

Collecting to Narrate Stories

– Inmaculada Corcho Gómez

Most researchers agree that there have been collectors from the beginning of humankind. It could be said that it is a passion stemming from when gathering food was a practical matter for survival. Collection, is therefore instinctive, in order to be able to perpetuate our presence as a human species.

If we heed biblical literature, we could consider Noah as the first collector converting the Ark in the first cabinet of curiosities. Ptolomy founded the Library of Alexandria to compile the knowledge of the world, just as abbeys, cathedrals and universities did in the middle ages. The Renaissance and the humanistic vision of man extended the limits of the known world and with it the yearning for knowledge, adding a new aspect to the activity of collection; that of differentiating themselves and showing their power over the world. The marvels of the world: animals, objects, even people, of the different territories discovered, were shown alive or through paintings, sketches made by artists, writings or fragments of the findings. From that moment onward, power and knowledge were a part of a life of nobility. The opening to other worlds, the possibility of travelling and of observing distant places allowed merchants, adventurers and scholars to make collections of a great variety of objects, up to then, unfathomable. The cabinets of curiosities, teeming with objects and figures that surprised and astonished visitors, collections shown as spectacles that both triggered fantasy and motivated study of those who possessed them and of those who viewed them. From the observation and study of these objects interpretative theories began to be established. Occasionally these theories were unfounded, based on mere imagination, even in superstition; in other cases, allowing sensible theories to be posed, leading to subsequent fundamental investigations. These collections of extraordinary objects would, in time, be catalogued and systematised in orderly traditions affording content to museums and academic institutions.

What began as a gathering activity to assuage hunger and perpetuate the species, became sophisticated giving way to collections to satisfy our spiritual appetite. Today the exercise of centuries of hoarding has made us evolve, know ourselves better, know our environment and preserve our heritage. With them we have fed our intellectual, aesthetic and emotional development. The museums, those places of orderly stockpiling, democratised the treasures of kings, nobles, adventurers and scholars, and established the first interpretations of the collections, marking the first tours in order to cause admiration in the visitors.

The contemporary world, multiple, quick and complex, has modified the manner of collecting and appreciating collections. We all collect to different degrees. Presently collecting is a ludic and intellectual activity in which we seek inspiration. Sometimes the desire is not material but spiritual. It is about achieving, seeking, tracking, pursuing, finding and possessing. Some people collect to learn and preserve history, others seek the satisfaction of organising and classifying; others simply collect for the satisfaction of tracking and finding.

Modern and contemporary collections have added a new factor to the inborn interest of collecting: to preserve shared memory of achievements and knowledge generated. To do that, they preserve the representative objects and study them out of the context for which they were created. Collecting means studying, developing plots, narrating histories and only a future vision will grant them a new meaning. Reviewing a collection means contemplating the objects closely, observing, researching, experimenting and making it part of new contexts and situations. Presently, collecting and the professional activities ancillary to it pose new uses of the collections, tendering new formulae of coexistence with the objects, with owner and observers. The possibilities of formulating and presenting a collection are limited only by our own intelligence and imagination. We look to the objects for answers on our society's fundamental topics. What we read into them changes the perspectives of history, giving them new meanings, modifying our attitudes and actions in the present. Collections have to be worked, investigated, valued and routes defined. Only then can they be useful.

Often it is thought, with poor but necessary museographic stance, that the fundamental work of a collection should centre on its physical conservation, its storage and guaranteeing perpetuity. The activity of preserving a collection itself must evolve with time to foster discussion and knowledge of the construction of collections and planning the legacy, attentive to a responsible but evolutive safekeeping that allows future societies to guarantee their permanence and enjoyment, without forgetting adapting collections to technological supports that rapidly change curatorial, institutional artistic practice. Working with historical collections always poses challenges both for the professionals and for the visitors.

Nor should we think that the final purpose of maintaining a collection is its economic value, but a value, or values, must be attributed to it to reinforce its heritage status and identity. An appraisal, often difficult, given the specific characteristics of many collections, or for having been conformed and/or acquired outside

commercial circuits. These intangible values must be estimated attending to historic and artistic criteria but also to its function, as heritage of knowledge to fuel innovation and creativity. These aspects can increase in value only if the collections remain active. Heritage has value in so far it can connect to a society that safeguards it always and reflects who we are as a community, as individuals and as institutions. It can record our collective heritage and also indicate the future, showing the many paths that can be taken towards it.

Human development has brought us to constitute a society that is plural, technological and communicated, making multiple approximations to artistic heritage possible; under many different eyes, generating legacies, combining a range of theoretical and practical perspectives that explore the diversity of heritage ensembles and question past perceptions. Each time this happens the identity of the works is renewed and present aesthetic values capable of communicating with the contemporary viewers are contributed. The perception of the visitors will be that these works were objects that had a meaning but can now act as contemporary art works. They are objects with new messages with which artists, curators, researchers, critics and visitors create overlapping layers

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that are peeled off to discover different semantic levels of the pieces and collections. In most historic collections the idea of their creation is very conventional: the contemporary vision, more complex and inclusive, allows also narrating more enriching histories.

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Just as it happens in technological nomenclature (2.1, 3.0, ...), the new approaches and interpretations of a collection should be understood as new versions that, anchored on an original base, develop new tools and scenarios to show contents that have been brought up to date and appraise their meanings. Internet is extending the number of people that access, ever more, to remote collections, transcending institutional and geographical frontiers; connecting collections throughout the world. It is also creating opportunities to communicate the meanings of the pieces and collections more effectively. As we review the heritage ensembles from different perspectives, the potential to continue generating thought and knowledge of them shall be revealed. Access will be offered to more people from different places, to pose different

topics and histories for diverse identities and cultures. The ease of access to information and knowledge now makes it possible for collections to link and relate among themselves and contribute their specific features. The sum of narratives and histories can only be understood in collections, ever more alive and open. This democratising idea clashes with the principles of authority established and practised during a long time by institutions and professionals in charge of the collections. In the same manner as technological tools have improved our lives and made them easier, facilitating access to the collections will allow more professionals to become interested in them and be able to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the pieces from the perspective of multiple disciplines, making easier exchanging ideas and information.

Today we must understand the collections as instruments of knowledge with the mission of provoking thought and inspiring those who work with them and those who contemplate them with the purpose of enriching us as societies.

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Species described by Willdenow from the materials collected by Humboldt and Bonpland in their journey across America. Herbarium Collection Jardí Botànic, Universitat de València