

## COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS

Among all the possible choices of “objects” for collection, that of works of art is the richest in meaning. In this paper we propose to discover if this ages-old activity may be understood as a historical phenomenon or only interpreted as one of the expressions man may give of his relationship with the universe of artistic works.

### COLLECTION WITHOUT HISTORY

If we are to believe the now classic view of economic history or that of civilizations, there must also be within them a history of collecting. This history would be simple and clear: with the ending of the Middle Ages, princes accumulated “treasures” whose role was to preserve a part of their wealth in movable form. This is why we find so many objects in precious metals and rare stones and why, at times, gold-enshrined relics survive. In short, these treasures were the gold reserve of the Bank of France, adapted to an age in which the State as such hardly existed and in which fortunes were essentially in land holdings. This kind of capitalization was just as often practiced by the bankers; the treasures of the Fuggers and the Medicis also guaranteed their financial “credit.”

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

Later, the substitution of absolute monarchy for feudal society brought about a change: the royal collection began to serve as ostentation. Treasures were no longer hidden but displayed. Francis I, Louis XIV, the Hapsburgs and, later, the German prince-electors and Catherine II of Russia considered the possession of the finest extant works of art a manifestation of their power. Great country estates, hunts, horses, like galleries of paintings, guards' uniforms and the silk in banners, like the ceremony of the table, were means for an ostentation of might. These rulers were only putting into practice, for the standards of the times, what today would be called a policy of public relations. The sovereign entrusted to his gallery, as he did to his army, the duty of proclaiming his glory.

When power passed from the State and the monarch to the banker, this ostentation only changed hands. Capitalism favored the accumulation of goods: artistic "goods" were at the same time one of the instruments of capitalization; a use for the surplus of revenue arising from controlling the means of production and, to boot, a demonstration of power concentrated in the hands of the wealthy. Social mimetism did the rest: from the time of the great monarchies, it was easy to explain how the spirit of imitation had come, through the example of the sovereign, to the powerful and the financiers.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, an ethic of economic competition succeeded to the centralizing hierarchy of the monarchic State. Collections multiplied, faithfully following bourgeois power in its social and provincial ramifications. The industrialist and the banker took the place of the farmer of the revenue; the notary and the provincial doctor proclaimed their status in society by the possession of works of art.

Several decades later, the relocation of wealth and economic decision towards the United States brought about a significant change. The newly-rich Americans—the Mellons, the Kresses, the Huntingtons, the Fricks, the Barnes—threw their dollars into the art market and made the fortunes of the Vollards, Duveens and Wildensteins. It is easy to understand the force that moved them: supported by a new world, unacquainted with the old geography of Europe and its old sociology, they in their turn manifested their power and acquired, through their collections, a status that assimi-

lated them into the best American society while placing them in a situation of favorable competition toward what was left of the aristocracy of the Old World. The great manor houses of the English gentry, the palaces of Italian princes and the town houses of the French nobility were emptied to ornament the “follies” of these new *traitants*. Gifts and donations assured the steel, railroad and stock market millionaires a sort of duly-paid nobility. The phenomenon was not essentially different from the one that created marriages with the heirs of the aristocracy of the old European countries. A Boni de Castellane for a husband, some Renoirs or Filippino Lippis in a New York town house or a California mansion, and the trick was done. The relocation of the “*économie-monde*”, as Braudel writes, and that of real power was expressed in efficacious and visible terms.

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However, if we look more closely at the facts, biographies and, indeed, anecdotes, details come out of the shadows that cause us to doubt the truthfulness of this picture. The admirable historical and economic systematizing appears as just a façade, like one of those baroque facades that hides an obscure, complex and human reality behind a structure of appearances.

Thus, the monarchical concern of ostentation cannot alone explain the totality of the behavior of the sovereigns. We must not forget that the collection, for the king, was also the fulfillment of another one of his duties. Beyond an artistic Colbertism, which led to the favoring of national production by the creation of academies or workshops, the monarch, from whom the State was still not entirely separated, seemed to feel a sense of duty toward the nation to preserve and to conduct a certain policy of national patrimony. Two facts are significant here: one, the collections of drawings—not really suitable for ostentation—that sovereigns formed from the 16th century in Italy and the 17th in France. It is as though the monarch assumed a didactic role that he judged necessary for the country, and the only instrument he had was patrimonial: public service and the museum were being conceived but did not yet exist.

In the same way, when the kings of France opened the gallery of the Luxembourg palace to the public for a time, they were no

longer acting through a simple consideration of their “glory,” as was said at the time.

Of course, the desire to imitate the sovereign and in that way affirm a social role in one’s own proper rank may explain many things, but the verified activities too often go beyond these reassuring motives. That Jabach, a very wealthy banker, should form an exceptional collection of works of art is acceptable: he ceded to the habitually alleged need for imitation. That he should sell his collection to the king when he ran into financial difficulty remains within the logic of the system. But why did he deceive his royal buyer and secretly keep for himself the originals of certain drawings, copies of which he delivered to the keeper of the royal collection? That Crozat, a farmer of the revenue, rivaled the great lords with the brilliance of his collection and succeeded in dazzling them, is a pure and simple application of the historic law, but he had many thousands of drawings. The excess shows the irregularity in behavior, the internal logic of a passion that went beyond all social motivations.

There is more. From the 16th century, some collectors, who were neither kings, nor princes, nor bankers, and who undoubtedly were unaware of the Marxist analysis of history, had undertaken to gather oeuvres with no concern for the motives that would be attributed to them later by the historians of civilization. What para-monarchic pride, what need for imitation led Vasari to collect drawings? And, a century later, a rather obscure churchman, Resta, to do the same?

In the 18th century, young English aristocrats made their “grand tour,” bought things to cover the walls of country houses in Yorkshire and Kent. Naturally, their purses were heavy with the money that the commercial and colonial prosperity of their country had brought them. Naturally, one cannot quite deny that they were moved by the desire for ostentation, by the display of their wealth and the emulation of kings and princes. But the walls of Althorp House studded with canvases by Claude, Salvator Rosa and Carracci rise in the most isolated English countryside. The exhibition, however striking it was, could hardly be seen by anyone but the neighbors and occasional visitors.

The *amateur*, then, pierces through the collector; psychology recovers its rights. Already the quality of choice should have

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denounced the too simple explanation. Of course, the well-chosen royal accumulations depended on more or less informed agents: the collection of Catherine II owed a large part of its luster to Diderot and Grimm. But how can the part of passion be refused, when we remember the extraordinary quality of the “harvest” of Charles I?

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Tastes and a system of values that a collection expresses perhaps offer another guide for ranging these personages in history. Every man belongs to his time and, therefore, to history; this is obvious. Changes in taste have been brought up many times. The realization of this evolution is itself located in history: until romanticism no one thought of doubting the timeless nature of esthetic judgment: academies were there to recall this axiom. One had the right to argue between “Poussinists” and “Rubenians” but not to contest the superiority of Raphael or the non-existence of a “Gothic” art. Within twenty or thirty years, romantic thought, whether literary or philosophical, resurrected time—the time of history as well as that of life. Since then, we know that esthetic judgment carries the mark of its epoch, that it is ephemeral in an ephemeral civilization.

The critical fortune of 18th-century painting is an apparently very clear example of these changes in taste. French rococo reigned at Versailles, in Paris, in churches and town-houses. It exported its works and its artists as far as Prussia, Russia and Spain. Then, in the last quarter of the century, as the history we are taught tells us, its decline began. Romanticism, after a parenthesis of neoclassicism, consecrated oblivion and scorn for the masters of the century of Louis XV. Nothing could be more natural: society had changed. There had even been a revolution in France in 1789. Let us pass over the details: after all, it little matters that the taste for “*rocaille*” had been replaced since before the States General by the neo-antique rigor of Cochin, Vien and David. Nor does it matter very much that in the generation of Boucher’s pupils some painters had already shown in their choice of subject matter, but even more in the appearance of a style, an initial draft of what could be romanticism; or that Durameau and Doyen were, in many respects, in the fiery and at times dramatic accents of their writing, more

romantic than Girodet would be. These are incidents along the way. In any case, the sketched movement was quickly erased by the brief triumph of neoclassicism—that of David and Guérin—which was itself attacked after 1830 by Géricault and Delacroix in France and by Constable and Bonington in England.

It is accepted that the eclipse of this art lasted until the Goncourt brothers. Thus it would be beginning with the Second Empire that Boucher, Fragonard and Hubert Robert would again gradually find a public. The great French collections of the end of the century, those of Groult, Doucet, Paulme, and others, were rehabilitated. The price of oeuvres, even minor ones, of the French 18th century in pre-1914 sales confirms the exactness of this parabola.

The temptation to read art collecting into history is all the greater since this evolution, in its turn, could be read as a transposition of changes in economics and society. The taste for lucid, gracious and at times frivolous 18th-century oeuvres, the marked preference on the market for works ready to hang in the salons of a Paris that stretched from the Monceau plain to the Bois de Boulogne: would this not be the faithful image of a bourgeois society? Thus triumphant capitalism delved into the historic treasure to find what suited it, what would satisfy its need for immediate pleasure, a just recompense for the exploitation of man by man and something that would take from the *Ancien Régime* one of its aristocratic symbols that could be domesticated. Collecting, like leaving for the hunt from a newly-acquired or newly-built country mansion, was the apparent homage of the urban and bourgeois class to a noble and rural world that had been destroyed and was envied. *Fêtes galantes*, nudes by Boucher, Fragonard, Schall or Lavreince: an art of gratification, as Malraux wrote, suitable for satisfying both the ambition of a class and the preferences of some individuals. This would still be a determinism: our personage would be placed in an order, defined in society by history.

However, we cannot be assured that this fine historical tableau is true, if we no longer consider an evolution of taste but the attitude of the collectors. We have joked about the famous tale of Balzac's attributing to Watteau a fan that was painted for the Marquise de Pompadour. It must be noted that in doing this Balzac, in full romanticism, and well before the public rehabilita-

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tion of the 18th century, considered Watteau as an important artist. Now, at about the same time as Cousin Pons, Doctor LaCaze did not hesitate to buy 18th-century oeuvres—again Watteau but also Chardin and Boucher. This man refused to obey our classifications. Intractable and cumbersome personage. . .

Once again, the collections of drawings will be revealed as significant. Little or much, like it or not, spurred by a simple historic curiosity or by admiration, Vasari, Resta—and the English following—Mariette, denied the order of values to which they nevertheless adhered. Mariette, a writer, was a conformist: he admired the great Bolognese artists, Raphael and Bouchardon. But his collection contained contradictions: veritable pre-Raphaelites figured in it, silver-point drawings by Credi, Filippino Lippi, and Pisanello. Vasari, doctrinaire of progress, nevertheless looked for pieces he thought were by Giotto. Their example tends to show that the collector obeyed vaguely conscious motives, that his collection went beyond him or, at least, went beyond the conscious image that he had of his own set of values.

Then there is Philippe de Chennevières. His epoch is the one in which, again, taste inclined toward the French 18th century. His contemporaries were little concerned, outside of a reverence as a matter of principle, with Claude and Poussin of the 17th century and even less with the provincial artists of that period, eclipsed by Versailles. Now, it was the oeuvres of these forgotten men that Chennevières was going to assemble. In his day, who would have dreamed of such a thing? Fromentin commented on the Netherlands of the classic age; Manet or Ribot turned toward the Spanish masters of the great century, after the revelation that was the exposition of the collection of Louis Philippe. In the auctions, masters and lesser masters of the 18th century triumphed.

Once again, the amateur appears as a stranger to his own time. It is necessary to look elsewhere than in history for the key to the personage. Let us agree, then, that in his domain he foresees it, prepares or makes it as much as he belongs to it. There is, however, a decisive turning-point in the history of collectionism.

Until the end of the 18th century or, more precisely, until the French Revolution, a collection was formed in a restricted world, on a market that was both rich and perfectly defined. Directly or through hearsay, buyers and sellers knew each other; often works

were acquired in entire lots, sometimes at the end of a subtle negotiation; decisions were made on the basis of reputation, at times without the works having been seen. The dealings that ended in a purchase by Charles I of England of the “Mantuan pieces,”—the artistic treasure of the Gonzagas—are significant. The collection of the rulers of Mantua was famous in the Europe of princes and amateurs. Two intermediaries, at least, were employed to negotiate the sale to Charles I; it took as much time as it does a diplomat to conclude a treaty. When the bargain was finally struck the paintings—Titians, Correggios—were loaded on a ship and convoyed to the Thames. From London, Charles I had unceasingly followed the transaction; he finally took delivery of the cargo, those masterpieces that belonged to him for a few years.

This example is not the only one. Cardinal Leopold de’ Medici employed courtiers who, throughout Italy, explored the market and proposed sets of drawings to him. He reserved the right to examine the pieces in Florence and, sometimes, refused a group or objected to the quality or the price. However, the origins were certain if the attributions were not always so. Similarly, Mariette was one of the great buyers at the Crozat auction. He also negotiated sets of drawings at a distance, with Zanetti in Venice or with other connoisseurs. He asked his painter acquaintances about them, if necessary by correspondence.<sup>1</sup> The Europe of the amateurs was then small and trustworthy. There were no treasures without origin nor pieces without a pedigree. Without risking too much, one could buy with one’s eyes shut. At the end of the century the Archduke Albert of Austria acted in the same way, as did the great English collectors. Lord Somers had acquired *en bloc* the drawings provenant from Resta; a century later Woodburn bought the entire collection of Thomas Lawrence, of which a large part passed to Lord Ellesmere.

The filiation of the oeuvres was either princely or authenticated by their provenance: the artist himself, his students and his friends.

<sup>1</sup> We give only a few examples from the list of intermediaries, merchants and bargain hunters: Grimm and Diderot for Catherine of Russia; Luigi Crespi, son of the artist Giuseppe Maria, who mediated in the purchases of the Elector of Saxe and Cardinal Corsini; Bottari, librarian for the same prelate, procured drawings for Mariette.



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From Carlo Maratta a certain lot of 17th-century Roman drawings passed to Spain; from Sicily Ruffo ordered a painting from Rembrandt and was astonished at the price asked—the highest he had ever paid.

It was the Revolution that set the new form of collectionism going. The upheavals in French society, emigration, then the Napoleonic wars brought a change to the nature of the market that lasted for more than a hundred years. Works were lost track of—escaping confiscation by chance or by misappropriation, brought back by Napoleon's soldiers after having been bought or stolen in Italy, in Spain or in the Netherlands. Fortunes changed hands, sometimes in confusion. Then, in France, but also elsewhere, began the golden age of the second-hand dealer and discoveries. That age is not yet over. By chance at public auctions, in the flea markets, oeuvres come to light after having been ignored for a long time. The field for investigation of LaCaze was no longer that of Crozat or Mariette. The Goncourts found drawings by Boucher in the second-hand book stalls. It was no longer simply a matter of corresponding, within a narrow circle of amateurs and artists, with agents, friendly or paid, to acquire works with known provenance. Masterpieces could perhaps be found in the rag-pickers' gleaning, more often still at an auction at which would unexpectedly be hauled in wreckage of a forgotten age. A certain major painting by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin that had disappeared shortly after the death of the artist came to the surface, anonymous in an anonymous sale at the Drouot during the fifties; a certain drawing by Poussin appeared in a London catalogue as a Roman 16th-century work; a large cartoon by Baroche came out of the oblivion of an attic; the London merchant David Carrit bought at small cost, at the auction of furnishings at Mentmore, former residence of the Rothschilds and Lord Rosebery, a Fragonard that had been thought to be by Carle Van Loo. Discovery and the hope of discovery were born from the loss of identity of the works, dispersed through the misfortunes of history over a wider area and in a collectivity that was less restricted.

The revolutionary turmoil did not only "disperse to the four winds with its bitter breath" families, soldiers, owners and plunderers; it, and the imperial wars that followed, broke the thread of memories that, before, almost always linked a work to its origin.

Leaving empty or pillaged churches, abandoned or devastated palaces, thousands of works or objects entered into a wandering whose aftermath still today determines many of the characteristics of the art market and the activity of the amateurs.

It is as though the areas of the treasure hunt had been redistributed. Henceforth there were two courses: one, still conforming to the older model, was that of catalogued works. Publicly and in that case also with great publicity, since the media now took an interest in the events of the art market, considerable sums were exchanged for properties matched by the certainty that is attached to a pedigree and the unanimity of the art historians. Thus, the most illustrious collections were made and relocated. Thus, in Paris, London and New York the collections of Camille Groult, the Duke of Devonshire or the Havemeyer heirs were sold for hundreds of thousands, or millions, of dollars, according to the date. Everything was done and undone within a narrow circle; the events were noted in advance; the appearance of a newcomer at the games table only meant the emergence of a new fortune and perhaps a new whim.

However, there was another world in which the members of another circle operated. In it we find what characterized the market after the Empire. There, a work is acquired during an estate sale, drawn from a lot without prestige offered in an anonymous auction, bought from a second-hand dealer or a junkman in the poorer quarters. Duly recognized by the one who discovered it, it would be endowed with a new identity, with a new civil status; once recognized by the art historians, it would enter the "noble" circuit, if it did not directly go to an institution or museum. Such was the case of the Lorenzo Lotto and the fragment of Raphael recently acquired by the Louvre.

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At almost the same time another change in the conduct of the collector appeared: a sort of specialization developed that divided the amateurs. Henceforth, it became more and more rare for the same man to attach himself to both modern and "ancient" art: this word itself only entered into usage at that time. Before that, on the contrary, almost all collectors bought contemporary works and those of the past indifferently. This was true of princes and patrons

as well as collectors. For example, up until the end of the dynasty, the Medicis enriched their gallery of self-portraits through commissioning living painters; Mariette, who looked as far back as the Florentine *quattrocento* for drawings, set a high price on those of Bouchardon, his own contemporary. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the popes, their nephews, princes and cardinals—Scipion Borghese and Mazarin—placed antique statues in their galleries along with works of their own epoch. This universality of ambition yielded, little by little, to a division of tastes. Significantly, in 1913 Jacques Doucet sold all his 18th-century oeuvres in order to form his collection of modern art.

Of course, there were still amateurs here and there trying to cover both the domain of historical works and that of contemporary art, such as Thyssen or Dominique de Ménil, in another register. However, the effect of the division of centuries was so strong that even the collection of impressionist works became a specialty, distinct at the same time from that of works before the 19th century and that of modern art. Barnes, in Philadelphia, Pierre Lévy at Troyes, each devoted himself to a period—impressionism for one, the Paris school for the other.

Thus we observe that, especially at the end of the last century, amateurs tempted by universalism seemed doomed to a poor alternative in the art of their contemporaries. It was the paintings of Meissonnier, Decamps, Eugene Lami, not those of Manet and Degas that were neighbors at Demidoff's San Donato, or Richard Wallace with Fragonards or Poussins, as though the sensitivity to the art of the past implied a narrow view of the esthetic world, as though the eye and the desire were unable to accommodate to modern values at the same time as to tradition. It was not merely taste that was divided but sensitivity. Any survival of the old composite treasures was thus eliminated, no doubt forever.

There is more than one reason for this evolution. Perhaps in the century which saw the development of industry the society of the collectors followed, in its way, the example of the economic world in which functions were separated, in which the "*travail en miettes*" of Georges Friedmann was set up. Certainly, the more and more revolutionary nature of modern art, the simultaneous development in the 19th century of an eclectic academism and, as party to the rupture, the open conflict between the successive

waves of the new realism—that of Courbet and Manet, then that of the Impressionists—appear to us as a dialectical movement in which contraries are linked. It was not like that for those who lived at the time, however; we have seen the birth of a historically singular form of the division of tasks and preferences that created a regime of classes, as though the characteristics of vision themselves could no longer be commonplace.

It would be tempting to tie in this evolution with that of society itself and to see in it one of the triumphs of the bourgeois order. In a slightly different perspective, Maurice Rheims affirmed that the idea of “false” was essentially bourgeois. It is true that the idea that romanticism conjured up of the artist’s condition—exactly opposed, after the dispute over *Hernani* and Balzac’s *Traité de la vie élégante*, to the “bourgeois” status—had some weight in this sense. Once again, however, any parallel that is too facile between the history of economic society and that of the world of the collector runs the risk of being misleading. The Charpentiers, Rouarts, Auguste Pellerin, the Havemeyers and the Barnes are no less “bourgeois” than Camille Groult, the Pereires, the Veil-Picards or Richard Wallace.

Here it might be well to consider the revolution in thought that was the discovery of historic time. Romanticism not only gave a new intensity to the day by day passing of time, to the time of individual existence. It suddenly struck minds by revealing to them the depth and continuity of historic time—a discovery of which the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages through the English *roman noir*, Walpole and Chateaubriand, was only a consequence. It is as though after the first few decades of the 19th century the individual collector was unable to take on the flight from the present and at the same time the thorough investigation of the past, as though the artistic consciousness tended to obscure the mobility of the present or to attach itself only to it: from this came the diversity in choice. This was at first expressed by abrupt plunges into the most distant past, the one that official judgment before the Revolution undertook to dismiss and pervert with the qualification of “gothic.” This is undoubtedly the meaning of the sudden rush to the dealer in medieval *objets d’art*, opened with the century, and the memory of which remains in the example of du Sommerard, but also of Victor Hugo. The return, shortly after the middle of the century,

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to the knowledge and admiration of “primitive” works, those of the early Renaissance, must be understood, at least in part, in this sense. But, to the new depth given to the historical field was also added a sharper consciousness of the ruptures that marked contemporary art. The discovery of history as a comprehensible category often led, paradoxically, to the refusal or misunderstanding of its vibration in the present. One learned to live the past intellectually, in its continuity, while the artistic conscience of the amateur risked ignoring mobility and modernity. After all, this latter was only acclaimed by artists like Manet or Degas because they were taken up in the same movement and affected by the agitation itself of a perpetual evolution, the consciousness of which was rendered sharper by the discovery of the future.

Thus, as though they were unable to confront the excessive inflation of the past and the disquietude of the present at the same time, amateurs chose a feverish attachment to unseizable modernity or a backward march toward the darkness of time. Collectionism and patronage separated.

#### AN ENDLESS FINALITY

Perhaps at this point in our reflections we begin to approach the collector in his authenticity and understand the meaning of his activity. If no historical logic suffices, neither does the recourse to the idea of gratification. Certainly, each time that the historical and social view disappear, being unable to account for the extreme singularity of a conduct, we perceive a psychology: what comes into play is a particular form of desire and pleasure, a specific form of obstinacy in the search for this pleasure. However, this is not enough to explain the movement of sensitivity that spurs a man on to spend his energy, time and money on collecting. It is further necessary to discuss the type of feelings and the object of the activity that determine this perseverance and, in the end, obsession.

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First of all, collecting is defined by its object, which, obviously, is the ownership of works of art.

The French Civil Code says that ownership is the “right to dispose of something in the most absolute way.” Nevertheless, this idea in itself, quite classic, does not really account for the relationship between the collector and his collection. He possesses, of course, in the legal sense: he may give a work away, sell it or indeed destroy it. He benefits, of course, according to another term of the Code, which primarily means the right to collect the revenues deriving from property. On the contrary, the amateur’s enjoyment is through the eyes and the mind: for him, a painting only engenders feelings.

There is a more remarkable trait, however: material possession means the possibility to touch, manipulate and handle as well as contemplate. In a museum, the oeuvre is offered to the eyes and only to them: do not touch. In his home, the collector has physical control of the thing: at his will, he touches it, turns it, changes its location. The two-dimensional object that a painting appears to be on the walls of the Louvre thus finds a third dimension: when touched, the impastes of the oil painting become reliefs; at the moment in which the picture takes its place in the newly-acquired surroundings, it again finds its density; turned, it shows the canvas, the base-frame or the grain of the oak panel. At no other time and in no other place is the work such an *object* and the object a work.

No one is more sensitive than the collector to this characteristic of the work of plastic art, that is, its ability to be identified with a material thing; it has its grain, its material and its weight. The impastes of oil painting are recognized by touch and not only by sight. A canvas lightly moves in its base-frame; a sculpture may be apprehended by the fingers. Everything that radically separates painting, sculpture and drawing from a literary work here achieves its reality. It is not just variations in light that give the work a new, sometimes surprising, aspect; it is a suddenly revealing juxtaposition, a new perspective arising from the change of place of a painting.

In a museum, it is the curator who has the rights of a collector and, seemingly, his powers. However, he does not—or is not supposed to—act for himself, for the satisfaction of his own desire or whim. He is delegated by the State or the institution. The ethics of his function enjoin him to look first for the didactic classification, the explanatory statement and the reasoning. The curator of a

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museum is accountable for the patrimony; he is not its owner. His duty is to the public, the nation and history. The collector, on the contrary, is the free despot of his collection; he may hang his paintings without concern for chronology or school, put a Cezanne next to a Poussin, if he has the good fortune to own the one and the other; place a portrait by Largillierre between a landscape by Van Goyen and a still life, if that is his pleasure.

This manipulation is not merely a discretionary power exercised by the collector. It is a sign and visibly expresses everything that radically distinguishes the work of plastic art from a literary one. The latter remains the same from one edition to another, indeed, from the manuscript to the book; each edition, however different the print, paper or format may be, transmits the same sentiment to the reader. On the contrary, it is the nature of the picture or statue not to communicate its meaning except through the means of a unique material thing, impossible to duplicate and betrayed by any attempt at reproduction.

Up to this point we have considered only the *result*, as though collecting were a fact from which we could deduce the collector. However, such a view, neglecting the evolution, is partial, if not false. The passion of the collector is perhaps recognized by the result; it is not identified with it.

The terminology of exhibition catalogues is deceiving: a work listed as belonging to the X collection does not mean that X belongs to the confraternity. There are heirs of collectors and heirs of painters. Neither of these enter into our purposes. No more than one swallow makes a summer does one Monet on a wall make a collector; the same is true for family portraits. In Paris there is one of the most important sets of Jongkind's oeuvre: it belongs to the grand-niece of a friend of the artist, who received the works from him. Matisse's family, the relatives of Bonnard, are not families of collectors any more than are the heirs of Picasso, Groult, Rothschild, Mellon or Kress, if they no longer acquire works of art.

To define a collector by the ambition for appearances, for ownership of works and benefits derived from them is not sufficient. We must understand the man by watching him *act*: we then see that, as Pascal wrote, the chase matters more to him than the prey. At least, it better clarifies his conduct, especially since the change that befell around 1800 but also further back in time. The

actions of the collector express a determination: that of giving new status to material objects. The characteristic of this man is to search for works, wherever they may be found, to integrate them and to put them into an order, to select and then to make known. It is he who takes on the task of breaking ground, discovering the revealing shard, the fragment of a statue, the blackened inscription. It is his charge to give identity to the anonymous; he is the archaeologist of the terrain. He dirties his hands, as well, that is to say, he enters commerce and the market. On his own, if he is one of those who do not refuse to go to small sales and obscure shops, or through the intercession of a merchant.

If the princely treasures of the end of the Middle Ages are in modern times the first examples of collections, they already show a trait that will remain. Those apparently anomalous accumulations of natural curiosities<sup>2</sup> mixed with man-made objects and, often, relics prove that all collections aspire to be in their way a résumé of the world. This intention is again expressed in the sets of works formed with the design to represent the history of art itself: the *Libro de' disegni* of Vasari already testified to this, only the field of the quest became the universe of art rather than the universe of nature. The essential dimension was history: classification itself proved it. Collecting tended to be encyclopedic: it broke away from the single absolute of choice in sensitivity—what moved, what pleased—to become a rational employment and ordering after the quest.

The scarcity of works on the market, the investigation in depth of the historic field did not put an end to this sort of collectionism.<sup>3</sup> One was more easily resigned to attempt to put together only a complete series in a voluntarily limited area—French drawings from their origins to contemporary times, impressionism, Italian or French baroque, still lifes, that renounced the intellectual concern for enumeration in ownership and action.

The spirit of the collection thus approached that of a public institution and its pedagogical vocation. However, since it did not

<sup>2</sup> This characteristic is found again in the 18th century, in Bonnier de la Mosson, for example.

<sup>3</sup> The collection of engravings, the search for complete series bearing the successive “states” of printing are a limited case here.



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rest on enumeration alone, which would be a historian's task, but on the acquisition of objects, it also showed, and perhaps more profoundly, that its finality would be to make the collector master of a world that he could make his own and order as he pleased. The intention is clear: the collector has undertaken to enclose, restrict to a daily cohabitation the exterior and inexhaustible world of oeuvres. He may end by projecting his desire into things, by thinking only of these forms which, elsewhere, roam about or become fixed, feeling called by his knowledge and desire. These voices of silence sometimes echo from the depths of time or space for his hearing alone.

He endeavors to surround himself, within his sight and sensitivity, with beings with whom he can converse at leisure and that bring him, in the security and peace of the enclosed space, the echo of what is for the vast world their fellow-creature, their brother.

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Quest in the field, enumeration, classification: the collector furnishes material for the art historian.<sup>4</sup> Just as the collection, with regard to the museum, has the double sense of a given example and a received example, the relation here is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the amateur proposes, the historian disposes: it is up to the latter to qualify definitively—if this kind of judgment is ever definitive—the identity of the work and to substitute classification for intuition. That which in a collection is still erratic—a work juxtaposed to others by the encounter of choice and chance—takes its place in a series; the work is dated, on occasion published, in any case entered in the documentation of the historian. Private property, it has become a collective good; intellectual appropriation has taken over from material possession.

On the other hand, we clearly see that the two individuals do not follow the same route. The historian doubts, searches, worries about documentary proof that will attest to the origin of the work and thus attach it to an author: the agreement concluded between the congregation and the painter, the mention in contemporary

<sup>4</sup> We do not forget that there are more secret collectors, jealous of their treasures but in my opinion they are not characteristic.

correspondence or citation in an old guidebook. Certainty, for him, lies at the end of this process. Inversely, for the amateur it comes from the immediate confrontation between the thing seen and the mind's eye; it is first of all intuition and encounter. It is up to erudition, later, to confirm the quick judgment that established a bond between what is called the style of an artist and the thing that appears to the eye. This encounter is the communication between two minds, in spite of the time elapsed, in spite of the opaqueness of the material object. The road is covered in one stretch. In that instant, across the centuries, the mind of the collector has sensed a familiar presence in the architecture of the forms, in the "writing"—this so-explicit term of usage—of the tracks left by the brushes in the painting material and in the juxtaposition of tones. The mind and the hand of the vanished artist have passed that way; it is felt more than it is explained, as we would be at a loss to justify the recognition of a familiar voice.

However, this act that identifies something with a man, with a presence canceled by death and time, is itself only made possible through a knowledge or, more precisely, an acquired familiarity. These voices from the past can only be heard by one who has long frequented the haunts of the vanished souls—museums, churches, monuments. It is not enough to have a good ear (or a sure eye): it is also necessary that around the memorandum of the catalogued works is constructed a coherent image of the personality that left behind it, like the frozen words of Panurge, traces of its particular existence, its way of thinking, being and doing, so that one work among a hundred reveals them to one who knows how to see them. Confidence in the plastic arts is rarely without detours. An avowal as clear as that of Cristofano Allori, representing his young mistress as Judith and portraying himself in the severed head of Holofernes, is a singular one, but it is not unique. The enigma is still more easily solved by a mind of our day, habituated through a knowledge of Freud and Jung to recognize symbolic transpositions. In one way or another, however, with a discretion that often increases as we go back in time, a painting is a confession, an act in which a soul divests itself in order to convey to one who can understand it the intimate feeling that the play of light, color and space, different types of faces, attitudes of the body, and even a beam reflected on the bowl of a pitcher had for it. That is where

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the amateur recognizes his man, finds the thread of a familiar voice. Thus, history is found in the activity of the connoisseur, but it is a history that may not be understood except through the works themselves, without the mediation of documents or books. The attribute of the connoisseur is this knowledge that has not taken a detour through language and writing. It suffices to be present at a conversation among amateurs: each one speaks of the artist in the present tense; we do not hear them say that Raphael or Poussin “did” thus or so but always that they *do*, that they feel, that they portray.

Undoubtedly, in reality attitudes are less decided than we have described them here for reasons of clarity. More than one historian is a connoisseur and is not satisfied with a similarity drawn from texts or archives when he does not recognize the personality of the artist in the work proposed to him. Like Mariette and Fritz Lugt, the amateur in his turn becomes a scholar and scrutinizes testimony in books and documents. However, there still remains a division between two attitudes, each of which favors one of the channels of knowledge.

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No doubt we must now agree that the portrait sketched no longer resembles many individuals. Set aside are the occasional amateurs, tempted one day by the absent-mindedly desired work and forgetful of it the next; collectors after their fortunes are made, late comers to the family, who adorn the walls of their homes at tremendous expense: strong in their opulence, they continue to practice the ostentation of royal or princely tradition. They have taken care to make known the brilliance of their acquisitions so that no one is unaware of them. Set aside also are the heirs, who preserve with fervor or negligence the patrimony formed or created by earlier generations—the work of an artist-ancestor or the passionately amassed collection of some forefather. The groups that for convenience are listed under their names in the catalogues or the nomenclatures merit attention and inventory: there is material in them for the historian and the connoisseur. However, these collections do not contain the personage we have endeavored to describe here: the one who, day after day, produces a display that gradually

approaches the idea he has formed of it and that he ceaselessly re-forms.

Real collectors, gripped by passion, wherever it has found them, on this side of the Atlantic or the other, among the rich or the middle-class, the patient, the uneasy, the hunters, are possessed by their collection much more than they possess it. Their work has taken them over, much as the characters in a novel gradually take over the novelist, Balzac or Tolstoy.

The collection, in short, is revealed as a portrait of the collector. From choice to choice, sometimes from sacrifice to sacrifice, a man has fashioned this image of himself, this resemblance in a game of mirrors. But these mirrors are the works of someone else; thus the portrait cannot be read except by reading beyond the assembled faces, bodies, forms, hues, beyond the intervention of the model, through personages who often have vanished and who thought to put only their image into the work but dissimulating it: the artists. Certainly, the means used, time, money, have been able to warp the lines of the portrait; necessities, exterior to the collector's intention have determined the blanks, silences and ellipses. The features are nonetheless drawn. It is rare that regrets—acquisitions that the fortune of the collector or the state of the market prohibited—are not evident among the works, just as we can discern meanings written “between the lines” in a text.

Let us not deceive ourselves: such a reading would not be truthful if it stopped at what is most obvious and superficial in the assembled oeuvres: the subjects—or the absence of subjects, as is seen in the preference for still lifes or abstract compositions; the series of attributions, that according to the case reveals an excess of ambition, a too hasty satisfaction before the great names fastened on the cases but strangely absent in the work itself. It is necessary to try to understand the slowly constructed statement that unites precisely *these* works on these walls. What is significant is the repeated presence of certain clashes in hue or light, it is the preference for structures of tortured forms or, on the contrary, forms that are calm and suspended in an assured balance. The collection is read as a work in itself, through pondering on the arrangement of space or human forms, on the contrasts in lights and darks, on the train of thought that picked out a discordant tonality at one point of the painting or gently harmonized neigh-

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boring but opposed hues, that reflectively organized the alternation of mass and space.

By reading a collection in this way, leafing through page after page like a book, the observer will perhaps comprehend its slow gestation. Precisely because it is formed of elements that are themselves composed and obey a law of internal organization established by the artist, the collection has been designed very slowly; in a very long cycle, much longer than that of the genesis of the works themselves. The collector takes possession of finished things in order to compose something unfinished; as the artist expresses his thought and sensitivity by applying successive strokes on a canvas, the collector pursues his work by putting on his wall or in his portfolios paintings, drawings and sculptures, one after the other. But where the creator is in a position to perfect his works one by one, the collector knows that there will be no vernissage, no final delivery of the work to the public. By its nature, his enterprise is condemned to incompleteness.

Paintings, aligned on the wall, appear at first as windows opened on to an exterior world, that of the treasure-house of oeuvres, but, looked at differently, they reflect an interior universe, a slow advance of an individual consciousness. At times anecdotes are futile: they say that Mazarin on his death bed murmured, looking for the last time at the masterpieces accumulated around him: "To think that I have to leave all this. . ." But there is no true collector who would not be conscious of the final loss to which his enterprise is destined through the fragility of his own life; if he struggles inwardly with time it is not so much because he is thinking of what he must leave behind him as because he knows that his end will freeze his work in an incomplete state.

This form of dissatisfaction appears most significantly in the sensitivity of those who search for the works of the past. A collector attached to contemporary productions may delude himself that he is going at the same pace as the artists. But if he has devoted himself to creations of past centuries, he sees more forcefully the limit that is imposed on him by necessity; in that case, to collect is ceaselessly to approach the past and to feel that it escapes while it offers itself. This endlessly explored whole of paths beaten in new directions interrogated and loved in its innumerable traces, will only be captured in the end in ludicrous bits. As the inventory

of what exists or what has existed follows its course, we take a better measure of our own impotence. Personages, oeuvres, take form in the memory and in the imagination: a certain artist, discovered late and loved, whose work we can never acquire; a certain painting, secretly glimpsed, whose acquisition fell through. In a collection, the losses jostle the modest gains. The pain of a wish forever unfulfilled pierces through an apparent satisfaction and delectation.

The abstract categories of space and time have gradually taken on substance in the mind of the collector: the geography of the universe of works of art, from museum to church to collection, has eliminated unknown territories to the benefit of explored areas; history has opened up into a larger field for having been investigated. In the same movement, however, the narrowness of the domain that the collector can handle for himself becomes more obvious and, in the end, more acute. Undoubtedly, this characteristic, proper to collections formed during a lifetime, explains the feeling of coldness and lack of abundance often found in the galleries of millionaire late-comers to art who have had the haste and means to cover their walls too quickly.

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In the 17th century, the artists of the northern schools liked to put in their Vanities, above the assembled objects that symbolized the flight of time—the skull, the extinguished candle, the watch—a glass globe in which the studio was distinctly reflected and, in the center, the artist in front of his easel. The optical effect—the same that gives the portrait of the Arnolfini its two-fold depth—inverses actual proportions; the expanse within which the objects are enclosed and in which they are at large in their small volume, is contained in a smaller sphere, as though geometry had overturned the empty sack of space. The silhouette of the artist is barely distinguishable. The work itself is reflected in the sphere, and nothing prevents the mental continuation of the game to infinity, as Georges Perec suggests in *Un cabinet d'amateur*.

This image finds a new meaning. A collection appears as the sphere that reflects a universe rendered to the scale of the individual and his familiar surroundings with, in the center and still

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farther away, the effigy itself of the one who organized this reduced world. It is almost invisible, difficult to read in its smallness, but present. It is reminiscent of St. John's words, as they are reproduced by Grunewald in the Isenheim retable: "*Illum oportet crescere me autem minui*".<sup>5</sup> It suffices to give the pronouns an appropriate meaning, to agree that one designates the world of works of art and that the subject, instead of the Evangelist, is the collector who willingly effaces himself before someone else's work

This man casts his eye and his hand on objects wandering about the world and uses them to build around himself a representation to his own measurement of the universe of art works. The consciousness itself of what is unrealizable in his intention makes him act, search and catalogue. In his hopes his defeats, but also in his taking of possession he sees and aims beyond the coveted object. He brings a part of the world to himself and attempts to reduce this open universe—the space and time of the oeuvre—to a closed ensemble. At the same time, however, he knows that this infinity escapes him and that the refuge of his collection, this second shell of his ego, will remain forever incomplete. He will even have learned, with time, that he has put as much of himself into it as the reality of the works.

Raoul Ergmann  
(Paris)

<sup>5</sup> "It is He who must become greater while it is I who must efface myself."