



To have and to hold

As many as one in 10 of us – rich or poor – is gripped by the passion to collect.

IT'S AN ITCH, AN URGE, A PASSION, AN OBSESSION, a malady, a gentle madness. Its addictive nature is unfathomable to the non-afflicted and a source of infinite delight to those who suffer from it. It runs in families; might even be genetic. It affects between one and 10 percent of the human race. I am, of course, talking about the instinct to collect.

Much has been written about this fascinating phenomenon. On the topics of who are the great collectors and what they possess, many essays and books filled with facts, figures and photographs grace the shelves of shops and libraries.

But enter the slippery world of “why” people collect, and certainty makes a hasty exit. The “why” question has perplexed philosophers, psychologists, historians and even collectors themselves for ages. All have sought some sane explanation to this rather curious predilection, because, let's face it, there is little sanity in collecting. After all, what could one “do” with 11 000 works of art or 600 cups and saucers, or 190 chairs or 7 000 musical instruments?

In an attempt to find answers, scholars have grouped the reasons for collecting into neat categories. The acquisition of knowledge, an altruistic attitude, nostalgia, relaxation and escape, social interaction, and a search for and expression of identity are among these. It all sounds good and well, but I believe them to be secondary functions of a primary instinct.

Closer to the truth would be the pleasure of the hunt and the need for order. If you doubt my assertion, check with your nearest collector. It is always there – the almost violent joy of spotting the object, the angst of acquiring it, the finality and sense of completion upon finding a place for it. Marvellous.

And then it starts all over again. The urge to go out and look, just look ...

“I am unpacking my library. Yes, it is not yet in the shelves, the faint boredom of order not yet manifest,” German philosopher and bibliophile Walter Benjamin wrote in 1931. Suspended between the need for order and the ennui of finding it, the collector constantly has to add to the collection. The impossibility of completion, of owning one of each, is always present, ever challenging, intoxicating.

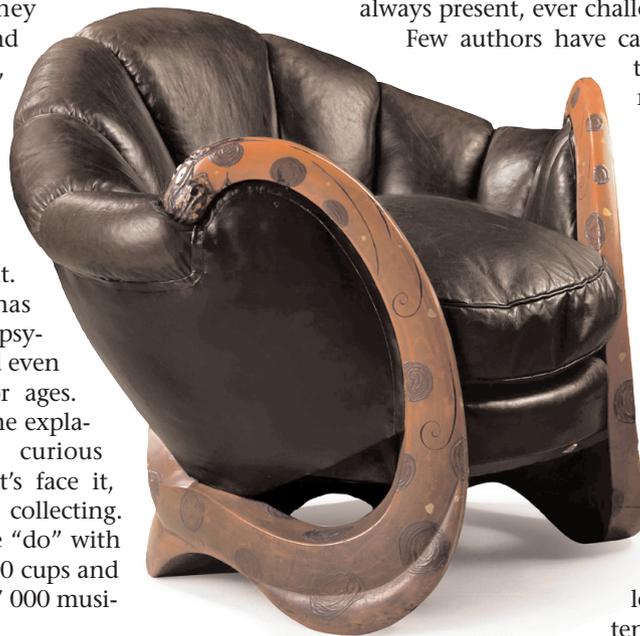
Few authors have captured the components of the collector's psyche with more seismographic accuracy than Benjamin. “In the figure of the great collector, the urge to conserve fuses with exhibitionism and vanity and with the fixation of one goal to the exclusion of all distracting influences,” he wrote in his essay “Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus” (“Unpacking my Library”). The passion for collecting is indeed over-riding, all-consuming.

Freud, another fervent collector, conceded in a letter to a friend, also written in 1931, that he had read more books on archaeology than on psychology. He referred to his collection of archaeological treasure (mostly small bronze statues from ancient Rome,

Greece and Egypt) as his “old and dirty gods”.

In that admission hides a thousand truths. It suggests the reverence, the fact that the collector is almost a servant to the collection. It suggests the animistic, even numinous nature of a collection – it suggests the fact that a collection develops “a life of its own”.

If that, dear reader, is taking it too far, let me at least assure you that collections have “voices”, which often develop because of, but also >>



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The world's most expensive piece of furniture was sold in February for the equivalent of R290 million.

>> despite, the collectors' intentions – thereby taking on a life of their own.

And like the pagan gods of ancient times, this one needs feeding. As soon as the collector stops adding to the collection, it starts dying. Even Freud asserted this fact. Anyone interested in the subject can feel it: just compare the experience of being shown a collection by its owner to the experience of going to a museum that houses the collection of a long-deceased enthusiast. The one is alive, the other not.

Love objects

THE THEORIES OF THE FRENCH PHILOSOPHER Jean Baudrillard perhaps offer a more intellectual approach to what is essentially an emotional topic. Baudrillard is interested in the relationship between people and their things in general, but is especially intrigued by the passion-driven relationship as it manifests in collecting.

Baudrillard maintains that all objects have two primary functions: to be used and to be owned. Once an object has been divested of its functionality, what is left is its possibility to be owned. The relationship between owner and object becomes completely subjective. Think of an old book: dusty, dirty, sad, forgotten – until a collector spots it and, realising that this very one is lacking from his collection, rushes to pick it up, dust it off, take it home and arrange it among the other books – to be treasured for as long as the collector is alive. No longer a book to be read, but an object to be loved: a love object. To have and to hold. That's all.

"When I go to one of my museums and see a piece I bought 25 years ago, I remember all the details of the sale, even the smell of rain on that day," one of the world's biggest art collectors, Reinhold Würth, recently said in an interview with *The Art Newspaper*. With 14 museums scattered around the world and filled to capacity with an estimated 11 000 works of art, this is quite a claim to make. But I believe him. I believe him because that is the stuff that the collector's soul is made of.

A collector is constantly in the process of writing his own story by adding, editing, moving things around. Is that a clue to something else? Is collecting an attempt, like the clever girl from *1 001 Nights*, to see if death can be cheated by an enchanting story – an attempt at immortality? Who knows?

Yet, there is an inevitability to it all. A collection might be permanent, but collectors are not. To all collectors there is always the reminder of "one day". What will happen to the collection one day. Does one leave it to the children, start a museum, bequeath it to an institution or sell it all – lock stock and barrel?

The most talked-about of all possible scenarios is when a famous collector decides to sell his collection in the most public manner of all: at auction. Single-owner sales are not only the darlings of the public sales rooms – the world media love them as well!

The most valuable single-owner collection to be sold at auction realised €373.9 million. It was the highest total for any sale ever held in Europe.

Of the almost 700 lots, 16 sold for more than €5 million each. Sixty-one lots fetched more than €1 million each.

Various world records were set: it was the most valuable privately owned Impressionist and Modern Art collection to be sold at auction; it was the most valuable privately owned silver collection to be sold at auction; various new world records for artists at auction were achieved.

World's most expensive chair

BUT THE STAR OF THE AUCTION HELD OVER three days was the 20th century decorative arts category. A chair by Irish designer Eileen Gray fetched €21.9 million. At £19.4 million, it is the most expensive piece of furniture ever sold. The previous record belonged to The Badminton Cabinet, an extremely important cabinet made in Florence in 1726, which fetched £19 million in 2004.

Gray designed the chair between 1920 and 1922, and called it "Fauteuil aux Dragons". (The French claim her as their own because she lived and worked in Paris for most of her life.)

The pre-auction estimate for Fauteuil aux Dragons (Dragons' Armchair) was between €2 million and €3 million. Two well-known antiques dealers who had handled the chair in the 1970s bought it.

Lot 50, a famous painting by Picasso, failed to sell! A piece of 20th century furniture selling at almost 10 times the pre-sale estimate, and a superstar painting not selling at all? What is happening to blue chip? A new age, indeed.

The auction was held in the Grand Palais in Paris from February 23 to 25, 2009. In a Europe fraught with worry over the economy, this sale took centre stage. "It was the sale of the century, a never-to-be repeated event," newspaper headlines read.

"There is still a lot of money in the market – money is not the problem, the problem is the psychology," an insider said.

The collectors were out in force. With the single-mindedness that only the truly obsessed can muster, they were not going to miss this opportunity. So what if there is a recession around?

The auction was, of course, the much talked about sale of the estate of recently deceased French collector and famous couturier Yves Saint Laurent and his partner, Pierre Bergé.

What is left is a three-volume catalogue that chronicles the life of a great collection and will forever tell the story of two great collectors. At a pre-sale price of €600 per set, the catalogue itself will probably end up being a collectors' item soon.

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