Introduction. 'Doubts Affirmations'

Anthony Shelton

In my house, I have gathered together toys, small and large. I could not live without them My house, too, I built as a toy, and I play in it from morning to night
Pablo Neruda (In Luis Poirot, Pablo Neruda Absence and Presence 1990: 48).

All day long I pace the museums, inspecting the relics of our history, all carefully laid out and labelled in scholarly hands on postcards. At night I meditate on the quantities of pure gold which we house so carelessly in glass cases, unaware that this same putrid stuff is decaying in our arteries. Is it possible to keep the vitality of the centuries in a bottle with a postcard on it to hint at an identity long since lost? My own history, my present, is confused by the death which I see gathered around me, here a jawbone, there a femur, here a wedding ring, there a pickaxe. I cannot live because the decomposing bodies of my ancestors dog me at every turn. They are not living in their myth, but dead, influencing my dying, not my life. That is why action is so erratic, so full of extremes, because the hyperethral universes which should live in us today are dead, and behind glass. Instead of nourishing us they are the umpires of our defeat, our decline and fall.

Lawrence Durrell (The Black Book 1977 [1938]: 156-7).

This is the second of a two volume work which seeks to encourage the study and the wider historical comparison of the personalities, passions and means by which ethnographic collections were acquired; the processes involved in their transformation from private to public ownership; and the strategies pursued by museums and galleries in manufacturing and communicating their meanings to distinct publics. The first volume principally examined collectors, a focus which is continued in the opening section of the present work by Brown, the Taylors, Mackenzie, Green, Levell, Durrans, Garner, Wastiau, Martínez, and Glover. The following section, however, with papers by Petch, Levell, Shelton, and Bankes goes on to look at the relationship between collection policies, whether manifested through the requirements of distinct exhibitionary complexes or study collections, and changing forms and patterns of collecting. In the final



section, contributions by Jones and Pole provide institutional x-rays which disclose the complex, interwoven and often incommensurate and even contradictory positions occupied by individual collectors and the museums they have benefited. Looked at more generally: if the first set of papers explores collecting by situating collectors in their wider historical and social matrices; the last six contributions examine the formation of contemporary museum collections and the influence of collectors and the modalities of collecting on the growth and character of those institutions.

Not only can the history of collecting be approached from at least two different starting points, but the ideological screens produced by fundamental rifts and tensions between collecting institutions and collectors (Corbey 2000, Shelton 2001a), carry the potential, at the very least, to generate different versions of their histories. The worlds of museums and private collectors can be, but not always, full of animosity. Surprisingly, a number of the ethnographic collectors and dealers interviewed by Raymond Corbey expressed their consternation at the unethical way in which some museums had acquired their holdings. They lamented that museums were reluctant to enter into meaningful dialogue with the peoples from whom they obtained their collections. Others accused museums of operating double standards inasmuch as they were willing to publicly condemn dealers as unethical, while nevertheless, continuing to acquire material from them (2000: 163). Dealers also sometimes expressed resentment towards museums for taking objects out of general circulation and thus diminishing marketable commodities. Yet, in an extraordinary inversion of British academic and museological opinion, we find nobody less than a dealer and collector of 'tribal art', Jacques Kerchache, playing the role of the architect and guiding spirit behind France's most ambitious and costly project for a new museum of ethnography, the Musée du Quai Branly. Museums are sometimes accused of 'killing objects', and being unappreciative and ignorant of the value, significance or beauty of what they hold, views which are also held by some non-collectors. With such misunderstandings there is little wonder that Lawrence Durrell left such a depressing account of his trip to the Horniman Museum, so antithetical to his vivid and enthusiastic writings of real, lived rituals, festivals, and everyday life in the Himalayas described from his boyhood recollections in Pied Piper of Lovers. Older museum displays and practices may therefore, according to some, be equated with the death of all the 'wonderful', 'romantisised' qualities that collectors, dealers, artists, and aesthetes impute the objects they own.

Conversely, museum personnel, including those of the two older Parisian ethnographic museums which are destined to be swallowed up by the new project, often mistrust the less than transparent workings of a too fluid international market situated within highly sensitive political arenas and delicate and complex legal frameworks. Prolific ethnographic collectors, such as Jef Vander Straete, Matthias L. J. Lemaire, Jean-Paul Barbier, Monique Barbier-Mueller, Paul Guillaume, Charles Ratton, Bedouin de Grunne, Marc Felix, and many so-called 'supercollectors' who are, or were, able to exert tremendous influence on the artmarket, have not, to the best of my knowledge, attracted much scholarly attention. Neither, with the exception of Hooper and Epstein,1 have perhaps less influential collectors (less influential only because of the relative underdevelopment of the British market in 'tribal art'), such as William Oldman, W. D. Webster, or Harry



Beasley, been the subject of much scrutiny.² The way such collectors can influence markets, taste, and museum policies, is better documented for fine and contemporary art collectors. Interestingly, some of the better known of these, including Robert and Lisa Sainsbury and Dominique and John de Menil, combine collections of contemporary art with ethnography. According to Jane Addams supercollectors derive their wealth

...from multi-million-dollar family businesses that are also international; they buy where art is cheap and sell where it is expensive - usually the US; they buy in bulk and work hard at their hobby; they use dealers as scouts but in general make their own selections; they establish art institutions and hire curators to run them; they exert a significant influence on the art market - they can even raise prices merely by viewing works of art (in Hatton and Walker 2000: 9).

In The French Art Market. A Sociological View (1987), Raymonde Moulin observes the complex and ambiguous motives that drive contemporary art collectors. In one interview, a collector claimed: 'With paintings I experienced the lasting pleasure of absolute possession that so long eluded me with people' (1987: 82), while another thought: 'Collecting is lazy. It is a way of appropriating other men's work, of embellishing oneself as with the feathers of a peacock. It is a way of sharing in the artist's creative genius, his demiurgic power' (1987: 83). According to Mamadou Keita, a Malian dealer and collector of 'tribal' art in Paris: '... the tribal art market is a world of arguments, backstabbing and cheating.... Hate and envy everywhere! Everyone is fishing in the same pond for the same fish big and small, the collectors, so they all stand on each other's toes' (Corbey 2000: 160); a characterisation which readily brings to mind the unscrupulous dealer described in Richard and Sally Price's Equatoria (1992). These self-indictments confirm the worse stereotypes held by the museum establishment about private collectors. Collecting may be a form of expropriation to bestow, quite consciously, on oneself the emblems of power and prestige, and as in the case of some collectors, to reap substantial financial rewards in the process. In Britain, it was interest in contemporary art that brought awareness of 'tribal' pieces, but even then a specialist market did not begin to grow until the 1950s (MacClancy 1988: 164). Between 1958-1968, the annual turnover in the Antiquities and Primitive Art Department at Sotheby's increased from £34,000 to £250,000, until in the 1970s so-called 'tribal art' was being collected and traded for its investment potential (MacClancy 1988:165). Charles Saatchi, a good example of a supercollector, has frequently been vilified for monopolising specific markets, buying contemporary art in bulk at cheap prices, filtering it through the exhibitionary complexes he controls or can exert influence over, and selling it at huge profits. Although he has denied any self-interest, his critics remain as vociferous as his supporters, and whether fairly or not, have tarred his motivations as financially driven (Hatton and Walker 2000: 158-173). Similar descriptions and interpretations could no doubt also be applied to some of the less researched, but enormously influential ethnographic collectors listed above. Such is the anathema increasingly connected to this most



voracious activity that, in a recent article in the Sunday Telegraph Magazine, Cressida Connolly advises her readers:

I don't know why parents encourage their children to collect things. Collecting promotes avarice, slyness, obsessional tendencies and envy. It is progressive - like any addiction - and pernicious. Witness the thieving in the playground and on the street that has come from the Pokémon craze. No wonder the arch-villain of Toy Story 2 is a collector (16 January 2001: 51-3).

However, not all collectors, or for that matter supercollectors, are motivated by self-interest or narrowly defined egotistic goals. A very different type of collector was the late Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, who restlessly converted whatever economic capital he could accrue into symbolic capital, following his imagination, passion and will to fashion his own world. Much of Neruda's collection was broadly ethnographic, dealing as it did with the wrecks of the sea and the much worn tools and accoutrements of rural life. Living in a world surrounded by such objects provided the stimulus for some of Neruda's most unforgettable poetry. According to Alastair Reid

> He lived outwardly, not inwardly. All his life he collected a great variety of things: ships in bottles, shells, French postcards, ships' figureheads, sextants, astrolabes, clocks, stones, books, hats, bottles. (in Poirot 1990: 9).

The houses in which these objects came to rest became his 'private theatres, in which he had designed the sets, and always played the leading role' (Ibid.). Objects are what Boris Wastiau has recently described as lieux de mémoire (2000: 9), brought together to precipitate a collector's own theatrum mundi so that long after the physical presence of their owners has departed, their ghosts remain in the assemblages composed in life. The beautifully haunting house of Frida Kahlo in San Angel or the house by the sea that Neruda built himself in Isla Negra, when recombined and made transparent through their maker's paintings and poems, pull together whole unique human universes.

Neruda composed and lived his life intensely from the flotsam and jetsam he gathered together on his travels; memories materialised in the remarkable objects that were metaphors of a life's voyage. His attitude to these objects, as well as their relation to his compositions, was complex but clear:

It is very appropriate, at certain times of the day or night, to look deeply into objects at rest: wheels which have traversed vast dusty spaces, bearing great cargoes of vegetables or minerals, sacks from the coalyards, barrels, baskets, the handles and grips of the carpenter's tools. They exude the touch of man and the earth as a lesson to the tormented poet. Worn surfaces, the mark hands have left on things, the aura, sometimes tragic and always wistful, of these objects, lend to reality a fascination not to be taken lightly.



The flawed confusion of human beings shows in them, the proliferation, materials used and discarded, the prints of feet and fingers, the permanent mark of humanity on the inside and outside of all objects.

That is the kind of poetry we should be after, poetry worn away as if by acid by the labour of hands, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling of lilies and of urine, splashed by the variety of what we do, legally or illegally.

A poetry as impure as old clothes, as a body, with its food stains and its shame; with wrinkles, observations, dreams, wakefulness, prophecies, declarations of love and hate, stupidities, shocks, idylls, political beliefs, negations, doubts affirmations, taxes (in Poirot 1990: 38).

He himself described his houses as 'a fable of cement, iron, glass', a 'dream universe' according to Matilde Urrutia (in Poirot 1990: 52). Neruda or Kahlo's memory palaces, or those which belong to a multitude of unrecorded lives are stark contrasts to the unsentimental homes of non-collectors; the graveyards of suburban interiors, or those 'spiritual' souls that stalk the poor poet, berating the supposed materialism of his habit, while waiting for the opportunity to run away with his memories and dispose of them for personal gain. Neruda shared a similar proclivity with Pierre Loti or Sir John Soanes. In the ethnographic world Neruda's counterpart was Mademoiselle Walschot, described in this volume by Boris Wastiau, who inhabited a magical realm like those created by the surrealists André Breton, Max Ernst, Wolfgang Paalen, or the Mexican artists, Rafael and Pedro Coronel, to name but few.

Collecting has also been seen to stimulate classification and comparison and, so it has been argued in some discourses, form an essential part of scientific method. Nevertheless, 'knowledge, mastery, and control', as Hatton and Walker have argued, appear to be three reoccurring themes which are as prevalent among fine art collectors (2000: 96) as well as their ethnographic counterparts. According to Corbey:

The better Brussels dealers, nearly all (are) also collectors, are engaged in a continuous struggle for pre-eminence, for status: who has the best private collection, deals in the rarest pieces, organises the finest vernissages? Who has the best taste? Who has 'opened up' new areas? (2000: 134).

Suspicion about collectors is not only found in the popular media, but shadows and is sometimes even confirmed in some of the essays in this volume. Romantics, idealists, obsessives, self-promoters, even liars and rogues are all terms that could be used to describe one or other of the personalities that emerge from these pages. In 1978 African Arts, a much respected scholarly journal, stopped printing photographs of artefacts in private collections because of the adverse effect they had on increasing their market values. For similar reasons, after noting a sudden spate in sales after a piece had appeared in one of its exhibitions, the



Museum of Mankind abandoned exhibiting privately held ethnographica early in its short history (MacClancy 1988: 173). It is extraordinary how much passion, hatred and acclaim collectors engender, but some of the contributors to this volume offer their own antidotes to such an unfairly termed 'disease' while ensuring the survival and perpetuation of museum work. Brown convincingly argues that collections are the result of at least two sets of mediations in which the desires of the collector must always engage with the criteria adopted by an originating community in stipulating what can and cannot be alienated. Although such mediation may not always proceed in a balanced, just or even intelligible way (recall the invocations to the early Portuguese traders on the Guinea coast to participate in an exchange system embedded in a foreign and exotic religious idiom described by William Pietz), objects once obtained can enter new and sometimes redeeming transactions with their communities of origin. Sometimes, when the objects are still contested this may be negative, but under other circumstances such as with the collection of Cree sacred bundles, described by Brown, additional fieldwork can elicit further histories from the community, which not only serve to deepen our own understanding of the significance of displaced objects, but can contribute to the recovery, recollection and revitalisation of a community, family or individual's own past. Thus the restitution of works or images can serve a prophylactic function.

This work opens with Brown's demonstration of the utility of doing object-based fieldwork, itself a form of visual restitution and oral decolonisation of our own categories, and ends with Pole's avowal to work ever more closely with originating communities to promote understanding and co-operation between geographically distant localities. Although some of the intervening papers give examples of this kind of close co-operation (Horniman and Manchester museums), the thrust of the research not unsurprisingly focuses on the histories, motivations, and strategies of the acquisitors. Some of these, such as Garner's portrayal of Merton Russell-Cotes or the Taylor's anecdotal and brief mention of Grey Owl, disclose apparently roguish characters, but the majority of the collectors discussed in these pages were either romantics, idealists, or driven by curiosity or the search for personal meaning and identity. MacKenzie's stirring description of Mary Edith Durham notes how one of her motivations was to map the distribution of costumes and the styles and patterns of dress in order to ascertain ethnic distribution in the Balkans to help settle questions over land rights. Martínez juxtaposes the persecution and prejudice experienced by Otto Samson with his vision of a common humanity whose unity could be found in mapping and collecting the material evidence of cultural traits which diffused from one region to another. Not surprisingly, and perhaps it is too banal and reductive to even remark upon such a point, most, if not all of the collectors described here, were in some way liminal persons. Liminal as in the case of Russell-Cotes and Grey Owl in as much as they were attempting to construct new identities to accompany and legitimate their transition from one social class or life style to another; liminal in as much as they worked in the interstices between two different social and cultural realities (Davidson, Gray, Hose); liminal because of travel (Durham and Thomson); or liminalised by their own activity together with the obsession and peculiar interests underlying them (Pitt Rivers, Samson, Sheridan and Blackmore). Nevertheless, as Durrans reminds us the peoples of one historical epoch removed from our own are also 'other' to us, and it is dangerous and at worst disingenuous to impute them motives or project judgements from a totally



unlike historical milieu such as that which we ourselves occupy. If collectors like Mary Edith Durham, or Sheridan and Blackmore, for whom the process of collecting, with all the concomitant social relations, trials, expectations and triumphs that it entailed, was more important than the resulting collection, had not themselves been romantics, the later recollection of their exploits by friends and family members recounting their own genealogies, would almost certainly have made them so.

Too much recent opinion has tried to reduce and generalise the 'collector' to a common type person, without examining the complex motivations underlying their actions or the relationship between their collections and their other productions and world view. Corbey, noting the differences between the collectors / dealers of Brussels writes: 'Some have become or are becoming quite rich in the process, some not; some are real intellectuals, others not; but all are very passionate about tribal art' (2000: 76). MacClancy, on the other hand, found that some collectors thought '...the best pieces feed the spirit'; could dispatch them on a journey towards liberation; or provide a spiritual balance to the pressures of business and politics (1988: 176). This volume is concerned neither to vilify or celebrate collectors, but to achieve a better understanding of the heterogeneous connections between objects, biographies and institutions.

That museums usually erase the identity of the collectors who have assembled their holdings has commonly been acknowledged, though not sufficiently examined. The process of personal erasure appears partly to depend on the specific circumstances of each collection and the level and nature of the documentation which accompanied donations. Three patterns emerge from the papers collected together here. Glover, Green, and Levell note, that even when collectors published books about the customs and lives of the people from whom they collected, the process of assembling the collection or even the relation between material culture and the written narrative may be missing. As with the missionary collections assembled by Davidson artefacts were intended to be used to illustrate popular lectures given in order to raise funds for good works.3 In collections such as these, only the collector could provide the bridge between historical circumstances, specific meanings, and objects, or, where they were made and have survived, the diaries, letters or photographs, sometimes waiting to be discovered in private hands. Levell thus talks about the need to look at collectors in a much wider perspective than that simply afforded by the museum. Furthermore, as the papers by Brown and Durrans note, there has been a tendency for collectors to split the products of their lives work between private and public spheres; collections often going to public institutions, while diaries, letters and photographs remain within the family. This poses particular challenges to re-totalise a life and collection once its instigator has died, and privately held records begin to get lost or are discarded or intentionally destroyed. Second, collectors such as Russel-Cotes and Durham consciously composed their own narratives of personal adventure to situate themselves within the wider process of the formation of their collection. Individual intentions here can vary between the desire for self-aggrandisement and memorialisation, attributed by Garner to Russell-Cotes, to the intense personal and apparently disinterested commitment that MacKenzie argues motivated the career of Durham. Third, in yet another case, collectors attribute discrete meanings to the objects of their collections, while the biographies of their assemblage, such as those of Donald Cadzow and Robert and John Rymill, or Charles Hose are absent. Clearly in each of these cases, the epistemological value of



different types of documentation and the distinct modalities through which it can be reconnected to a collection can produce very different narratives whose worth will be variously judged by the specific museum.

With the growth of professional anthropology, collecting slowly became institutionalised and determined not by personal whimsies, but by the uses to which collections were to be put. However, to believe object attribution marks the beginning of systematic collecting glosses over important differences in the form documentation could take. Durrans, observing that most early ethnographic collections were made by amateurs, notes the influence of the collector's primary training in deciding what was deemed important to record and ignore. In the case of Charles Hose, it was probably his natural science background that guided the short and perfunctory information he collected with each specimen. Nevertheless, the same training also led him to write publications which were descriptive rather than personal, so the whole range of strategies he employed in building his prolific collections remain unknown to us. In the case of Major Powell Cotton, another prolific ethnographic collector from a very different background, exact map co-ordinates and detailed descriptions, recorded the collecting point of many of the specimens he acquired, no doubt reflecting the military precision which had been a necessary part of his job (Nicklin 2001: 150). From 1956, beginning with Colin Turnbull, the assemblage of systematic collections by professional anthropologists at the Horniman, brought new and more comprehensive data. Since then this has been systematised and coerced into institutional guidelines governing collecting procedures. However, it is not only the intention of collectors or the policy of museums that determine the value and meaning of an object. Changes in intellectual climate also provide alternative filters which enable objects to be re-evaluated and ascribed new significances by tastemakers and publics alike.

Nevertheless, since most museums during the early period in the growth of scientific collecting saw the best kind of documentation as empirical or objective, native exegeses were still largely ignored. In the case of the Pitt Rivers (Petch), or the Horniman (Levell), the demands of evolutionary sequencing elicited an exegesis remote from that which any 'native' artist or user could have provided.

In the wider museum collections described by Bankes, Jones, Petch, Pole and Shelton, it is the sheer heterogeneity of object sources that establish an inevitable and undeniable tension between institutions and individuals. This will inevitably be compounded more as museums such as Cambridge, the Horniman, Manchester and the nationals continue to make increasing use of 'native' interpreters, curators and collectors.

While early 19th century western travellers fixed and ensured the cohesiveness of their own memory through collections which abnegated someone else's history, it is no less true that, once removed to the museum, these personages were themselves, in turn, erased from the narratives that grew around former personal artefacts; not only through the absorption of collections within wider, encompassing paradigms such as at the Pitt Rivers Museum, or the Horniman, but through simple neglect such as Jones describes



occurred at Ipswich, and, one suspects, many other smaller provincial museums throughout the United Kingdom. From 1851 onwards, the Great Exhibition and the rapid growth of public museums helped democratise the experience of travel by showing at home what previously only the rich could have seen abroad. Similarly the exhibition goer, no less than the *flâneur* on the streets and in the department stores of European cities, developed and shared similar perceptual and intellectual mechanisms with the exotic traveller; '...visiting, watching, marvelling, wondering, defining, naming, and commenting' to apprehend the spectacle assembled before them (Hamon 1992: 67).

Jones while embedding his discussion of collectors in the institutional history of Ipswich Museum, not so much looks at the Institution to redeem the work of collectors, but the reappreciation of the lives and motivations of collectors as a necessary first-step to re-integrate their gifts into a comprehensive and international history of Ipswich's encounter with the wider world. Museum classifications of collections by subject divisions eludes their distinctive biographies and significant relationships with their former owner's personal and unique encounter with the world; an encounter which inevitably testifies to a specific historical relationship between the local and the 'other'.

The contributors to this and its companion volume, apart from documenting the work of specific collectors and describing the richness of some of the institutional collections that they contributed to establishing, raise many interesting comparisons and reveal various processes which deserve much more attention. In the end, the two broad approaches taken here to examine collections; whether from the point of view of the collector or the institution, are not after all incommensurate or contradictory, but only alternative starting points for investigating the knotted discourses which tie together the private and the public; the personal and the institutional; the local and the far; the self and the other in unique and different ways which have given museums their unique, but not always acknowledged, singular identities.

Notes

- 1. See Ezio Bassani and Malcolm Mcleod 1989.
- 2. MacClancy (1988: 169), estimated that there were only about 15 serious collectors of non-western art in the UK in the late 1980s. Since then both Sotheby's and Christie's have closed their London non-western art departments, serious collectors of say African art number little more than three, and by the end of the 20th century important dealers, like Kevin Conru, have relocated to Brussels.
- 3. Missions in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany also sold ethnographic artefacts to raise money to fund their work, as well as retaining their own collections which were used to familiarise new missionaries about the different beliefs and their manifestations which they might encounter (Corbey 200:59).

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