



The Urge to Collect

From children's marbles to works of art, collecting is one of mankind's most popular pastimes. We collect many different things for many different reasons, but there must be rules to make it worthwhile . . .

□ Why do people collect things? The handiest explanation is that it is a matter of instinct. Collecting evidently is not exclusive to human beings. Pack rats and magpies are notorious for stashing away every object that strikes their fancy. Chimpanzees and whisky jacks share the habit of assembling jumbles of trash.

That monumental spoil-sport Sigmund Freud put down the urge to collect as a sublimation of sexual desire. This hardly seems to accord with the ways of pack rats and the rest, unless these creatures are a lot more complicated than we think. Other psychologists have tied collecting to an unsatisfied lust for power. This begs the question of why some of the most powerful people in history have been among history's greatest collectors as well.

But why quibble? Suffice to say that a great many different people collect a great many different things for a great many different reasons. It might even be said that we are all collectors whether we know it or not. For who among us does not collect something, be it rubber bands, paper bags, derelict wallets or handbags, desiccated ball point pens, single cuff links or earrings? What husband does not notice a tendency in his wife to collect certain foodstuffs such as cans of apple sauce or pound upon pound of tea? What wife has not detected a similar tendency in her husband,

dwelling on broken fishing tackle, ill-assorted nuts and bolts, and obsolete neckties? What is a home without keys for which there are no locks, unstrung tennis rackets and unsmoked pipes, sweaters that will never again be worn, and musical instruments that will never again be played?

Bits of string, buttons, expired driver's licenses, old golf balls — the list of our litter is almost endless. It takes a superhuman effort of will to throw out everything in a household that should be thrown out, and most of us prove to be only too human when the moment of decision arrives. Sophisticated collectors would dismiss this as mere "accumulation", as opposed to the active practise of collecting, which entails buying, selling, trading, labelling, cataloguing, and maintaining contact with fellow enthusiasts. Still, it takes no special powers of analysis to see that our reluctance to part with useless items goes beyond the delusion that they "might come in handy someday". They may be rubbish, but it is our own rubbish — part of our uniqueness as human beings.

Collecting in any form is an assertion of identity. Clinging to personal junk is only a step away from the more orderly process of saving photographs and souvenirs to keep a sentimental record of our life and times. The impulse to gather souvenirs can be overpowering. Soldiers have been known to risk death or injury to pluck a memento

from a battlefield; so, for that matter, have teen age fans scrambling for some pop idol's autograph. Why? Probably because keepsakes are essential as keys to the memory. Photograph and souvenir collections are to the individual what museums and archives are to the society — a way of preserving history, in this case a history that is all one's own.

Collecting reveals a great deal about a personality. Among any group of children collecting marbles, you might find three or four different general types. Some will gamble to add to their treasures, while others will take no chances. Some will recklessly squander their stakes; others will specialize in shrewd trades. Some will concentrate on quantity at the expense of quality. Some, regrettably, will steal or cheat to add to what they have.

Childhood collections go some way towards proving that the child is father of the man. As a boy, Winston Churchill had an impressive collection of toy soldiers which he would manoeuvre in large formations; many years later he would be doing the same in real life, albeit at second hand. Churchill has been described as a romantic whose dreams came true. It is safe to say that there are many like him — racing drivers who once collected Dinky Toys, sports heroes who collected baseball and hockey cards with pictures and biographies of their own boyhood heroes, actresses who as girls clipped pin-ups out of movie magazines. The great majority of us, however, will never achieve our most romantic ambitions. For us, then, collecting may offer an outlet to indulge our fancies in a harmless and comfortable way.

Thus, for a few fleeting moments, the record collector may vicariously become an internationally renowned soloist performing in front of a glittering symphony orchestra. Distance and time mean nothing as the collector of model ships sails an imaginary vessel into the teeth of a hurricane as he rounds the Horn. The art collector falls into a reverie of dashing the last masterful brush strokes on his latest masterpiece. Immune from the discomforts of travel, the philatelist journeys far and wide to exotic climes.

*Saying to the world that
it's nobody else but you*

In this respect collecting is food and drink for that larger-than-life image of ourselves that dwells in the alter ego. But it can also be richly nourishing to the ego as such. There can be few owners of collections who do not delight in showing them off. Any collection, from sea shells to old masters, is a reflection of the owner's taste, and taste is the pride of a personality. Whether good, bad or indifferent in the eyes of others, taste is a way of proclaiming to the world: "This is nobody else but me."

The need to display one's taste as an expression of the ego partly explains the propensity of collectors to keep in touch with each other and to gather together on occasion. The recognition of one's peers is a heady tonic to self-esteem. A convention of, say, chess set collectors may be a hotbed of rivalry and envy, but it is all in the family, among people whose particular knowledge and acumen makes them an elite group of equals. Collecting is a great social leveller. An insignificant man in ordinary affairs may be the king of collectors of a certain class of object, commanding the respect of all who dabble in it. One of the joys of collecting in an organized fashion is in associating with like-minded people. Life-long friendships can spring from a common interest in things like matchbooks or dolls.

There seems no limit to the interests that may give rise to collections. The *Guinness Book of World Records* tells us that Dr. Robert E. Kaufman of New York has 6,210 packs of different brands of cigarettes from 157 countries; the world's largest collection of *empty* cigarette packs is owned by Niels Ventegodt of Copenhagen — 40,065 different brands. There are said to be 5,000 collectors in the United States of the "date nails" which railroads once drove into ties to record when a track was laid. Among other things, people collect outboard motors, coffee cans, mouth organs, hot water bottles, telephones, invalid stock certificates, and funny hats.

A refuge from the vexations of your everyday existence

They follow these whimsical pursuits at least partly as an antidote to the seriousness, tenseness and impersonality of everyday living; a great Russian bibliophile once put it nicely when he said that his collection gave him "needed rest from worldly squabbles". Collecting is capable of so absorbing our thoughts that we have none to spare for our usual vexations. It is noteworthy that even an art or book auction at which collectors have large sums at stake is conducted in an atmosphere of dignified tranquillity.

This is not to say that collecting is not a serious pastime. Some people are very earnest about it indeed. The hunting instinct in the human species comes to the fore in all its intensity when a collector is on the trail of a special quarry. Collectors can be ruthless bargainers when they are on to a good thing. Busy tycoons such as J. Pierpont Morgan and J. Paul Getty devoted as much time to their fine arts collections as they did to their businesses. But, of course, they had managed to collect enormous amounts of money first.

The historic appeal of collecting to the very rich may confirm the connection some critics have drawn between collecting and avarice. The same faculties needed to amass a great fortune are useful in amassing a great collection, no doubt. But it may be that they were doing more than just following their natural compulsions or flaunting their wealth and power. They may have been reaching for a kind of piggy-back immortality based on the immortality of the artists whose works they collected. Indeed, the names of many super-rich men and women of the past would now be forgotten entirely if it were not for the museums they established or their other public benefactions of art.

Taxation and social changes have now practically ruled out the vast collections once assembled by private individuals. Their place has been taken by collections like that of the National Gallery of Canada, which is celebrating its centennial this year. The officials and selection committees of such institutions do their collecting on behalf of the public. Over the years, our National Gallery has added to its original collection of Canadian art by acquisitions of paintings, sculptures and prints by most of the greatest names in the history of art.

Expansion, specialization, and a collection of fakes

Public institutions have much in common with private collectors. The National Gallery, for instance, has an acute space problem because its 28,000-item collection has long since outgrown its premises — not an uncommon complaint among collectors of any kind. Although it runs the largest and oldest travelling exhibition program in the world, its officials would still like to be able to exhibit more of its treasures. In this they are similar to coin and stamp collectors at conventions who protest that you ought to see what they had to leave at home.

The Gallery's collection has followed a familiar pattern in expanding from a fairly narrow speciality into broader fields such as fine art photography.

This is one of two main routes a collection can take, the other being to become more and more specialized. Collections can also run off in odd directions. A. J. B. Kiddell, a director of the famed London auction house of Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co., owns an extensive array of paintings — all of them certifiable fakes.

The danger of a collection turning you into its slave

Many the person who began collecting antiques has ended in being far more interested in the curious junk that crowds cheap antique shops. To the dedicated junk collector, a devastatingly unsightly old lamp may be more of a find than an authentic Chippendale piece. This is related to collecting for the sake of collecting, something that presents a hazard to the people who are now buying antiques and other works of art for economic reasons. It could well be that those who acquire collector's items as a hedge against inflation will want to keep and expand their collections. Having been bitten by the collecting bug, they may find themselves spending more inflated money than before.

The most common danger in collecting is that one can become a slave to it. This phenomenon can best be observed in one of the most prevalent and yet least recognized forms of collecting, the collecting of other human beings. Social climbers and groupies do it all the time; and their individuality is often abandoned in their supplication to the figures they admire. "Great lovers" of both sexes collect other people to the exclusion of rounded standards of quality and taste.

On the other hand, a person who gathers genuine friends has a collection that is unique and priceless. For in this as in all other forms of collecting, a couple of basic rules must apply to make it worthwhile. First, never collect just for show, but for intrinsic value. And second, never collect to impress others or to meet their standards. Collect according to your own standards to satisfy you.

A Change in Schedule

Since its inception almost 60 years ago, the *Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter* has been distributed with the bank's compliments to any individual or organization that cared to receive it. Such has been the immense popularity of its thought-provoking essays that its total circulation in French, English and Braille in both languages now stands at 736,000 a month in more than 75 countries.

Unfortunately sharp and steady increases in mailing and other costs over the past few years have added enormously to the expense of providing this public service. In order to reduce these prohibitive costs to manageable proportions, and yet preserve a service that is so obviously in demand, it has been decided to reduce the frequency of publication to six editions a year.

Accordingly, as of the next edition in July, its new name will be *The Royal Bank Letter*. We hope and trust that its readers will appreciate the reasons for the change. We intend to maintain the high literary standard that has made the *Letter* one of the world's most respected publications. It will not be published as frequently as in the past, but otherwise it will be the same as before.