

# Objects OF DESIRE

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CREATING LEGACIES, ONE COLLECTION AT A TIME



To most people, stuff is...stuff. To collectors, stuff is living history.

FOR COLLECTORS, Patrice Moore's story is a cautionary tale. Mr. Moore is the man who, in December 2003, was found buried in his Bronx apartment in a decade's worth of magazines, newspapers, books, and junk mail. Trapped for two days, he was finally discovered by his landlord, who serendipitously came by to offer him a loan he'd requested earlier in the week. Rescue workers spent over an hour removing rubbish to reach him, and he had to be hospitalized for the leg injuries he sustained when the weight of his accumulated papers crashed down upon him.

Hoarders like Mr. Moore take collecting to an extreme, endangering their own health and safety in order to avoid throwing anything away. But hoarding is just an outlying case of what many researchers believe to be part of human nature—the desire to create, sustain, and preserve. Indeed, our early survival as a species depended on our ability to stockpile grains, nuts, and meats as a hedge against the

## *A lot of Moxie*



At the turn of the twentieth century, the most popular drink in America was a former patent medicine called Moxie. It was also one of the most heavily promoted. Moxie logos appeared on dishware, toys, thermometers, fans, and even sheet music. Today, hundreds of collectors like Peter Bergendahl of Henniker, New Hampshire, are on the prowl for Moxie collectibles. Bergendahl focuses on Moxie bottles and bottlecaps. Think that makes for slim pickings? Think again—there are over 120 variations of bottles alone.



precariousness of the human food supply. Back then, collecting was about preserving our lives in the most literal way; without it, we would have become extinct.

Collecting today, thankfully, does not usually have life-or-death consequences, Mr. Moore's paper avalanche notwithstanding. But it is almost as ubiquitous as it was when humans first walked the earth. Most children have a collection, be it seashells, stickers, or baseball cards. And even adults who do not consider themselves collectors may keep scrapbooks of family letters and photographs or purchase the occasional highly valuable or nostalgic item. If it's true that collecting is in some way hard-wired, then it's no surprise that its draw is quite powerful. What else could explain the enormous success of *Antiques Roadshow*, the most popular primetime show on PBS? Its appeal rests on the dramatic tension and emotion of the moment when people discover that their junk is a treasure—or worse, their treasure is junk.

Viewed this way, dedicated collectors aren't so different from everyone else; they just take a broader perspective. Rather than save only their own family history, or purchase only modern knick-knacks or limited-edition items, they seek both to differentiate themselves through their discerning eye and to honor and protect a small piece of history—whether typewriters, folk art paintings, or Civil War bullets. Their desire to preserve is deeply felt; they reap great delight from marking the boundaries of the collection, acquiring objects, learning about their items and sharing that knowledge, and completing a collection. Perhaps most important, they also preserve a sense of historical context and continuity through their collection.

This desire to define and distinguish oneself and to establish a legacy is not unique to individual collectors. As a society, we also create institutions—museums, libraries, and archives—whose purpose is to preserve our history, culture, and collective memory. As the nation's conservators, the reasons institutions acquire objects are different from those of the individual collector. Institutions seek representativeness rather than completeness, universal narratives rather than particular details. And they must consider not only what captures their curators' hearts and minds, but also what attracts visitors and resources. Yet they, too, aspire to ensure that their knowledge—their mark on the world—will endure through the institution even after the individuals involved are gone.

#### **POSSESSION OBSESSION**

Asking collectors about their collections is like asking new parents about their children. The delight in their voices and the sparkle in their eyes will betray their passions as they tell you where they obtained each item, why they chose it, how much it cost, and what makes it unique. And if you happen to converse with

Investing in stocks usually pays off better than investing in a collection, but most collectors aren't in it for the money

serious collectors—those who run a collecting club or write research articles about their collectibles in their spare time—the depth of their knowledge will be as astounding as the depth of their collection. They will tell you the entire history of the production of their beloved objects, who invented it, why the product is designed as it is, and why it is no longer made. They will be able to discriminate between minor variations in the product and tell you how each and every alteration affects its value. They will be custodians of history, admittedly of a very particular kind.

What motivates people to devote their lives to preserving what many others would view as arcana? For some, it is an investment. Collectors dream of buying an unrecognized treasure on the cheap, waiting until the market is ripe, and selling it for a 1,000 percent return. But those who plan to retire on the money they'll make by selling their old comic book collections may be surprised to find that most collections really aren't a great investment. Although there are always a few lucky winners in the collectibles lottery, a recent survey of the academic literature by economists Benjamin Burton and Joyce Jacobsen finds that “the majority of collectibles yield lower financial returns than stocks,” and at greater risk.

For many collectors, though, it's not about the money. “To me, money takes the fun out of it,” says Steve Silberberg, a Hull, Massachusetts, resident and owner of one of the largest collections of air sickness bags in the U.S. To dedicated collectors like Silberberg, the act of acquiring their objects of desire has a value in and of itself, one that at least equals any potential financial gain they might receive. Peter Bergendahl, a New Hampshire collector of Moxie soda bottles and bottle caps, agrees. “I realize that my collection is an investment, but I don't like to think of it that way. Knowing something is out there and looking for it, the search for the object, is the whole point. It's no fun without that.” The pleasure of the experience is what gets collectors up early on summer weekends to make crack-of-dawn sorties to antiques shows. It's why they feel thrilled when they find a cherished item in a junk box at a garage sale or triumphant when they outbid someone at an auction.

But neither is it just about the fun. Dedicated collectors are after more than the simple enjoyment of



In 1990, a Swatch watch designed by Italian painter-sculptor Mimmo Paladino sold at Sotheby's for just over \$20,000. Original retail price, just two years prior: \$70.



## Toy story



In February 2004, Boston's Museum of Afro-American History opened a temporary exhibit of 40 historic and contemporary black dolls. "Dolls are a powerful way of talking about history," says executive director Beverly Morgan-Welch. "They tell the story of changing images of black people by how they were designed, where they were made, who bought them, and who played with them. The more people see these objects as being part of American culture, the more they can understand a more inclusive America."



finding or owning things. Since they wish to make a distinct imprint on the world, they choose what they collect carefully and deliberately, which leads them both to narrow their fields of vision and to deepen their expertise within that field.

For this reason, a collector's accumulated objects must in some sense be the same—Man Ray prints, Bakelite jewelry, diner memorabilia—which sets a boundary on what is and is not in the collection. At the same time, every item in a collection must be unique. Most collectors avoid duplicates, except to be sold or traded for other items. Most also seek completion: owning every Topps baseball card issued in 1985, or one example of every piece of vintage Fiesta ware ever manufactured in medium green. This is true even for those who collect in areas where a collection can never truly be complete, such as art; for example, they may try to obtain one piece of art from each period of an artist's life, or one piece by every major artist working in a particular style.

The collections of Dave Sutherland, a former Vermont radio broadcaster and current president of the New England Antique Radio Club, are typical. Sutherland collects a specialty type of radio that radio stations used to give away in the 1950s. Shaped like an old RCA microphone, the frequency of the station was printed on the front and a call letter flag on the top. He aims to obtain one of these for all the frequencies he worked for. He is also searching for all the program guides for his former employer, New Hampshire radio station WKNE, from the 1940s and 1950s, as well as all the sizes of milk bottles from all the dairies in his hometown of Brattleboro, Vermont, and a variety of barber bottles and shaving mugs. Establishing these rules of the game—these limits and boundaries—creates the tension and excitement collectors need to continue their search year after year.

The personal relevance of Sutherland's collections is also typical. Because of the time, money, and emotional energy collecting demands, most people collect something that holds personal meaning—perhaps items relating to professional interests or hobbies, or nostalgia for one's youth, or a remembrance of a friend or relative. Ray Goulet of Watertown, Massachusetts, founder of the New England Magic Collectors Association, collects Houdini and other magic memorabilia because he was a professional performer for 40 years and ran a magic studio for over two decades. Bergendahl started his Moxie collection because he remembered his mother drinking Moxie in his youth and because he used to earn money as a kid by returning bottles for deposit. Many get their start by inheriting a valuable item, then starting a collection of the same.

For the same reason, collections rarely stem from commonly used items such as paper napkins or toothbrushes. These types of items do not hold emotional

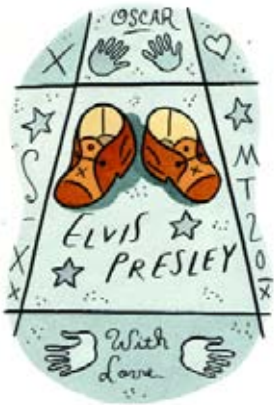
Because of the time, money, and energy collecting demands, most people only collect things that hold personal significance

meaning for most people, so they don't seem like items that are worth collecting. It is only when an item is imbued with personal or historic meaning that it becomes collectible. One could imagine, for instance, collecting the monogrammed napkins from a celebrity's wedding or a set of vintage toothbrushes demonstrating the history of tooth-brushing technology.

But when it comes down to it, collectors don't simply care about owning stuff, no matter how personally relevant or satisfying it is to own a particular piece of history. Much of the pleasure of experience is in sharing it with others. This is why there is an association for almost every area of collecting one can imagine: the Paperweight Collectors Association, the National Fishing Lure Collectors Club, the Candy Containers Collectors of America, and the Toothpick Holder Collectors Society, just to name a few. Marty Bunis, who organizes a quarterly swap meet for the New England Antique Radio Club, says, "People come here because they speak the same language and they're interested in the same things. They can get advice, and if they need something, it will be here or someone will know where to get it. It's more than a market; it's a place to socialize." By meeting with other like-minded people, collectors can distinguish themselves among their peers and can pass along their knowledge and enthusiasm to the next generation of collectors.

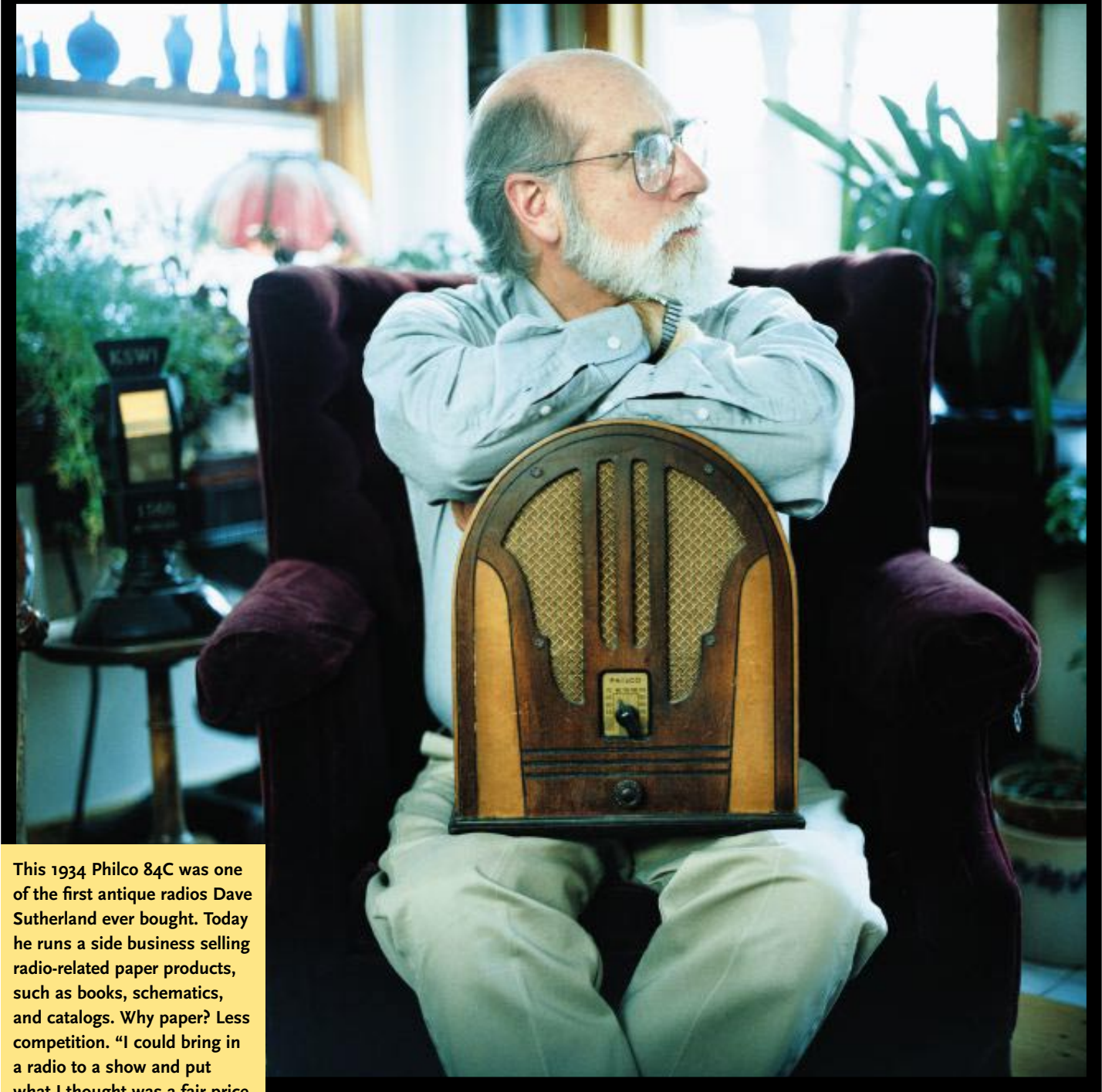
#### MORE THAN THE NATION'S ATTIC

As a society, we also care about saving our national treasures and remembering our cultural heritage. This is why we are, for instance, spending \$18 million and three-plus years to preserve and display the Star Spangled Banner that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814 and inspired our national anthem. But these efforts also go on at a much broader, institutional scale. We build museums ranging from the sublime (the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to the ridiculous (the Museum of Dirt in Boston, the Umbrella Cover Museum in Peak's Island, Maine)—and we build them frequently, with about 16,000 museums currently operating in the U.S. We preserve millions of rare books and papers in university libraries. We create specialized archives such as the Vermont Folklife Center, which stores audio recordings of everyday Ver-



One of the largest collections of celebrity shoes in the world—including Marilyn Monroe's high heels, Elvis Presley's boots, and Shaquille O'Neal's size 20 sneakers—grew from the collection of a Toronto podiatrist and can now be found at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto.





This 1934 Philco 84C was one of the first antique radios Dave Sutherland ever bought. Today he runs a side business selling radio-related paper products, such as books, schematics, and catalogs. Why paper? Less competition. "I could bring in a radio to a show and put what I thought was a fair price on it, but someone else would have the same radio in better condition and sell theirs, and I'd be left with mine," says Sutherland. "But there are only two of us who do the radio shows in New England who sell the paper stuff."



monsters' life stories, and the New Hampshire Political Library, which documents the state's unusual political history. We establish local historical societies to record the changing histories of our cities and towns through maps, census records, and significant objects. And in most cases, we make these preserved materials accessible to the public, for now and for the future.

These institutions are entrusted with describing and preserving important pieces of a culture or history—but to do their jobs well, they must do more than that. They must provide a coherent narrative and compelling presentation so that they will attract visitors, resources, and funding to their institution. This ensures the institution's viability and allows its story to be told to future generations. Building this kind of narrative typically doesn't mean displaying every possible example of a particular item, as an individual collector might, since the more narrow the range of objects, the less general appeal they will hold. Instead, institutions must cull the multitudes of possible items in their collections down to a manageable and meaningful few.

To accomplish this, institutional collectors establish a mission—a way of defining what is in and out of their collection and thereby of setting criteria for what to acquire. For example, the Concord Museum focuses on the town of Concord, Massachusetts, with a special emphasis on the early years of the American Revolution and on Concord's famous nineteenth-century authors such as Emerson and Thoreau, whereas the Peabody Essex Museum collects maritime and Asian art along with architectural artifacts. The difference is that, by charter, institutions must generally stay within that mission, whereas collectors can always alter their goals as their interests and opportunities change.

Furthermore, because they are responsible to respond to a broad range of interests, institutions will seek out different objects than will individual collectors. Museums care more about obtaining the best examples and the items that represent the watershed moments in their area of focus. Matt Zeysing, assistant curator of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, comments, "The Hall of Fame doesn't actively pursue a jersey worn by Kobe Bryant from any particular game, but last year we got his shorts from the night that he set the NBA record by hitting 12 three-point shots in a game. If he hadn't hit those shots, we wouldn't have pursued anything from Kobe Bryant from that game."

At the same time, cultural institutions will often pursue items that would be of little interest to the average collector but help to fill in gaps, tell a story, or bring a historic event to life. For instance, the Concord Museum has a collection of tourist artifacts, such as china and postcards, that have only negligible value but provide insight into town life at the turn of the twentieth century. "The tourist china, which was produced

To be successful, museums and libraries must cull their collections down to the best and most meaningful items



**Sometimes collecting can save you money. Average annual insurance premiums for a 1965 Jaguar run about \$650, less than half the cost of insuring a new car.**

from the 1890s through the 1920s, illustrates a period when Concord's sense of its own past got commercialized in a distinctive way," says David Wood, curator of the museum. "People were selling Concord as a destination, and when visitors came here they were selling souvenirs to them. It also provided a way of living for a number of people in Concord." These artifacts, though not particularly popular among collectors, are critical to the museum as a way to reflect and interpret Concord's changing economy and changing view of itself over the years.

Items with an interesting provenance—evidence of its prior history of ownership or use—are particularly important because that background information provides the details that make an exhibit sparkle. The average old overstuffed armchair wouldn't make it into a museum, for instance. But Archie Bunker's famous armchair from the television show *All in the Family*, which the Smithsonian National Museum of American History acquired in 1978, is a highlight of the museum's popular culture collection and is considered one of the museum's biggest draws. Likewise, Jeff Leich, executive director of the New England Ski Museum in Franconia, New Hampshire, notes that for his museum, "what has value more than just a pair of skis is if we can get some information about who used the skis, where they were used, and what was the history of this person, even if it was not a historically significant person. From a museum point of view, that's much more interesting because you can connect the item to a geographical place and a point in time."

But actually acquiring the objects that bring a story together can be a challenge. Many museums and archives only obtain new items through donations, largely because they lack the funding to purchase items on the open market. Even those that do purchase items end up competing with others for the most special and unique treasures. For example, the Basketball Hall of Fame competes for objects not only with private collectors of basketball memorabilia, but also with the nonprofits to which players often donate their game-worn jerseys, game balls, and other memorabilia. Likewise, in a recent estate liquidation, Ken Gloss, proprietor of the Brattle Book Shop in Boston, discovered 10 letters written by Thomas Jefferson, a find which would have made a significant addition to any Amer-



# One man's junk is another man's treasure

What distinguishes a collectible from ordinary rubbish is not always clear. Nonetheless, there are two primary characteristics that collectible items share: desirability and rarity.

## DESIRABILITY

Whether it is destined for a museum or a private collection, to be collectible, an item must be desirable to someone other than the collector. So, your seventh-grade love letters probably won't qualify, unless you become famous (or notorious). But what makes something desirable?

✓ **CONDITION.** Condition is so important that third-party grading services have sprung up in some collecting areas to grade and validate the quality of items. The coin collecting market is one of the best-developed examples, with 70 possible grades of coin in the Sheldon Numerical Grading System. The same Morgan dollar—a silver dollar issued primarily between 1878 and 1904—can be worth anywhere from \$5 to over \$100,000, depending on its condition. Do not mistake condition for perfection, however; some of the most desirable collectibles are actually mistakes. The classic example is the Inverted Jenny, a 1918 24-cent air mail stamp with an image of a Curtiss JN-4 biplane. A production error caused some sheets of the stamps to be printed with the airplane image upside down, and one of those sheets got into circulation before the mistake was noticed. Today a correctly printed Jenny stamp goes for about \$100, but the inverted versions sell for up to \$200,000 apiece.

✓ **AESTHETICS.** Form, color, size, and materials also matter for desirability, though these preferences tend to change with popular tastes. For instance, very large items historically were not viewed as popular collectibles



because of the difficulty of storing them, but this has been changing in recent years. Rudy Franchi, a vintage movie poster dealer and appraiser on *Antiques Roadshow*, points out, “The typical movie poster is 27 by 40 or 41 inches and is known as a ‘one-sheet’.” The market for larger movie posters used to languish, but people are now living in bigger homes, and so they are able to display bigger things. Now there’s a big fad in buying the larger sizes, known as ‘six-sheets,’ that are 81 by 81 inches, as well as foreign posters, which are often larger.”

## RARITY

“There are some books that are absolutely fabulous literature, but there are too many of them,” says Ken Gloss, proprietor of the Brattle Book Shop in Boston. “For instance, Shakespeare, next to the Bible, is the most commonly printed literature in the English language. It’s wonderful stuff, but there are millions and millions of them so they’re not worth much. You’re looking for the one that’s a little more unusual, that you don’t see all the time.”

Items can be rare for several reasons:

✓ Some items are simply **UNCOMMON AND IRREPRODUCIBLE.** Among those who collect materials about the signers of the Declaration of Independence, for instance, the autograph of the all-but-unknown Thomas Lynch or Button

Gwinnett is worth far more than the John Hancock of, say, John Hancock.

✓ In many cases, what people collect is only in short supply because they define their collecting area so narrowly. But sometimes rarity is **CREATED BY THE MANUFACTURER.** In the 1980s, The Swatch Group created a frenzy by selectively releasing Swatch designs to a limited number of distributors, such that every retailer had a different selection, and by limiting sales to one per person. Swatch also launched an intensive promotional campaign touting their watches as a good investment. Swatch Fever spiked, and sales in the U.S. alone increased from \$3 million in 1983 to \$200 million in 1987. The same strategy applies to anything manufactured in limited edition, such as Franklin Mint plates, Beanie Babies, or Precious Moments figurines.

✓ On the other hand, it **CAN'T BE TOO RARE.** “If there’s only one of something, there can only be one collector,” points out David Wood, curator of the Concord Museum in Concord, Massachusetts. “What fires people up is things that are relatively common, so that you can get a complete collection of it in every form and every style.” These sorts of items are easier to find at antiques stores, flea markets, and garage sales, adding to the serendipity of the collecting experience and fueling the motivation of the devoted collector to keep searching.



ican history museum. But their value was too high for most institutions to afford, so almost all were sold to private collectors instead.

#### LEAVING AN IMPRINT

The desire to make an impact on the world may be subtle or even unspoken, but it is a prime motivator of human behavior—and it is what unites the otherwise disparate goals of individual collectors and their institutional counterparts. Individual collectors seek depth; institutions, breadth. Individuals look for differences; institutions, commonalities. Yet they share a desire for their collections to stand the test of time—to cheat death, if you will, by ensuring that their take on the world and their accumulated knowledge and effort will live on even after they as individuals are gone.

A lasting legacy for institutions is relatively easy to imagine, since they amass their collections with an eye toward stewarding history. And many, if not most, institutions do manage to live on, shaping and influencing our collective memory into the future. But this approach is no guarantee of success. Dreams of Freedom, Boston's immigration museum, had a well-regarded collection and an innovative approach to its interpretation, but it closed after only three years due to lack of funding. Furthermore, tastes change. What seems a meaningful collection of items today might not feel relevant to visitors 50 years from now. To survive, museums must shift with the wind to maintain their vitality without losing their sense of purpose.

The collections of individuals face a more complicated fate. The decision-making process that collectors use when obtaining objects—their focus on personal significance, completion, and minute differences between objects—often renders large portions of their collections unappealing to others. Often their families are not interested in maintaining or expanding the collection in future generations, leaving many simply to sell off a lovingly gathered assortment for lack of other ways to ensure its future. In some cases, particularly significant items may be donated to museums, but this can mean a loss of coherence for the rest of the collection as well as a loss of the sense of the collector's personality as demonstrated by his or her assembled items. Says Bergendahl, the Moxie collector, "I just hope that when I die, my son realizes that there's some value there and doesn't take it all to the dump."

Once in a great while, though, an individual's collection possesses enough historical, cultural, or artistic significance to merit its transformation into a public institution. Perhaps one of the best-known examples is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. In Mrs. Gardner's heyday of the late nineteenth century, members of the social elite were expected to be at least amateur collectors of fine arts, textiles, and furniture simply in order to furnish their

The most important legacy of a collection is the wisdom and beauty the world gains from its having been assembled

homes to the standards of the day. But Mrs. Gardner's unusual artistic vision and personal character produced collections of notably high quality, ranging from Dante manuscripts to the works of contemporary American artists such as Sargent and Whistler to her true passion, Italian Renaissance art.

Even early on in her collecting career, she acquired some fairly significant works of art, including a Vermeer and a Botticelli, and she and her husband originally planned to donate many of them to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston upon their deaths. But "in 1896, after getting the Titian [*Europa*, considered "the greatest Venetian painting in America"], two Reubens, and a Cellini, they realized that they had a museum in their own right," says Alan Chong, the museum's curator.

With the assistance of her advisor, Bernard Berenson, she continued to acquire world-class art in the ensuing years, but with a more curatorial eye—filling in holes in the collection and focusing more narrowly on a few areas of specialization. The charming, nontraditional museum she created opened in 1903, with the stipulation that its items be left "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever." Her museum today draws more than 181,000 visitors per year; it is one of the most popular attractions in the city of Boston and certainly one of its most enduring.

Though the transition of her collection from individual to institution may be unusual, Mrs. Gardner's desire to live on through her collection is hardly unique. But most collectors are not fortunate enough to have the discriminating eye and the financial wherewithal to establish a new world-class cultural institution based on their collection. The best most can hope for their accumulated things is that they will find themselves in the hands of a gentle caretaker—a devoted archivist or librarian, a child who takes on a parent's collection out of a sense of duty if not love. At worst, the collection itself may simply fade away.

A collection's true legacy, however, is not the items in it, but the wisdom and beauty the world gains from its having been assembled. Individual collectors find others who share their passions to pass on their knowledge and experience. Institutions share their knowledge with the world through public access, scholarly research, and interpretation. In these ways, the collection—and the collector—will still carry on. ✱



The kewpie doll was a hot collectible item before World War I; more than five million of the ceramic cherubs were sold in just four years.

## Dishing it up



“People don’t just buy Fiesta-ware to put on their shelves. They integrate the dishes into the way they live their lives,” says Fiesta-ware collector Daphne Durham of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Online Fiesta-ware discussion boards, such as [mediumgreen.com](http://mediumgreen.com), allow collectors to compare notes on how they use the dishes. Members post photos of new acquisitions or new uses, share research, and chat with other collectors. Durham says, “The sense of community I get from the boards is what keeps me interested.”

