTING AS A CULTURAL FORM

Like any complex form of human activity, collecting has many meanings, both at the level of the individual and of the wider culture. An important question is, in what ways does contemporary collecting reflect themes specific to modern and postmodern society, and in what ways is its significance universal? Is it primarily an expression of late capitalism, bureaucracy and the consumer society? Of surplus income, fragmentation, isolation and powerlessness of the individual? Or is it best understood as a continuation of the western drive that flowered in the Renaissance to explore, classify, make order in the physical world, to appropriate and domesticate the alien 'other' (Clifford 1985, 1988)?

At least some types of contemporary collecting reflect feelings of nostalgia for earlier times. Davis (1977) has suggested that such feelings flourish when there is discontent with the present, which is experienced as bleak, unsatisfying or even frightening. The nostalgia wave of the 1960s and 1970s is not, in the United States and Britain has had its impact on collecting too. In a world in which an old teddy-bear can command the price of £5.000 and the going price for a 1950s jukebox is $3.850, collectors cannot be viewed simply as pure aesthetic objects. We need to develop sophisticated ways of analysing the cultural meanings that such objects carry.

As the above suggests, a distinction should be made between the meanings of the activity of collecting and of the objects collected. In this paper we have not been able to consider in any significant way the significance of the objects collected. One question is, to what extent has the legitimation of the collecting of recycled objects—twentieth-century collectables par excellence—come from developments in avant-garde art? Is there a relationship between the collecting of beer cans and comic books and Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades'—objects taken from everyday life and transformed into art objects— and Pop art images such as Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans (cf. Crane 1987, Lippard 1985)? A proper understanding of collecting as a cultural activity must take into account its place and shape within the wider contemporary aesthetic scene, particularly the commodification and democratization of art.

Just as mechanical reproduction eroded the aura of the original work of art (Benjamin 1969b), so too has it an important impact on collecting. Collectors of paintings and sculpture continue to be interested in the authenticity of unique objects in the traditional sense. However, many of those who collect mass-produced, typically recycled objects are now unconcerned with the genuineness not of unique objects but of exemplars. For this reason vintage car-collectors prefer 'old old' parts, rather than 'new old' ones, that is, parts manufactured at the same time as the original car rather than virtually
identical but recently manufactured replacement parts for antique cars (Dannefer 1980). The larger question for the cultural analyst is why collectors are preoccupied with authenticity.

The above discussion pertains primarily to the significance of collecting as a late-twentieth-century activity. Alongside the time-bound aspects there remains the more fundamental question of its universal significance. In our opinion, it is the contemplative form, and perhaps in all ages since it first blossomed about 3,000 years ago (Alsop 1982; Bazin 1967), collecting is an aesthetic activity that gives expression to the universal experience of the ephemeral moments of human existence. As Rochberg-Halton has written,

We are mysterious creatures who mark our time on earth through tangible remnants. We transform time itself, as it were, into tangible space through our makings and doings, personalizing our environment while objectifying ourselves. In our own time it might be said that things themselves have got the better of us, dominating our lives with their claim that buying and selling is the ultimate goal of existence. Yet in this economic age of possession, it remains possible, and indeed all the more essential, to reclaim significance from our surroundings. As Jorge Luis Borges has said, 'Time is the one essential mystery', and 'Our task is to turn memory into beauty.'

(Rochberg-Halton 1986: 188)


REFERENCES


2 In addition to Nasbukov (1969), see Benjamin's essay, 'Unpacking my Library' (Benjamin 1969a); Hailatz (1937); Guggenheim (1980); Rietveld (1980); Getty (Le Vane and Getty 1953); Templeton (1952); and Frieze (1959). Biographies of art collectors also abound: see Pollock (1952); Saarinen (1958); Sisow (1981); Charter (1982).

3 See Hogarth and Hogarth (1944); Taylor (1948); Alsop (1982); Julian (1967); Rietveld (1961, 1967).

4 A orthodox Freudian approach would focus on the concepts of anal character, obsession and compulsions for more on psychoanalytic approaches, see Freud (1962); Fodor and Gaynor (1950); Bauleus Grinnell (1968). For a thorough discussion of addictive aspects of collecting, see Wallendorf (1988).

5 See McGuigan (1988); Greenspan (1988); Klayman (1988). Sotheby's contributed to this hysteria by issuing a pricey 95K boxed set of six catalogues for the sale, obviously intended itself as an instant collectable, by holding black-tie viewings of the objects before the sales and by making the sale into a media event. This extreme case illustrates how the element of context in collecting can be manipulated in a symbiotic relationship between the media, dealers and auction houses.

6 Interview with Anna Marrett, Collectors Department, Phillips Fine Arts and Antiques Auctioneers, London, March 1988. Dannefer adds that vintage car collectors often keep pictures of their cars in their wallets, along with photos of their families (Dannefer 1980).

7 Personal communication from Patricia C. Barry of the University of North Carolina, a veteran watchmaker.

8 Perhaps no society has made such a cult of experiencing the ephemeral as has Japan. Keene (1981) identified four basic principles in Japanese aesthetics, one of which is perishability. 'Their favourite flower is . . . the cherry blossom, precisely because the period of blossoming is so poignantly brief. . . . Plum blossoms look much the same . . . but they are less highly prized because they linger so long over the time' (p. 14).

9 This is a very unusual collection for an Israeli boy. The most popular collections among boys are stamps, coins and keyrings. Girls tend to collect table napkins, stationery and erasers, but also perfume bottles and soaps. Strong sex-typing is very much in evidence.

No two alike: play and aesthetics in collecting

With respect to more ephemeral experiences, the Principle of No-Two-Allike is apparently relaxed. Thus, a connoisseur of wine will buy a whole case of Vino e Spumante, with no two alike: play and aesthetics in collecting.

we can conclude that while wine connoisseurs generally pursue the notion of the dissimilar, bird watchers focus on the similar. Even in the case where both groups might look for dissimilarities, for example in the case of exotic birds or rare types of fish, we can conclude that while wine connoisseurs generally pursue the notion of the dissimilar, bird watchers focus on the similar. Even in the case where both groups might look for dissimilarities, for example in the case of exotic birds or rare types of fish, we can conclude that while wine connoisseurs generally pursue the notion of the dissimilar, bird watchers focus on the similar.

On the pursuit of completion in collecting, see also Belk et al. (1983).

10 See, for example, Barker and Smith (1976).

11 The Magadha is the University of Passover Seder. Many editions of it have been produced over the centuries.

12 Stewart (1984) has suggested that collecting containers of various kinds (e.g., pots, vases, teapots, boxes, vases, and Sévres), not to mention the auction in Phillips Fine Five thousand pounds sterling was the top price a ready-bone of certain objects. In an interview with Anna Marrett, Collectors and Antiques Auctioneers, London, March 1988, the price of $3,380 for a 1940s vintage car was reported in a June 1988 issue of The New York Times. Phillips sported in part the recent Los Angeles area of Melrose Avenue in April 1988.

A collectables shop in the trendy Los Angeles area of Melrose Avenue in April 1988.

NOTES


2 In addition to Nasbukov (1969), see Benjamin's essay, 'Unpacking my Library' (Benjamin 1969a); Hailatz (1937); Guggenheim (1980); Rietveld (1980); Getty (Le Vane and Getty 1953); Templeton (1952); and Frieze (1959). Biographies of art collectors also abound: see Pollock (1952); Saarinen (1958); Sisow (1981); Charter (1982).

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