



Polysemic Collection

Collections and the Sacred Space

The modern history of collecting says much about our relationship with the world and attempts to make sense of it. Museum collections tell many stories through the traces left by the continual counting, classifying and ordering of pieces on the playing board of a conceptual universe. Natural history and the arts play a major part in this narrative and parallels between these two fields give a sense of the tensions that exist today between the idea of the collection as a static reference point and as a fluid entity responding to constantly shifting relationships.

Museums started as private collections of the fine, curious and exotic. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the accumulation of vast collections by rich individuals largely as a response to expanding trade across the globe. Housed in architecture designed to impress, these emblems of the owner's reach, wealth and power also positioned them as cultured and learned individuals in a time of military and ideological struggle. Scholars and artists would be invited to marvel at remarkable objects often in the hope of inspiring works of genius. The formation of large collections, such as the Uffizi in Florence and the Vatican collection in Rome were influential across Europe, encouraging others to build what were often referred to as cabinets of curiosity or art rooms as well as grander state collections.

Although the Renaissance ushered in new perspectives on the world, these early collections were often ordered according to mediaeval criteria which impeded the building of rational ideas.

It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, devised a wholly rational and universally accepted way of ordering and classifying living organisms. Linnaeus' system did not rely on external, culturally based criteria, as previously had been the case, but rather on comparing specimens using inherent characteristics. Together with a flexible and extendable binomial naming system, the idea of identification and classification gained a rational footing and began to be applied to other areas of knowledge.

As nation-building rose out of the internecine wars of seventeenth century Europe, attention turned outwards towards empire building. The appropriation of culture was one significant strategy for legitimising the state's activities and establishing cultural superiority. Collections grew rapidly as the rush for colonies created the opportunity for large scale appropriations and acquisitions. The following eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a time of discovery, observation and description. The need for recording inspired new genres in art and the fledgling natural sciences focused on studying closed systems as a means of simplifying what were rapidly becoming complex areas of knowledge. Biology centred on the whole organism isolated from its environment as the physical artwork was the focus of the artist's attentions and intentions.

Objectification was being consolidated and made rational as the Earth and its resources were being measured, quantified and commoditised. The expansion of rival European empires led to a boom in museum building to house the growing number of objects from around the world. With the mass of data and potential evidence accumulating, questions were asked about how things related to one another and ultimately how they had come into existence. Explanations based on the scientific method for such things as the diversity of life, disease and the behaviour of matter were being developed aided by innovative technology. Describing the what is was gradually giving way to working out the how.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theory building set the foundations for today's areas of knowledge as museums were being consolidated as reference points for cataloguing the history of humanity and nature. The reductive study of closed systems became ever more detailed and specialised which, although being essential in understanding how things work, resulted in the isolation of the object of study from its context. This no longer yielded sufficient answers and twentieth century workers in all fields started to explore the possibility of applying mechanisms used to describe the specific more widely. This led to the formulation of meta-theories and syntheses aimed at more profound explanations. Ideas in mathematics, psychology,

philosophy and so on were opening windows onto a new landscape. As further specialisation increased the fragmentation of knowledge, tensions started to appear between reductive approaches and the need for more holistic contextual views which were at the time largely grounded in inductive, speculative thinking.

In the early years of the last century, artists responded to and shaped contemporary culture by searching for what literally could not be seen much as science was doing. Modernism attempted to engage with underlying structures and mechanisms of aesthetics, function and significance, making these the overt subjects of work often to reductive ends. This was at a time when Einstein's relativity was challenging common sense experience, quantum theory questioned the very essence of certainty and world war shook the structure of society. The search for meaning in all this led to a questioning of the foundations of knowledge and precision of language. With semiotics, what had started as linguistic analysis soon led to a whole new way of looking at significance as a function of context. The abstract and real environment in which something operated, soon became as important if not more so than the symbol itself. In sociology and art, relative values and contextual reevaluation came to the vanguard in challenging established views. It was found that juxtaposing hitherto unconnected sources engendered new meanings and narratives. With mass communications making symbols overfamiliar, postmodernism rapidly became a useful tool in revitalising the suspect and clichéd. Society had begun to engage in a collective resorting of imagery, ideas, and values, which eventually became wide scale in response to the new political realities of the free market economics of the eighties. Collecting was now undergoing and reflecting radical changes on many levels just as it had done so half a millennium ago, only faster.

Since then Collections have become fluid mediums for conveying a wide diversity of messages and ideals. Meaning and value are no longer considered to be inherent in the carrier itself, it is an emergent property of the dynamics that comprise its environment and our knowledge of it. Fashion has always played a part in the seesaw world of collecting but changes have become so rapid now, that institutions primarily constituted to accumulate, preserve and show, have struggled to keep up with trends. The unprecedented rate at which ideas, images, texts and sounds can be moved and shuffled has challenged the traditional idea of the collection as representing a fixed or slowly evolving reference point. The tension arising between this paradigm and that of the contextually responsive, permeable and fluid space has led to a diversification of strategies and opportunities for collating and exhibiting, from the Kunsthalle-

style institutions dedicated to temporary exhibitions without permanent collections, to ambushing venues with ephemeral events. The slower collection ideally focuses on the object, whereas concentrating on information and its delivery seems to be the main concern today. This prioritisation of education, universal comprehensibility, and entertainment, has led to oversimplified answers to what are usually complex questions.

The fact that collections have moved from a descriptive, deductive paradigm based on acquisition towards inductive generators of meaning based on information reflects an improvement in our understanding of the world. However, insight needs time and space and the danger is that the acceleration in the transfer of knowledge, with its accessibility, is at the cost of something valuable. There is a place for the classical ideal of the museum, the Μουσείον (mouseion), a temple dedicated to the muses, an environment for contemplation and the slow development of a lasting inspiration where the all important asking of questions is given space and the quest for answers is left for somewhere more appropriate. Much of my current work has been inspired by visits made long ago to museums. I had no need for distracting explanations or fashionable viewpoints. What mattered was that the imagination was catalysed in the context of the individual self at that particular point.

Tensions often resolve into diversification and this seems to be what has increasingly happened. Documenting complex relationships between things and classes of things can be done effectively in many different ways. However, there is a cost in the exchange between accessibility and quality of experience; transience and permanence; instant impression and long lasting inspiration. There is a need for a sacred space in which the concrete embodiment of an idea can be reached and refreshed through the imagination. The early collections struggled out of the constraints of the spiritual Middle Ages. Perhaps it is time for a return to a sense of that magic in the knowledge of how that works. In the current noisy and cluttered world, where so much imagination and abstract thought is brought to us by others, we need the possibility to connect again with the fine, curious and exotic in an unhindered imaginative sacred space.

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