



How collecting gathered pace

Once the preserve of emperors and aristocrats, the desire to own beautiful and rare objects has developed into a popular obsession.

THE REVENUE GENERATED BY THE INDUSTRIES that support our obsession to own unique, rare and interesting objects amounts to billions of dollars a year and is growing rapidly.

In many countries collecting as an expression of mass culture is a very recent development. In Japan, for instance, collecting antiques became a popular pursuit as late as the 1960s.

If the big auction houses, such as Christie's, which recently opened a branch in Dubai, are indicators of collecting activity among the world's rich and famous, the proliferation of fleamarkets in many countries is probably the most accurate gauge of popular participation in the self-regulating and stratified world of collecting.

Collecting has its roots firmly in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Genesis, Noah is given the task of building an ark, gathering two of each of the known animals and taking them aboard to save them from extinction when the flood came. In this story all the elements of collecting are implied. The task of searching (gathering) for a complete set or at least representative examples (every known animal), thereby accepting the responsibility of preservation. Noah was the first collector.

Now, anything can be a collectible, from the most benign to the utterly bizarre, the most exquisitely valuable to that which is almost completely devoid of any value except the value the collector finds in it.

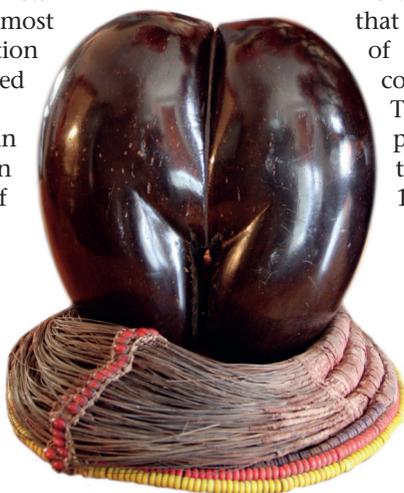
Art, books, furniture, scientific instruments, bicycle wheels, buttons, orchids, stuffed animals – whatever you can think of, the chances are that there is already somebody out there who collects it.

And today anybody can be a collector. Whether you are a man, woman, child, rich or poor, famous or just trotting along, if you want to, you can collect.

But that has not always been the case. For most of history, collecting was the domain of pharaohs, emperors, kings, princes and courtiers. Items of exquisite beauty were collected and commissioned to indicate and enhance the glory and magnificence of the ruler. Whatever was won in war was added to these collections to signify power and magnificence.

The Egyptian pharaohs were collectors. Their wealth stunned the world when archaeologists began excavating and opening, in earnest, the tombs contained in the pyramids.

The ancient Romans collected. Convinced that the Greeks had perfected all notions of idealised beauty, they became avid collectors of Greek statues and artefacts. They began the pilfering of Greek temples that was so enthusiastically continued by treasure hunters during the 18th and 19th centuries.



African beads, artefacts and natural "wonders", such as this *Coco de Mer*, were popular collectors' pieces during the 18th century.

Holy relics

WITH THE FALL OF THE ROMAN Empire, the face of collecting changed. The Dark Ages also affected the world of the collector. Macabre objects were collected for their numinous value. The body parts of holy men and women were believed to be imbued with special powers. Scull caps and fingers were popular; their curative powers were undisputed.

The first signs of collecting as we know it today made their appearance in 16th-century Italy. The Renaissance spirit of inquiry had interesting repercussions for the future of collecting. For the first time, ordinary men (not part of the ruling classes) were venturing into the arena. In fact, scholars and amateurs became instrumental in the collection and dissemination of rare and exotic objects. These objects were displayed in what the Italians called the "studiolo". Purpose-built rooms were filled with antiquities, relics, stuffed animals, plant material and gemstones from the newly

PHOTOGRAPHS: JO-MARIE RABIE

discovered, far-flung regions of earth. People could visit these “private museums” to wonder at the marvel of it all.

Probably one of the most prized possessions for any collector of the 16th, 17th and even 18th centuries was a Coco de Mer, or Seychelles Nut as it was called then. The island of Mahe was colonised only in the mid-18th century, but some of these nuts found their way to Europe as early as the 16th century, although owning one then probably meant that you were a king, or at least a prince.

This fashion for collecting soon caught on in the northern parts of Europe, but it took on a new guise. It is to the Netherlands of the 16th and 17th centuries that we must look to find the birth of the modern collector. Early Dutch collections were more than repositories of knowledge and wonder; they were expressions of personal taste.

Collecting had been democratised – it was now an option open to the common man and not a privilege only for the ruling classes.

A large and diverse series of factors contributed to this new trend. More sophisticated banking systems made the exchange of goods easier and more regulated. In a society without an aristocracy, extremely wealthy entrepreneurs, all willing to become patrons of the arts in order to acquire the necessary station in life, soon succumbed to the desire for stuff.

The Dutch, with their huge international commercial seafaring enterprises, had every opportunity to collect the oddities that found their way to the rest of Europe via the Dutch port cities. Japanese swords, Chinese silks, Indian cottons, Mughal miniatures, nuts from Seychelles and Oriental porcelain alluded to the mercantile world in which they lived.

Cabinet of curiosity

BUT CALVINIST SENSIBILITY FROWNED ON ALL display of wealth, so the cabinet of curiosity was born. Instead of a room (the studiolo), a piece of furniture was designed to hold items that were rare, exotic and desirable.

Cabinets could be opened and shut as the occasion demanded. They were employed to impress, amuse and entertain one’s friends and colleagues, but for the first time the added dimension of collecting as a personal and private joy found expression. Between 1600 and 1740, more than 100 private cabinets of curiosity were recorded in Amsterdam alone.

During the 18th century, the kings and princes of Europe not only inspired but were actually competing with the courtiers and other wealthy commoners – the availability of funds being the only deciding factor in the expansion of collections.

The 19th and early 20th century, one of the most prolific times for collecting, gave rise to the spirit of aestheticism. The pursuit of beauty became the main objective for collecting – the odd and exotic were assigned to public museums.



PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN COURTESY OF STELLENBOSCH MUSEUM

A stinkwood baroque cabinet (an *armoire* in colloquial terms), which was used to display the prized collectables of the fashionable society of 18th-century Cape Town. Even the design of the cabinet was influenced by the obsession that the wealthy had with porcelain from the East: the five flat steps on the pediment were designed to display the wares.

For the English gentleman-connoisseur, collecting became more than a private pursuit; it became his vehicle for social mobility – upward mobility.

Collecting is bigger, more dynamic and more international than ever before. The sheer number of people and things have seen to that. But being called a collector ... that is not in vogue.

In a recent television programme, Tom Ford, one of the masters of the universe of high design, showed CNN’s Monita Rajpal his amazing collection of contemporary art. Does he consider himself an avid collector, Rajpal wanted to know.

“Collecting is not a word that I like the sound of. It’s so pretentious. I buy what I love. My criterion for art is that it must move me,” Ford replied.

All collectors always buy only what they love – even if they are the only ones to do so. So Mr Ford, whether you like the term or not, I believe you are indeed a collector. But as to why somebody who collects would resist being called a “collector” – well that, as they say, is a whole other story. □