

Reviews

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The Archivist and Collecting: A Review Essay

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Russell W. Belk. *Collecting in a Consumer Society*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Index. 198 pp. Cloth. \$45.95. ISBN 0-415-10534-X.

Nicholas A. Basbanes. *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995. Illustrations. Index. 638 pp. Cloth. \$35.00. ISBN 0-8050-3653-9. ∞

Thatcher Freund. *Objects of Desire: The Lives of Antiques and Those Who Pursue Them*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993. ISBN 0-679-42157-2.

Kevin M. Guthrie. *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996. Tables, index. 246 pp. Cloth. \$29.95. ISBN 0-7879-0187-3. ∞

Dan Hofstadter. *Goldberg's Angel: An Adventure in the Antiquities Trade*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994. 241 pp. Cloth.

Phyllis Mauch Messenger, ed. *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. Illustrations, appendix, index. 266 pp. Paper. \$15.95. ISBN 0-8263-1281-0.

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Werner Muensterberger. *Collecting: An Unruly Passion; Psychological Perspectives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Illustrations, index. 295 pp. Cloth. ISBN 0-691-03361-7. ©

Lynn H. Nicholas. *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Illustrations, index. 499 pp. Paper. ISBN 0-679-40069-9.

Susan M. Pearce. *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Illustrations, figures, bibliography, index. 440 pp. Cloth. \$49.95. ISBN 0-415-07560-2.

Kenneth W. Rendell. *History Comes to Life: Collecting Historical Letters and Documents*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. Illustrations, bibliography, index. 279 pp. Cloth. \$29.95. ISBN 0-8061-2764-3. ©

Whereas it is virtually impossible to define collecting, and, narratively speaking, to mark where that activity begins, a collecting attitude is unmistakable and distinct.

Mieke Bal, 1994¹

During the past quarter-century, the number of repositories for research purposes has increased notably, and all these repositories are engaged in collecting records. It is a pursuit that has always been highly individualistic and competitive, but whether these characteristics are for better or for worse is open to argument.

Lester J. Cappon, 1976²

Introduction

Archival collecting—the acquisition of historical manuscripts and archives—has been a primary activity of the North American archivist from the faintest origins of the modern profession, whether we dress it up with terms such as acquisition, appraisal, or with some other professional jargon.

As a profession, in North America at least, we continue to be absorbed with the physical possession of records, documentary remnants, and a wide spectrum of other objects we could term artifacts or that we often treat as artifacts. Archivists describe their motivations for such acquisition as ranging from the preservation of documentary materials to the service of scholarship, but, despite the long history of collecting archives and historical manuscripts, it is not an activity that has been the topic of sustained scrutiny by the archival profession.

Collecting has become more difficult in the late twentieth century for a variety of reasons: shrinking archives resources, increasing records quantities, more complex record-keeping technologies, and a society seemingly torn asunder by multiculturalism and related ideologies (what can we possibly acquire to meet constantly changing and often conflicting

¹"Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 99. In the interest of trying to keep this review essay manageable, I did not include this book in the body of the review. However, I certainly recommend it, with its insightful essays on the psychology and motivations of collectors, the history of particular museums, and related essays attempting to understand how collections come to be formed.

²Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 433.

needs?). We could add to these challenges our own debates about the archival mission and appraisal theory and practice. The archival community certainly needs to re-open discussion about collecting, whether it is the profession's relationship to autograph dealers and individual collectors, or the issue of the physical custody of digital recordkeeping systems.

To a certain extent, the archival profession has allowed a sort of free-market approach in the acquisition of archival records. We collect institutional records, rather than nurture the development of viable institutional archives; even institutional archivists seem prone to refer to their holdings as "collections," a reference perhaps no more significant than a convenient shorthand, but one that seems dangerously more than semantical. We more often than not compete, rather than cooperate, in our collecting (an issue that Lester Cappon alluded to two decades ago in the article quoted at the outset of this essay). We sometimes even overlook the problems associated with managing certain kinds of record-keeping technologies, so that we still try to acquire them in ways that may not really protect the records themselves. We also participate in the autograph trade, ignoring some of the logical issues this raises for security or how the acquisition of such records has often compromised their provenance (and as a consequence, their recordness).

There are many problems with the marketplace approach. Paraphrasing Christopher Lasch from his last book before his death, this "market appears to be the ideal embodiment of the principle . . . that [individual repositories] are the best judges of their own interests and that they must therefore be allowed to speak for themselves in matters that concern their happiness and well-being. But [individual repositories] cannot learn to speak for themselves at all, much less come to an intelligent understanding of their happiness and well-being, in a world in which there are no values except those of the market."³ Left to the marketplace, archives become like history textbook writers trying to fit in everything and doing it on an equal playing field; the "textbooks fall apart" or do not get written at all,⁴ and the archives become repositories of lots of interesting stuff without real coherence or focus. Or, like the marketplace, archives can become like the old *Wunderkammern*, wonder-cabinets, museums "where natural wonders were displayed alongside works of art and various man-made feats of ingenuity."⁵ In this type of analysis, we can understand that this marketplace is an extension of a complicated set of activities, attitudes, and aspects that constitute collecting and that can endanger the nature and purpose of archives.

As I was writing this review essay, I was also reading the daily reports on the sale of John F. and Jacqueline Kennedy "stuff" (is there a better term to describe the incredible diversity of objects ranging from old golf clubs to fake pearl necklaces?) which chronicled the extraordinary prices these items fetched. The media, not surprisingly transfixed by the

³Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 97.

⁴The quote is from Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 197.

⁵The quotation is from Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 61. Weschler's book is a description of the Museum of Jurassic Technology located in Los Angeles. Weschler writes that this "museum affords this marvelous field for projection and transference. It's like a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums — all rolled into one" (p. 40). There is a sense, of course, that the rapid transformations in our society have brought about an increased sense of interest in acquiring old relics, similar to the collecting going on in the first decades of the nineteenth century by the historical and antiquarian societies. For an example of this, refer to Harvey Rachlin's extremely uneven *Lucy's Bones, Sacred Stones, and Einstein's Brain: The Remarkable Stories Behind the Great Objects and Artifacts of History, from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1996).

sale, made many references to the price of “history” and provided a window into the mind and world of the collector. As far as the media is concerned, there really seems to be little difference between what goes on at a bizarre Sotheby’s auction and a museum or archives. Popular columnists, writing about archives and their acquisitions, have often revealed this sentiment. Cullen Murphy, in a recent *Atlantic Monthly*, made reference to the National Archives’ efforts and the recent PROFS case’s impact on the preservation of electronic mail with wonderment about the need to save all these records. “I cannot help wondering,” Murphy wrote, “whether as a nation we are compiling archives at a rate that will exceed anyone’s ability ever to make sense of them.” He turned to an archaeological metaphor. “Is it preposterous to begin thinking of some of our archives as the new tels? . . . But there are too many of them for more than a few ever to be excavated systematically and understanding what’s in even those few takes decades if not centuries.”⁶ Thinking of archives as archaeological sites and collections can cause one to miss the larger issues of the value of archives for evidence, accountability, and even corporate memory. Wrestling with the psychology and nature of collecting is important for the archivist and the archival program; if nothing else, doing this forces us to come to terms with our institutional and societal missions. It makes us wonder if there is any more point to our work than trying to fill our repositories with high-profile archival fonds and manuscript collections.

As you can tell from my comments thus far, I have certain viewpoints about the issue of collecting: collecting is not appraisal, it can destroy the value of archival records, and it is sometimes irresponsibly carried out. While, a decade ago, Richard Berner could write that “collecting has taken on a coherence that was previously lacking,” I disagree with this assessment, then and now.⁷ While the discussion about archival appraisal over this decade has converged into more precise terminology and some intriguing arguments for macro-appraisal as a coherent, principled, scholarly activity, the practice of appraisal has not kept pace; it still appears to be malformed collecting, meant to satisfy ill-defined users’ or other needs.

The purpose of this essay is not, however, to describe these perspectives. My intention is, instead, to analyze recent studies concerning collecting that I believe will be valuable to archivists in their deliberations about this important issue. Looking at collecting from a variety of other disciplines and perspectives can do wonders for our own understanding about the role of collecting in the crucial function of archival appraisal. It can awaken us to the crucial differences between appraisal and collecting.

Appraisal is the careful analysis of records to determine if they merit continued maintenance. Collecting is the act of acquiring records: it is often reactive and done without careful analysis based on any values or understanding of the records’ functions.

The Big Question: Why Collect?

Within the archival profession, advocates of relentless collecting suggest many reasons why acquisition is so important. Many of these reasons are good: physical and in-

⁶Cullen Murphy, “Backlogs of History,” *Atlantic Monthly* 277 (May 1996): 20, 22.

⁷Richard C. Berner, “Archival Management and Librarianship: An Exploration of Prospects for Their Integration,” in *Advances in Librarianship*, edited by Wesley Simonton (Orlando: Academic Press, Inc., 1986), vol 14: 262. Berner observed the fact that in each state there were “two or more major repositories and a state archives” forming a “veritable archival network of national and even international scope. With proper leadership these efforts could be concerted deliberately and help assure more comprehensive documentary coverage in the process.” Unfortunately, such networks have not been developed.

tellectual protection; accessibility; impending destruction; and appropriate professional care. But, are there other reasons? For example, why is it that we see the rationale for collecting expounded within a professional rationale, while many archival repositories fail to develop adequate acquisitions policies or will readily ignore these policies when the possibility of a good acquisition is identified (as the numerous statewide historical records assessments of the 1980s found)?

Werner Muensterberger's *Collecting: An Unruly Passion; Psychological Perspectives* is worth consideration to provide some answers to this kind of question. Muensterberger, identified as a practicing psychoanalyst, attempts to probe into the psyche of the collector. His assessment of the "unruly passion" is itself unruly (the book is often repetitive and not particularly well-organized), but *Collecting* is often illuminating as to the activity of the collector (and it is also fun to read). The book is based on historical case studies, interviews with living collectors, and an analysis of existing studies. While Muensterberger is considering the individual collector, I wonder whether many of the characteristics he identifies are not also applicable to archives, historical manuscripts repositories, and special collections whose leaders have expressed unbridled enthusiasm for collecting, or where the origins of the program date to the core gift of manuscripts from an individual collector.

Muensterberger's evaluation revolves around his sense that collecting is an exercise intended to overcome certain personality disorders. There is the matter of trying to overcome personal uncertainties: "Repeated acquisitions serve as a vehicle to cope with inner uncertainty, a way of dealing with the dread of renewed anxiety, with confusing problems of need and longing" (p. 11). Loneliness seems to be an issue: "Irrespective of individual idiosyncrasies of collectors, and no matter what or how they collect, one issue is paramount: the objects in their possession are all ultimate, often unconscious assurances against despair and loneliness" (p. 48). Muensterberger concludes his study, in fact, with a suggestion that collectors are in constant search for meaning: "The objects they cherish are inanimate substitutes for reassurance and care. Perhaps even more telling, these objects prove, both to the collector and to the world, that he or she is special and worthy of them" (p. 256). Is this why many archivists seem content working in university *special* collections? Is this why so many university archivists and other institutional archivists try to collect without developing or working with records management programs?

Collecting is seen as both a crucial aspect of one's identity as well as a kind of religious exercise. The objects being acquired, suggest Muensterberger, "contribute to their sense of identity and function as a source of self-definition" (p. 4). There seems to be a common element among collectors in which "they need to convince themselves that what they own is special, if not the 'best,' or 'the ultimate'" (p. 107). This may relate to the religious nature of collecting: the "collector, not unlike the religious believer, assigns power and value to these objects because their presence and possession seems to have a modifying — usually pleasure-giving — function in the owner's mental state" (p. 9). Muensterberger compares collecting to the "accumulation of relics" as a search for evidence: "The objects are regarded as testimony that death is not final and the end of all existence; that one does not have to face abandonment, the dread of being left alone and, ultimately, demise and nothingness" (p. 56). The repeated references to the *symbolic* importance of archives, seeming to re-emerge as more and more archivists turn to working with electronic recordkeeping systems, often carry with them a kind of religious reference.

Collecting also examines a typical aspect normally associated with collecting, its pleasure. Muensterberger argues that "for the dedicated . . . collector . . . the experience

is not simply recreational but an enriching respite from the sometimes frustrating demands of everyday life” (p. 7). Put in a more blunt fashion, “objects in the collector’s experience, real or imagined, allow for a magical escape into a remote and private world” (p. 15).⁸ Is this the source of the popular perception of archives as a refuge from the problems of the real world? Is the fact that so many archives are unable to build broader public profiles or to work with more sophisticated recordkeeping technologies while they struggle with processing backlogs a reflection of this kind of attitude? Is the stack area that “remote and private world”?

Russell Belk’s *Collecting in a Consumer Society* examines the rationale for collecting by considering this activity as a “special type of consuming,” a topic that has not been generally considered by other scholars (p. 65). Belk considers the nature of the consumer society and the history of collecting, and then provides parallel analysis of individual and institutional collectors. While Belk draws on the psychological studies of experts like Muensterberger, he relies more on his own field of business administration to understand why we collect and how we rationalize the process of collecting. He examines how collectors explain their activity, including many explanations that will sound familiar to archivists (such as acting as the “savior of lost, neglected, or endangered objects” [p. 81] or acquiring objects that will preserve memories and a sense of the past).

While Belk’s book is sometimes disappointing in that it seems to string together the insights of numerous and diverse studies on collecting while only tentatively providing deeper insights on its own, the chapter on institutional collecting is worth reading because it is the closest to the archivist’s situation. Unfortunately, Belk chooses to stress the museum as the institutional type, rather than drawing in other institutions that also collect, such as libraries and archives. Belk makes some strong distinctions between institutional and individual collectors, with such comments as, “While a curator may be possessive toward a collection and regard it as ‘mine,’ the fact remains that unlike an individual collector, a museum curator does not own the objects in a collection and lacks the individual collector’s total control over their fate” (p. 124). But there are other important issues to consider when viewing institutions such as museums in the context of a consumer society. Belk notes that museums view themselves as competing with the department store, shopping mall, and theme park, and suggests that drawing on the efforts of individual collectors in forming the nucleus of institutional collections must be done by keeping in mind that these collections and their acquisition do not result in representative holdings because they have already been formed for other reasons and purposes. In other words,

⁸A more entertaining means of considering the psychology of collecting, with an uncanny similarity to many of the features profiled by Muensterberger, is to read Susan Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992). The novel, set in late-eighteenth-century Naples, follows the flawed career of the Cavaliere, a diplomat and collector. The novel is as much an exploration into the interplay between one’s personal and professional life and the impulse to collect. Consider some examples of Sontag’s commentary: “The true collector is in the grip not of what is collected but of collecting” (p. 24); “To collect is to rescue things, valuable things, from neglect, from oblivion, or simply from the ignoble destiny of being in someone else’s collection rather than one’s own” (p. 25); “The great collections are vast, not complete. Incomplete: motivated by the desire for completeness” (p. 72); “A collector is happy to be known, mainly known, as the proprietor of what—through so much effort—has been collected” (p. 138); and “Collecting is a form of union. The collector is acknowledging. He is adding. He is learning. He is noting” (p. 157). Sontag places the Cavaliere in a world being wracked by social and political change, describing one of the great impulses of collecting and collectors, to nail down a spot in the universe or to make some meaning of it all: “To collect is by definition to collect the past—while to make a revolution is to condemn what is now called the past. And the past is very heavy, as well as large” (p. 268).

Belk's work is a way of reminding archivists to reconsider the context for their own appraisal. What would archivists see as the main competitor in their social context (the information resources manager, the World Wide Web, or what)? How does the archivist take into account the efforts of institutional records creators and individual collectors to form records collections when appraising these records?

A more promising volume on the nature of collecting is Susan Pearce's *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*. Pearce, an English museum educator, argues that she wrote this book in order "to treat collecting as a social phenomenon, which should be examined from the perspective of its own proper critique rather than as a loosely historical bundle of anecdote" (p. 411). This is, Pearce hopes, "an investigation into collecting as a set of things which people do, as an aspect of individual and social practice which is important in public and private life as a means of constructing the way in which we relate to the material world and build up our own lives" (p. 4). In addition to a sweeping introduction and summary, Pearce includes three long sections on "collecting in practice," the "poetics of collecting," and the "politics of collecting." Revealing that this is a topic that has been of interest to her for some years, Pearce summarizes and critiques the diverse literature, draws in other disciplines and their own institutional and case studies, and liberally discusses particular cases as illustrations.⁹ Although dwelling on the European scene, Pearce's encyclopedic scope, carefully woven themes, and well-written and interesting prose supports a book that may be the best single volume study on the topic, with innumerable insights of interest to American archivists.

While there are far too many detailed discussions to relate them all, I believe it is appropriate to mention some as a window into how we archivists may have built our own worlds through collecting, acquiring, or whatever we deem to term it. Pearce writes that the "selection process clearly lies at the heart of collecting" (p. 23), chronicling that objects collected "have passed from the profane—the secular world of mundane, ordinary commodity—to the sacred, taken to be extraordinary, special and capable of generating reverence" (p. 24). Have we not also heard archivists speak of their "collections" in this way? There are also lessons from the historical review of collecting. "Just as the Roman public temple collections have given us some of our institutional vocabulary, particularly the word 'curator', so the Roman private art collections have provided characteristic collecting rationales which lay stress on the moral and ennobling qualities of accumulated art" (pp. 96–97). In the United States, at least, many archivists still prefer to refer to and think of themselves as curators, handling special collections entrusted to them as signposts to the past. Pearce believes that "collections are therefore both the product of a personal life . . . , and a means of structuring that life span, of giving tangible form and content to the experience of time passing" (pp. 235–36). This is part of a lengthy analysis of why collectors collect that certainly makes some interesting points about the origins of pre-formed collections offered to archives and manuscript repositories, and about the collecting impulses of archivists themselves. If nothing else, Pearce provides some powerful insights into the collecting impulse that archivists and manuscript curators must document as part of the appraisal process and include in descriptions of both collections and fonds. Collections are a way to beat time, to gain immortality, and "museums . . . are the natural heirs

⁹Many of the sources from other professional literatures have been included in her valuable anthology, *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (New York: Routledge, 1994), a volume including a number of essays on the nature of collecting by Pearce, Pomian, Schulz, Baekeland, Belk, and others usually cited in the recent scholarship on collecting. Again the emphasis is on museum objects and artifacts.

. . . of deep-rooted preoccupations in the European psyche which revolve around the capacity of material to create relationships between gods and men, the sacred significance of relics, and the need for a building in which sacred wealth can be set aside on behalf of the community” (p. 249). Are archives any different than museums in this sense?

Pearce also provides some insights into collecting which could signal to archivists new ways of reflecting on their holdings. At one point, she notes that “collections which have come to us from the earlier periods are attracting considerable attention as historical documents in their own right. . .” (p. 142). Archivists could use these insights to explore their own holdings; what are their origins; how do origins shape the nature of a collection; and what do collections tell us about the institution and its mission? For example, if an archival repository accepts a collection of historic manuscripts purposely brought together to illuminate Thomas Jefferson’s perspective on slavery, should that collection be described as part of a larger Jefferson fonds, or is it more properly viewed as part of the fonds of the particular collector who brought the material together in the first place? The answer to this question is of fundamental importance because it impinges on the nature of the manuscripts as evidence.

Pearce writes that “collections are psychic ordering, of individuality, of public and private relationships, and of time and space. They live in the minds and hearts of their collectors, for whom they act as material autobiographies, chronicling the cycle of a life, from the first moment an object strikes a particular personal chord, to specialized accumulation, to constructing the dimensions of life, to a final measure of immortality” (p. 279). If we can accept Pearce’s assessment, then how do we strive to describe such a collection? At another point, Pearce suggests that “material objects, like all other kinds of objects, are constantly created and recreated by human beings through their symbolic designation of them and their actions towards them” (p. 166), yet archivists seem to be more compelled to try to understand the past actions of their predecessors in order to preserve past decisions about their holdings, while failing to understand that any record kept at one time as evidence, may be determined at a later time not to be the necessary evidence. Archivists have too stringently accepted the appraisal and acquisition decisions of previous archivists as unchallengeable. Pearce provides another way of seeing things. The records acquired via previous decisions, however faulty, may take on importance by virtue of having been available in the archives for a lengthy period of time, and we need to understand how and why this may happen. This is not to say that we should not be allowed to question decisions made by our professional predecessors, but we need to understand how the process of putting records into an archival repository can transform seemingly useless records into valuable artifacts or representations of the past.

There are also reassuring aspects of Pearce’s study of some of our own most cherished archival principles. Pearce mentions that “information cannot come from single specimens, only from groups: the knowledge involved is essentially collective, and the collected existence of the many millions of pieces just referred to are essential to the existence of the system. Perceived relationships are of the essence; reality lies not in an individual item but in the relationship it bears to others which are like and unlike it” (p. 301). Here we have affirmation of a principle very similar to the archivist’s notion of provenance and context.

Another Big Question: How Is Collecting Done?

While it is quite clear that the psychology of collecting remains the more intriguing topic, the dynamics and practicalities of acquisition have also been the focus of an increasing number of studies—popular and scholarly. One reason for these studies may be the increasing splintering of society into many cultural and ethnic groups. Fragmentation highlights complicated issues ranging from repatriation of objects to the religious or symbolic importance of collections to particular groups. New interests bring new perspectives on the marketplace for antiques, museum-quality objects, books, and manuscripts. Practices once well-accepted in a homogenous society now seem not so clear or clean.

Much has been written, for example, about the ethics of collecting. *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?*, edited by Phyllis M. Messenger, is as good a place as any to start. The volume consists of sixteen essays by archaeologists, art dealers, museum curators and administrators, lawyers, public policy experts, government officials, and scholars, each of which focuses on cultural property as archaeological or ethnological objects. *The Ethics of Collecting* is really a collection of case studies, including descriptions of Native American perspectives, the antiquities trade in Arkansas, international looting of Mayan objects and of objects of other native peoples in different countries, the role of museums and collectors in the preservation of these objects, and legal cases concerning the repatriation of these objects. In the introduction to the volume, Karen J. Warren alludes to the “cacophony of voices over cultural properties,” and this volume seems to be a testament to this cacophony. There is a lot of disagreement and debate, something you would expect, given the diversity of perspectives represented in this publication. Yet, there is much to be gained from reading the range of perspectives provided here. If I had to identify one statement suggesting the primary viewpoint that emanates from the book, it would come from the essay by David Sassoon on the antiquities of Nepal: “Over the years, we have listened to the perspective of the nation’s art dealers, and we have listened to the perspective of the nation’s scholars. But there has been nobody who has given voice to the perspective of the villagers who wake up one morning to find their God missing from the temple” (p. 64). This volume gives a voice to the people.

Why should archivists want to read a volume of essays like this? After all, it is not about archives and manuscripts. I believe there are two reasons. First, there has been a stronger effort by the international museum community to regulate the acquisition and trade of antiquities, and, while these efforts have been uneven, they still represent a significant improvement over what, if anything, has occurred in the companion trade in autographs and manuscripts. In other words, it seems that the archival profession has been somewhat less active and certainly less vocal than the museum profession in considering the full range of matters surrounding manuscripts and archives sales and acquisitions. Over the past three decades, the archival community has made significant strides forward in dealing with theft of records, but there still has been less discussion of and agreement on issues like replevin and repatriation of records and historical manuscripts. Second, the collection of essays is useful for providing a host of insights into the general nature of collecting and the implications of collecting. Some examples will suffice in suggesting what I mean by this.

Alan Shestack, in his essay on art museums, argues that “museum professionals are acquirers; we are inherently greedy collectors. Most of us go into the profession because the desire to accumulate and bring together objects of quality is in our blood. We are personally and professionally devoted to adding to and improving our holdings — that is

what makes us tick” (pp. 97–98). Archivists might also confess their desire to accumulate documents which have special meanings to history: this desire to acquire may even be the dominant element in their professional make-up. Shestack goes on to add that this desire to accumulate may rationalize acquiring objects which may have arrived in the marketplace through less than appropriate ways. That includes acquiring objects even *suspected* of being acquired through less than appropriate means. Orrin C. Shane, III, in a commentary on one section of essays, relates public to private collecting, noting that “it is the demand for illicit cultural property created by private collecting that fosters the looting that supplies illicit material” (p. 149). Both of these insights could be, but have not been, discussed by archivists.

To the collections of scholarly essays, we can add—in a quite useful manner—more popular studies of specific cases of collecting. An interest in the antiquities and art trade has probably been spurred on by unrelated events. The fabulous prices some of these objects have fetched in the auction house piques the interest of the public and the media. The chaotic collapse of the Eastern Europe Communist Bloc and the escalating smuggling of art and historic objects reinforces an interest in cultural objects, as do the more bizarre chronicles of the systematic looting of museums, archives, and libraries in this century by nations at war.

A few of the many recent works merit interest and comment. Dan Hofstadter’s *Goldberg’s Angel: An Adventure in the Antiquities Trade* is a journalistic telling of the pillaging, buying, and recovering of four early Christian devotional mosaics, leading to the 1989 case of *Cyprus v. Goldberg*, described by the author as an important landmark litigation because it recovered artworks of “unknown provenance,” bought on good faith by an American dealer. Hofstadter’s complicated story is as intriguing as Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*; however, the points relevant to the practice of collecting are in the discussion about the cast of characters involved. None seem truthful. Lies abound. As Hofstadter comments, “even the most respectable dealers, collectors, and curators depended on a class of audacious brokers . . . from which they hypocritically averted their eyes” (p. 143). Can the autograph trade be any more respectable than this? We may never know, since nearly every work on this subject, one intertwined with the history of the American archival profession, has been written by insiders in the trade like Kenneth Rendell (one of his recent books is described below) and Charles Hamilton. These are useful books, but they are not intended to be critical evaluations.

Thatcher Freund’s *Objects of Desire: The Lives of Antiques and Those Who Pursue Them* is a popular treatise similar to the Hofstadter volume. Freund traces the manufacture, use, subsequent ownership, and transition from utilitarian objects to prized antiques of two disparate pieces of furniture — an eighteenth-century Pennsylvania blanket chest and a Chippendale card table of the same century. Freund’s work is a sympathetic one, for he is obviously a lover of both antiques and the quest for antiques. Again, we gain insights into the marketplace for such objects, and we begin to understand the reasons why monetary values fluctuate and why certain objects gain the prestige they do. About the card table, Freund writes:

Money makes some things beautiful, and the card table, they knew, was worth a lot of money. It was valuable because some people wanted it in their homes and because museums wanted examples in their American wings. It was valuable because some place a market existed for it and because out in the world of American furniture—

where the dealers fought and lied and stole things from their friends—some people could tell a great card table from a good one (p. 153–54).

This description may appear to be as far from the issue of archival collecting as one could get, except that there has not, to date, been an objective analysis of the impact of the autograph market, the market in nostalgia (typified by the Kennedy auction), and the involvement of archival and historical manuscripts repositories in the marketplace on the prices of documents, the urge to acquire such documents, and the competition for important archival fonds and collections. Books, such as that by Freund, can remind archivists that the issues of acquiring document collections by purchase can be a complicated matter; these perspectives might even suggest that archivists might think twice before becoming involved in the marketplace.

There has been a growing interest in the plundering of art and other national treasures during the Second World War, and this looting is another form of collecting (although it is certainly the most perverse form). Lynn Nicholas' *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* is by far the most comprehensive, informative, and disturbing of these new studies, examining the Third Reich's carting off of art from all over Europe, as well as the Nazis' notion of "Degenerate Art" and its destruction or removal from public view. There are many tidbits about intriguing activities in her book. She writes about the many auctions just before the onslaught of the Second World War and about how many art museums around the world used these sales to form or add to their core collections.

The spate of travelling art exhibits in North America held just before and during the Second World War was intended to protect the collections of European arts museums by getting them out of harm's way. Nicholas describes how the art museums, art scholarship, and antiquities and art trade within the Third Reich were all bent on supporting both the nationalistic aims of that despotic regime and the personal aggrandizement of individual collectors: "All this preservation, confiscation, and dealing would be carried out by a complex group of bureaucracies, often in ferocious competition, whose utterly cynical exploitation of those in their power was justified within true Nazi bosoms by an equally complex series of legalisms and rationalizations" (p. 97). As the author also points out, all of this wheeling and dealing had been meticulously documented by a political power expecting to be ascendant for a very long time. While Nicholas does not psychoanalyze the activities and reasons of the Third Reich and its leaders, preferring to tell the story of the illicit trade and of the tidy group of Allied experts who tried to put all the pieces back together after the war, *The Rape of Europa* is, in fact, another study of the powerful allure of collecting. At the conclusion of her book, she notes that her story does not have an ending because many of the art works and other treasures are still "lost" or remain "in hiding" (p. 444). Her characterization of the whole affair as "cynical and desperate games of ideology, greed, and survival" (p. 444) may not be that far from the seamier side of much of the collecting that still goes on today in the antiquities, art, and autograph trades; the interest in quick profit, the always-eager private collectors, and the more unscrupulous dealers can overcome ethics statements and play havoc with national and international enforcement procedures.

More relevant for archivists is Kenneth Rendell's *History Comes to Life: Collecting Historical Letters and Documents*, his most recent volume on collecting autographs and historical manuscripts. Rendell is well known to archivists, both because of his publications and his well-known work on recent forgeries. This book consists of two parts. The first

is a brief series of chapters on why people collect, what can be collected, the determination of values, and the detection of forgeries. The second part is a series of topical descriptions of “areas of collecting,” with brief descriptions of the rarity or availability of certain autographs, with numerous reproductions of signatures and photographs of certain types of records. *History Comes to Life* is, it seems, an update of or replacement for the earlier reference works for collectors published by another dealer, Charles Hamilton.¹⁰ Rendell’s volume is an unabashed invitation to start collecting, and is typical of this genre.

There are two aspects to this book that are noteworthy, one is interesting and the other quite disturbing. First, Rendell’s volume is obviously intended to establish his credentials as an authority, and some of his references to himself and his work fit well into the type of analysis of collecting done by Muensterberger, Belk, and Pearce. Consider this assessment of changing trends in manuscript collecting:

By the late 1980s, the entire business of historical letters and documents had very significantly shifted its focus from institutional to private collectors. This was a result both of decreased institutional budgets, particularly as the availability of major collections declined, and my own personal preference for wanting to share more directly in the enthusiasm and fun of building private collections (p. iii).

Admittedly, this is hard to understand. Is he describing his *own* business? Or, is he stating that *he* was a major influence on the changing trends of the trade in this decade? Or is Rendell merely describing his following of the shifts in interest and activity of the market?

The more important issue, however, is the second major focus on the reasons and justifications for the market. While Rendell’s explanation for why people collect is simplistic (“While many may think of collecting as an intellectual pursuit, it is an emotional one as well” [p. 1]), it is also the case that he has written the book not to explain what collecting is about but to encourage it (“Many of our clients are as fascinating and well known as the people whose letters they are collecting” [p. 7]). And this is where the archivist should be concerned. While Rendell is certainly not advocating illegal activity, he is making some statements that are dangerous: “A collector should not be bound by any rules of collecting except those created by his or her own interests and ideas” (p. 5). What Rendell is stating here, of course, is the desirability of forming one’s own collecting focus; but how will this statement be read by the individual who works for an archives or historical manuscripts repository, or by an individual who is upset that so many valuable and important records are held by institutions? In fact, throughout the book, one senses Rendell’s wistful longing for the good old days when institutions were not the owners of many of the important collections. And this leads to other questionable statements as well: “As budget problems have plagued libraries, it has made sense to convert unwanted collections into funds needed for other activities” (p. 8). Here is a statement that should have been accompanied with some indication of the legal and ethical matters and complexities of an institution doing this.¹¹ Instead, one can imagine the energetic collector beginning to call repositories to try and make deals for their holdings.

¹⁰Compare, for example, to Hamilton’s *Collecting Autographs and Manuscripts* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961, 1970).

¹¹Even in Rendell’s interesting and useful book on forgeries, *Forging History: The Detection of Fake Letters and Documents* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma, 1994), there is no assessment of why forgeries occur. Forgeries may be encouraged by the workings of the autograph market: when prices are driven up by competition for valuable items, forgers may be attracted by the prospect of a large reward for their work.

Rendell's book, and his other writings, are valuable to archivists for two reasons. Like earlier writings by Charles Hamilton and other autograph dealers, they are rich sources for reproductions of autographs and prominent forgeries. They are more important, however, for orienting archivists to the autograph trade, a trade that we need to be more critical of and that deserves significantly more study and reflection. In this sense, we could rename the book "*Autograph Dealing Comes to Life*."

Case Studies in Collecting

Two of the books considered in this review essay fall, I believe, into the category of case studies. One is a serious case study in non-profit management that actually focuses on problems regarding unregulated acquisition. The other publication is intended to be a broad analysis of book collecting, but in reality, it is a series of biographical sketches and vignettes about both book and manuscript collecting.

While Kevin Guthrie's study of the New-York Historical Society is an analysis of non-profit management, it is also a case study of the dangers of unmanaged collecting. For most archivists, the story of the New-York Historical Society is a familiar one. The Society, founded in 1804, is one of the venerated historical societies, and, as a result, it is part of the ancient history of the American archival profession. Long before the establishment of government or institutional archives, organizations like the New-York Historical Society were the primary means of protecting this nation's documentary heritage. This institution assembled an outstanding collection of historical manuscripts, historical artifacts, prints, and photographs exceeded by few other repositories. For many archivists and manuscripts curators, societies like this represent the pre-eminence of collecting venues. But, as recent articles in the *New York Times*, *Museum News*, and other newspapers and journals have indicated, the New-York Historical Society has fallen on hard times. For much of the past decade, leadership at the institution has changed rapidly, staff relations have deteriorated, desperate calls for financial support have been sounded, hours and services have been curtailed, and partnerships have been sought as hoped-for saviors. What went wrong?

The primary question Guthrie seeks to answer in his book relates to the New-York Historical Society as collector. "With such highly esteemed collections and seemingly broad support," the author muses, "how could the Society be in such trouble?" (p. 4) While Guthrie provides the answer later in the book that these collections are "cultural assets" and valuable not because of any cash value but "by the relevance of that asset to the broader cultural purposes and capacities of the institution to which it belongs" (p. 153), it is also true that it was the threat to the Society's collections that stimulated public consternation about the fate of the New York institution. Still, the sobering conclusion by Guthrie is that "although few people question the cultural value of the millions of manuscripts, books, prints, and other historical documents and artifacts held by the Society, they are not the kinds of assets that inspire and excite contributors" (p. 166). But for the purposes of this review, it is Guthrie's insights into the Society's collecting activities and emphases that are interesting.

This study of the New-York Historical Society suggests that the source of much of the institution's later financial and managerial problems was its collecting. Early in the book, Guthrie's mention that "an emphasis on acquisitions, particularly to the extent that quantity was regarded as important, could be dangerous" (p. 31) serves as a sort of understatement. He argues that the "Society had a long history of accepting anything and

everything that was given to it with little regard for the quality of the gift, the institution's capacity to absorb it, or the relevance of the gift to the Society" (p. 31). Later, Guthrie concludes that the "Society's history provides a dramatic illustration of what can happen when the relationship between an institution's mission and its collections is not carefully managed. The uncritical accumulation of materials for many, many years played a major role in creating financial obligations that far exceed the Society's present capacity to meet them" (p. 154).

What are the specific points made by Guthrie in examining the mismanagement of the Society? Throughout the Society's history, there was a constant battle to gain control of the collections (p. 36, 74, 135). Deaccessioning, needed to help the Society rid itself of items recognized as outside the scope of any rational mission, was handicapped because of the poor records maintained about the collections (p. 111). The Society found itself unable to choose priorities in its research library or its more public museum function (p. 24), and even staff competed for priority recognition as the Society declined to the point of oblivion (p. 140). Board members were not selected because of their managerial or other expertise, but because they were collectors or were interested in the collecting activities of the Society (p. 73). The lack of control of the Society's holdings even scared off partners who had similar interests (p. 127). And, finally, the Society prided itself, for decades, on its independence from both professionalism and public and government benefactors. Evident in Guthrie's study are the results of unbridled collecting and the mistaken assumption that building great collections should be the primary mission of cultural repositories like the New-York Historical Society.

Nicholas Basbanes's *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* may be the most disappointing of the volumes considered in this essay. Basbanes, a former literary editor and now columnist, claims that his book is the result of eight years of "investigative journalism," with a thesis that "however bizarre and zealous collectors have been through the ages, so much of what we know about history, literature, and culture would be lost forever if not for the passion and dedication of these driven souls" (p. 3). For those looking for a well-written and interesting book about individual book collectors (and we should note that there is a substantial discussion about manuscript collectors, as well)—that is, stories about the hunt for books, the building of particular collections, the market for books, and the donation of some of these personal collections to institutional repositories—*A Gentle Madness* will be an entertaining addition to the bookshelf and good beach reading. Those looking for what Basbanes calls his thesis—the relationship of book collecting to knowledge and scholarship—will be disappointed.

A Gentle Madness is an antiquarian's delight, meaning that those who enjoy collecting books will like this. The book does not provide any real understanding of collecting, failing to delve into motivations or to develop themes that tie various collectors and their activities together; and it takes for granted that the accumulating of collections of books will generate or sustain meaningful and useful scholarship. In the entire volume there is not a single discussion about *how* the book collections are or could be used. In fact, there are many references to the origins of personal collections that make one wonder whether such assumptions are merited at all. Basbanes's retelling of why one collector started acquiring documents provides an example of what I am discussing:

Karpeles explained that his fervor was inspired by nothing less than a midlife epiphany, a revelation that came in 1978 when he was forty-two years old and visiting the Huntington Library in San Marino with his wife, Marsha. "We looked in an

exhibit case and we saw something that we could not believe was there, something we felt belonged in the Smithsonian Institution,” he said. “It was a pass that President Lincoln had given to one of his bodyguards the night he was killed. We asked some questions and we found out that this little pass is nothing, that there are documents changing hands all the time that would make you faint. Right there, I decided I would go into this, and I would go into it with a vengeance. I would see how many of these great documents I could get before people realized what they were selling” (p. 438).

Whether or not this collection comes back to an institution seems almost beside the point. Here is testimony of a collector competing with repositories and going after individual (“great”) documents that perhaps even destroy the evidence of the records in question by ruining their context and making them into artifacts serving a completely different purpose. The irony of the Basbanes book is that the long chapter on the book thief Stephen Blumberg paints a character portrait that seems in perfect harmony with the many other collectors described. The value of this book, perhaps, is that it reveals something of the obsession with such collecting that should cause archivists and manuscript curators to question their own collecting activities and motivations.¹²

Final Thoughts

Archivists have devoted too little attention to the real history and value of collecting as a pursuit in the context of the broader professional mission of the archivist. Is this mission primarily to fill repositories with all sorts of stuff, or is it to protect crucial evidence as a foundation for public accountability and memory? Is there a difference between these two ideas of the archival mission? As archivists, we have tended to compile a spotty record about the legacy of nineteenth-century collecting, while not critically considering the twentieth-century counterpart at all. That is, we have not documented our own appraisal and acquisition work, nor have we evaluated its success. Broad and important questions about appraisal and collecting, raised in new writings about this topic in the past fifteen years, still need to be addressed.

Archivists also need to consider the relevance of collecting in a new age that is increasingly dominated by electronic recordkeeping systems. Is there a role now for collecting? And indeed can we collect in an electronic environment? Perhaps as context, we should also consider whether older collecting efforts have been successful. More critical, scholarly inquiry as to the nature, results, and value of and the issues generated by collecting needs to be done by archivists.

¹²The failure of this book is also seen when reading a brief article by Dana Gioia, “The Hand of the Poet: The Magical Value of Manuscripts,” *Hudson Review* 49 (Spring 1996): 9-29. Gioia gets to the heart of why manuscripts, even those with questionable or unknown value, are acquired by institutions. The author dismisses the market setting values, examines what insights literary manuscripts can provide into the work of a particular author, and then contends that such materials are being collected because of reasons having to do with their symbolic value in a technocratic age. As Gioia states, “An institution of learning seeks significant manuscripts because they possess qualities that scholarship cannot entirely reproduce—an authentic, holistic connection with the great writers of the past. It is not the intellectual content of the manuscript that is important but its material presence—ink spots, tobacco stains, pinworm holes, and foxing included” (p. 22). Whether you agree with this assessment or not (and I do not agree with it completely), the point is that his twenty-page article is much more insightful than a book thirty times longer.

It is also necessary for archivists to devote as much attention to understanding the nature of their records holdings as in mastering the subject or informational value of these holdings, or of even administering them. In fact, I would argue that more attention should be devoted to the evidence issues, to comprehending the recordkeeping systems, and to recognizing that “collections”—in the true sense of the term—are understood through their formation and subsequent preservation and management. Susan Pearce, in the introduction to her recent anthology, wrote “it is . . . incumbent upon the investigator to try to find ways in which, first, the social meanings of individual objects can be unravelled; second, the significance of the museum as a cultural institution can be understood; and third the processes through which objects become component parts of collections, and collections themselves acquire collective significance, can be appreciated.”¹³ Looking at this assessment from our own disciplinary vantage, it seems apparent that the lack of scholarship concerning the history of American archives, as well as fundamental principles and activities of archival practice, may derive from a lack of critical perspective on the records held in our repositories.

Understanding our records means adopting some new approaches. It seems that most descriptions of archives still dote on their subject content. There have been persuasive arguments for transforming description to emphasize functions and activities. Looking at collecting, as this essay has tried to do, suggests something else. The descriptions of “collections” acquired by archives and manuscripts repositories should focus more on the collectors’ activities and objectives than on the potential subject use by subsequent researchers. After all, the evidence of these records can be and often is compromised by collecting, which pulls records from their context. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, in her history of museums, wrote that the “collection of things by donation [in the early formation of European museums] meant that items were presented that seemed appropriate from the point of view of the donor.”¹⁴ This seems to be a continuing truth about most donations, artifacts, or archives, suggesting that the descriptions might be more useful if they tried to reveal the donor’s view — both why they were collected and then donated. While the museum curator, in organizing or exhibiting objects, is creating an understanding of the object,¹⁵ the archivist’s role should not be to impose a new order but to reflect the purposes, organic nature, activities, and so on of the creator of the records system.

Archivists must reflect, as well, on why they collect. Two decades ago, Oscar Handlin made a reference to the collecting and publishing by Jared Sparks of sources in the mid-nineteenth century. As Handlin suggested, the “assumption that history was the sum of the biographies of a limited number of dominant individuals came easily to an age which conceived the hero as the center of society.”¹⁶ In a similar fashion, archivists seem prone to justify collecting all sorts of materials because every individual and every culture has become the center of our society. We need to understand our motivations and then to declare them honestly. Archivists know full well that they cannot preserve all records with archival value. One way of genuinely recognizing this limitation is to describe and otherwise deal with the collections they have acquired by declaring that these represent ser-

¹³Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 1.

¹⁴Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 160.

¹⁵See Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁶Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 267.

endipitous accumulations shaped by the collector, and by directly stating all reasons for their acquisition beyond the evidential and informational values customarily advanced for justifying such collecting. Descriptions of archival records and manuscripts collections should be devoted as much to the origins of the acquisition as to any other matter.

Finally, while we need to understand the symbolic and cultural value of archives, archivists also need to struggle with the impact of collecting as a means to this end. Ken Burns, producer of the acclaimed documentary on the Civil War, stated that most people are captivated by history through "story, memory, anecdote, feeling. These emotional connections become a kind of glue which makes the most complex of past events stick in our minds and our hearts, permanently a part of who each of us is now." Burns also noted that the source of these emotional connections was the archives documenting the war, so rich that an original plan for a five-hour documentary was scrapped in favor of the eleven-hour series.¹⁷ This value of archives and historical manuscripts is also one of the reasons why collecting them is an obsession of many archivists, as well as the public. That is to say, archivists may also become obsessed with the collecting of archives as artifacts while losing sight of their primary values, such as evidence and accountability. There must be a balance in our approach to collecting, and this balance does not seem to be evident, at present.

Just as we cannot overlook the weaknesses inherent in the use of archives and historical manuscripts by a documentary producer like Burns, archivists must not turn a blind eye to the many problems caused by a focus on collecting. Recent scholarship on collecting reveals, at least, the potential for study and reflection by archivists about this activity.

¹⁷Ken Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Morning Courage," in *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*, edited by Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160.