



To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting

Philipp Blom

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“Many unsuspecting passers-by had to relinquish molars before their ruler’s lust for surgery was satisfied,” the author writes of Peter the Great’s obsession with removing and collecting teeth. He adds that the “teeth in the collection are recorded in the contemporary catalogue as: ‘teeth extracted by Emperor Peter from various persons,’ among them a singer, a person who made tablecloths, a bishop of Rostov, and a fast-walking messenger (not fast enough, Stephen Jay Gould remarks).” The author may have begun his research in a spirit of scholarly curiosity, but as each eccentric character parades past, it is apparent that Blom, who studied at Oxford and worked as a journalist in London and Paris, enjoys putting these figures on show. He has become a collector of collectors. The author may have begun his research in a spirit of scholarly curiosity, but as each eccentric character parades past, it is apparent that Blom enjoys putting these figures on show. He has become a collector of collectors.

Blom begins with a loving description of his own great-grandfather, a “great collector” of books and art, then tells of meeting Georg Moritz and Wolf Stein. Moritz, an elderly, disinherited German nobleman, lived in dilapidated grandeur amidst a fascinating welter of fine art and books. Stein, who hungrily accumulated thousands of books after an adolescence spent in a concentration camp, told the author, “I didn’t have much of a formal education in my youth and I always hope I may make up for it if I read all these.”

The work then takes a more historical, anthropological direction. Loosely thematic, each chapter offers intriguing glimpses into the private lives and bizarre tastes of collectors. The vast galleries of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II ranged from rhinoceros horns to globes to Mannerist paintings of mythological scenes—the more erotic, the better. Sir Hans Sloane, a seventeenth-century physician, amassed a collection of zoological specimens so complete that, on its bequeathal to the Royal Society of London, “the British Museum was born.” The medieval rage for holy relics, the auctioning of Napoleon’s “most private of private parts,” a modern collection of milk bottles—Blom discusses them all.

He also speculates on the drive to collect. The book’s title suggests a sort of matrimonial union between collector and collection. Early collectors indicated that a collection is a way of categorizing, and therefore understanding, the world. Ultimately, Blom sees collections as reactions to mortality and loss. For him it is ironic, because each “collection is a constant reminder of the very reality it has been created to stave off. The greater the value ... the greater the risk of loss that it represents. ...”

Blom’s well-supported conclusion, however, is not the main reason to read his book. The fascinating array of historical tidbits and entertaining, sometimes tragic characters are the real draw. Historians and readers of biographies will relish the book’s knowledgeable handling of cultural history and its tales of private life. Collectors may find themselves eerily paralleled in its pages.

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