The art of collecting

by E.V. Thaw

When asked to say something about “collecting,” the first thought that enters my mind is a negative one: it is not “accumulating.” And a second negative: it is not “investing.” What then, stated positively, is collecting? It is acquiring objects that have some relation to each other and putting those objects into the kind of order that reflects the collector’s response to them. Each true collection achieves a personality beyond and apart from the sum of the objects. This personality is definable and has a value in itself. It is lost if the collection is dispersed or mutilated.[1]

All the above is true, I believe, of collections of baseball cards, beetles and butterflies, stamps and coins, and many other categories of collecting and ordering, but true only peripherally. It is the category of art collecting that concerns me here, and this is the category in which what I call “personality” is most apparent and, somehow, central. I include decorative arts. The fine and the decorative arts are also most vulnerable to the accusation of appearing to be mere accumulations where the ordering function is absent or minimal. This can be noted in private collections as well as museums. True collections are never only an assembly of accidents or lucky finds, although individual pieces or sections may be so characterized.

The true art collector must have some initial instinct and preference for the field chosen. But, while instinct and taste are crucial, so is scholarship. Studying books, visiting other collections, consulting experts, learning about condition and conservation, and, generally, developing experience and expertise are also crucial aspects of the intelligent collecting of art.

All of this sounds so virtuous, so boring. What about the late John Gere, a curator at the British Museum, who collected plein air oil sketches? He is reported to have rushed away to a dealer’s office in London to buy a rare sketch that his fiancée Charlotte had spotted for herself. [2]

What about that late genius of collecting, Norton Simon, who seemed to get as much pleasure from outwitting the dealers and auctioneers as from the art itself? He would often not buy until he showed the painting to his butler, his cook, his chauffeur, or other laymen to test its “popularity quotient.”
W hen Plato insists that the search for Beauty is allied to the pursuit of the Good, he clearly had no premonition of the art market of the last hundred years or so. The phrase *he would sell his mother to obtain that picture* has been heard in all its variations so often that the thought of collecting as a compulsion rather than as a purely rational activity certainly occurs to one. Where collecting becomes contaminated by *investing*, the objects purchased for the primary purpose of sooner or later being resold at a profit, then the *personality* of the assemblage is nonexistent and the sense of order among the objects is similar to the exhibitions mounted before an auction sale. Of course, good collections, with plenty of order and personality, are sometimes dispersed at auction, their catalogues, often well produced by the auction houses, serving as a similar kind of memorial to the collector’s taste and skill as a museum catalogue. More often, however, an auction bearing a great collector’s name is only a fragment of the whole, what remained at death or after a change of interests, or after numerous masterworks had been donated, sold, given to children, or otherwise removed from the core.

I have observed, over the years, that collectors form a kind of loose confraternity. We all tend to know one another within our geographical limits and, although we compete sometimes, we tend to support and encourage each other emotionally. We are happy when a fellow collector makes a great discovery or a great buy and have very little *schadenfreude* when he or she buys a mistake. There are many lavish apartments and houses with good paintings in New York along Park and Fifth Avenues and in the best suburbs of Dallas, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but very few real collections as I am using the term. Someone who stops acquiring Monets or Picassos when the house is decorated is not a collector, by definition.

So is it a mania, then, that makes one continue to add, to refine, to put in order a collection of works of art? Are the dreadful Freudians right, after all, that collectors must have had unhappy childhoods? That they cling to possessions like an unloved child clinging to fuzzy toys as a substitute for maternal affection? Does the retentive habit follow through one’s life because of poor toilet training?

These traits and these explanations are offered in a recent book on collecting by the well-known Freudian analyst (and collector) Dr. Werner Muensterberger. It was published by Princeton University Press,[3] so it must have passed expert readers who did not consider such ideas complete nonsense. Yet, nonsense they are, and Muensterberger’s examples of so-called collectors feature Balzac, who bankrupted himself by filling his Paris *hôtel particulier* with carloads of meretricious decorative junk, and the nineteenth-century book collector Sir Thomas Phillipps. He was the paradigm type of *accumulator*, buying enormous quantities of books and manuscripts from catalogues of booksellers and auctions. He hardly ever saw his purchases, the unopened packages piling up in his several residences, only to be revealed after his death in a long series of book auctions from which many of today’s major libraries trace some of their greatest treasures. Phillipps, however, in his behavior to his wife and family as well as to the world around him, was certifiably insane.
I am not competent to demolish the Freudian put-downs of our humanity, and I believe much of that work has by now been done by competent others. Nevertheless, as a collector myself for nearly fifty years, I can admit that some compulsion plays a role and that sometimes the urge is hard to control. Certainly, then, there is a psychological factor, sometimes called a ‘passion.’ But what is wrong with a passion to collect? How about the passion to breed racehorses and win the Kentucky Derby? Or for building one great yacht after another to win the America’s Cup? It has been said that rather than being critical of the affluent who spend large sums to acquire works of art, one should be critical if they didn’t.

Not everyone who can afford to collect likes or understands works of art. Not everyone who likes and understands them wants particularly to possess them. There are, after all, more than enough on public display in museums and commercial galleries to satisfy most people’s tastes and desires for aesthetic experience. That some of us must physically possess some of these art objects has, I believe, one significant cause. By possession one is able to experience the object more intimately and more completely than even the most thoroughly attentive viewing at an exhibition. Also, concentrating on the original work over illustrations in art books, computer images, or the projected slides of university art lecturers is a kind of cultural rebuke to the trend of our times not to care about the unique impact of originals, but to look for economic, political, gender, or other issues for which reproductions are all that is needed. I used to host a session of the Museum Course at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts every year when I was dealing in art. I was continually saddened by the lack of interest in the major old master paintings I would pull out of my closets and display on a lighted easel. Some graduate students might be interested in the back of the painting to notice labels or the type of relining, but most were immobilized by such proximity to an original master painting and could only mutter some clichés about the price or the social conditions and patronage that underlay its production. No analysis or enjoyment of the painting itself. No budding art collectors there.

Of course there are economic concerns which the most passionate and serious collector needs to be aware of. Nothing concentrates the mind like the need to write a large check for an object to take home and add to an ensemble which has long proven its quality and resonance. Will the newcomer hold up in its place and under severe scrutiny? Does it fill a gap or does it refine the intelligent order of the assemblage? By all this I mean that collecting consists of many rational decisions and is an intellectual activity in spite of factors such as instinct, taste, passion, and other such concepts. We are not animals, nor are we deprived children shouting ‘mine, all mine’ at an exhibition of art for sale, but rational beings making careful choices and carefully examining our instinctive reactions so as not to let them seize control.

Real art collectors often feel the ability to apply their talents to any field of art. The late Jacques Gelman[4] once told me that, should the supply of the kind of great modern paintings he collected dry up, he would collect Chinese ceramics with the same search for quality and the same satisfaction for his eye. I myself have collected seriously in at least three different
fields, Master drawings, American Indian art, and Nomadic art of the Eurasian steppes. I have several other categories up my sleeve that could mature into collections showing order and rational choices should I live long enough.

But today the odds are stacked against the activities of the true collector of most kinds of art. National borders are rapidly closing; the United Nations is sponsoring ever more restrictive international treaties prohibiting the collecting of any art except that of one’s own country. Our State Department and its compliant advisory arm, the Committee on Cultural Property, is toadying to the demands of so-called “source nations,” seizing and returning objects or paintings that might be legally imported but are “stolen” in the eyes of nations that claim that all art belongs to the State.

Because these dramas are now taking place in the antiquities field, all art collecting has come under a cloud. The archaeologists and anthropologists who stress context want to forbid collecting because art markets, they claim, cause the illegal digging and despoliation of sites that source nations are too poor to protect (or too corrupt). No collecting, no markets, no value, i.e., no digging. QED. Of course it’s not so simple, and the value that collectors and art markets create have been in most cases the only reasons that much of the world’s art has survived. This has been a phenomenon since Roman times and has preserved at least something in the face of history during which gold, silver, and bronze objects were regularly melted down for state debts and cannons.

This is not the place to argue the long and complex issues of international art markets. It is enough to say that the movement of art has always been affected by the economic strength of one part of the world versus another. The Chinese, just now, are emerging as the strongest competitors for their own historic art as their economic boom continues its dramatic rise. Such are the natural and beneficial economic waves that, like free trade, should be encouraged, not stifled by nationalistic restrictions. Great and merely good art, like literature or music, is international and will only suffer and die if confined in a political straightjacket. The Elgin Marbles should stay right where they are in the British Museum.

But what to do or to say about the sadly diminished reputation of the art collector, both private ones and museums as collectors, in our peculiar times? What was once a prestigious and admired activity, thought to have public benefits for education and aesthetic pleasure, has now become a dirty word, joining the denigration of both “connoisseurship” in the study of art history, and the concept of “quality” as applied to the art of the present. These notions are lumped into the convenient and amorphous rubric of “elitist” — a term that has lost all earlier definitions and now means, very specifically, that one is against minority cultures, women’s art, poor people, children, etc. If the collector is seen to spend a large sum on a Degas or a Pollock, somewhere criticism is likely to flow that the money would have been better spent on a neighborhood youth center or the battle against AIDS. What used to be seen as part of the general support for civilized values is today seen as having no value. Art collecting is seen as obsolete, with countries like England no longer financially supporting many great cultural institutions as they normally did, but instead are
seeking to transfer the money needed for so-called “High Culture” to popular cultural themes which, because popular, are usually financially successful on their own. As a consequence, the British Museum, for the first time in its history, is firing expert scholarly curators (called “keepers”) in order to keep the doors open.

The overwhelming majority of those who call themselves collectors collect contemporary art. Highly acclaimed contemporary art is, and always has been, the most expensive kind of art to pursue. A fine Jasper Johns can cost more than a great Monet or a pretty good Rembrandt.

The number of people worldwide who collect seriously and internationally in the areas of antiquities, tribal arts (primitive art is no longer politically correct to say), old master paintings and drawings, and museum quality Oriental arts is minuscule in comparison with contemporary stuff. Those who do are probably a dying population in the culture wars. But possibly the tide will turn, and, as all the postmodern nonsense fades into satirical footnotes, art collecting and its adjuncts, connoisseurship and the search for quality, may once again see their reputations restored.

Notes
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1. This essay is occasioned by two exhibitions now on view in New York. The Thaw Collection: Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, Acquisitions Since 1994 opened at The Morgan Library on September 27, 2002 and remains on view until January 19, 2003. Nomadic Art of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes: The Eugene V. Thaw and Other New York Collections opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art on October 1, 2002 and remains on view until January 5, 2003. On September 10, 2002, Mr. Thaw was elected an Honorary Trustee of The Metropolitan Museum. Go back to the text.


4. Whose great collection of historic modern art, the Jacques and Natasha Gelman collection, is at the Metropolitan Museum in its own galleries. Go back to the text.

E. V. Thaw (1927–2018) was a preeminent art dealer, collector, and philanthropist.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 21 Number 4, on page 13
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