On the nature of collecting

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Collecting is a particular kind of activity that should not be confused with other forms of accumulation. For instance, hunting and gathering food, rounding up stray cattle, or calling in school children from recess is not akin to collecting stamps, coins, rocks, art objects, or first imprints. One gathers food, cattle, and children for other purposes. What then is collecting about? I am looking at a cabinet of small historical busts that I have put together over the last twenty years, scouring through tourist stores, antique malls, music shops, and eBay (Figure 1). Several shelves of faces gaze outward in unwincing silence. Visitors are surprised to find them in such abundance. Why are they here, they want to ask?

I began academic life as a sculpture student, working in clay, modeling heads and figures. I appreciate the skill that goes into crafting busts. But that is not why I collect them. Few of my objects display noteworthy artistic ability. Indeed, many of them are downright bad, the cheap output of mass-produced tourist kitsch. Injected plastic mold work, pot metal and plaster of Paris knockoffs of famous people—Mozart, Aristotle, Wagner, Joseph Smith, Jackie Kennedy (Figure 2). In the world of Christianity, the religion I study, there are many modern popes and many other historical religious figures to collect (Figure 3). There are, of course, more images of Jesus than one could count, though his imagery raises the problem of rhetoric: is he shown as a historical figure or a deity? Does he belong in my collection? Collecting is obsessed with boundaries—what should contribute to my collection and what should not?

I appreciate skill and masterly expression, but I have collected these objects for other reasons. If we consider that collectors work over a lifetime to assemble their brood of artifacts, it would seem that the engine propelling their practice has at least as much to do with impulse, passion, and desire as with the rational motive to classify every specimen of a particular genus. What seems to surprise my visitors is that I would amass so many of this sort of thing. Why busts? In fact, I suspect the choice may be arbitrary. We do not recognize a collection as such until it is staring back at us, that is, until it has already begun and is able, by virtue of its accumulated mass, to exert a field of gravity in its own right, pulling at us to help it expand further. It is important to realize that a collection is something that must expand, or it ceases to exist. A collection is measured by growth. If you have five versions of the same thing that never expand, it is an array or an assortment, a single constellation of fixed elements, not a collection.

Collecting is not about expenditure or investment. That is why food, cattle, and children are not collected. They are gathered to be consumed (food), fattened and sold (cattle), or nurtured (children). Nor does one collect ideas. They are spent, put to use, developed, exchanged. They belong to an economy in which one participates. Purchasing items for resale is not collecting. Nor can merely hoarding or amassing things be said to be collecting them. Collecting removes items from one kind of market in order to insert them into another, which is the taxonomy of the collection that is its always emergent purpose. A collection is an alternate system of value that determines the act of collecting. A collection dictates its own terms for all additions, which change the shape and character of the collection. A collection comprises parts that form an evolving order that presses its owner to expand it. In the economy of a collection, the owner is a servant, an instrument or means driven by a restless need to articulate the collection’s taxonomy by displaying it and by growing it.

We collect because we are compelled to—by the magnetic field of a collection’s incompleteness, by a telos that moves through the ever-changing group. The assembly speaks to us in the material verbiage of size, shape, display, variation of medium, color, type. For example, I have wanted at various times to collect samples of all media used commercially to produce small busts of historical individuals. So I sought out every medium I could identity—ceramic, chalkware, plaster, resin, marble, cast stone, bronze, zinc, copper, pewter, aluminum, cast iron, pot metal, plastic, latex, porcelain, wood, wax. Then I wanted sizable representations of genres: paper weights, souvenirs, pencil sharpeners, coin banks, curios, whiskey decanters, promotional gifts, advertisements, commemorative busts, rewards,

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honorific totems, contest prizes, and political propaganda. And then I wanted a broad sampling of subjects to be found: composers, poets, novelists, philosophers, generals, presidents, popes, heads of state, patriots, folk heroes, artists, film stars, professional athletes. And as I collected, I found myself limning the boundaries of what I wanted and what I learned was outside my aim. I concentrated on historical figures, avoiding literary characters, ancient mythical figures, fictional personalities, saints, Victorian types, virtues, allegorical figures. No gods or demons or angels. And size: nothing more than ten inches in height, very little less than two inches. And expense: rarely more than forty or fifty dollars, more often between five and fifteen. And no fine art. I wanted only mass-produced objects, mechanically wrought for the commercial marketplace. Collectibles, not antiques. If a bust is hand-crafted (carved or modeled), it must be an example of an entire class of objects, not one-of-a-kind.

As the collection expanded, it continued to tell me in new ways what to seek out. It led and, after repeatedly consulting with it, I followed. And that made the collecting both a pleasure and an imperious master. Collections forever obsess their servant-owners with something they need, something one must find. Producers know this and issue collectible series. An entire set of presidents, the leading composers, the Romantic poets, the generals of the Civil War. Collectors are apt to spend more and more to complete the sets. But when they have acquired everything, an anti-climactic gloom descends. The temptation is to dispel the disappointment by turning to fill another gap.

Collectors are buffeted by such passions. I wonder if the best they can achieve is a kind of managed addiction. The deliverance from the raw passion to collect with single-minded obsession relies on clinging to the rudder of purpose. A collection that coheres is one whose members exhibit a telos in relation to one another, that is, a point or purpose that directs their assembly. Collectors must continue to examine their collections because the telos is always coming into view. (This ongoing disclosure is why collectors inspecting their work appear to be doting or gloating. In fact, they are marveling at what they had never noticed before.) If collectors do not establish a rationale for their collections, they will remain pointless, shaped only by what appears on the market. So collectors identify a theme and forge from it both a limit on what they will acquire and a motive for pursuing what they do. Discourses emerge as they assess their collections. These discourses intermingle with the
practice of acquisition, directing and informing the quest, shaping policies of acquisition and practices of display. As a statement of the collection’s purpose, the discourse disciplines the urge to collect, honing the fit of desiderata and restraining the compulsion to acquire at will. But the urge remains, an addiction managed, but always on the verge of splurging. Why do we collect? So that we do not binge.