

# Private Passion – Public Challenge. An Introduction

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## Abstract

By no means a new subject, collecting has become a hot topic in the wake of the academic fascination with »material culture studies« since the 1990s. A vast range of case studies continues to be published even today: the interest in Renaissance and Baroque »Wunderkammern« (cabinets of curiosities) which initially held a prominent position within scholarship has been extended chronologically, backwards to antiquity and forward to the present. The passionate private collector, their incentives and their personality have been a topic of research for sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers. The transition of a private collection into a public museum is a challenge for all participants. Different incentives and concepts, legal frameworks, and notions of freedom interact with each other, and provenance poses are, possibly, the most complex future challenge.

## Persönliche Leidenschaft – Öffentliche Herausforderung: Eine Einführung

Obwohl kein neues Thema, wurde das Sammeln im Zuge der universitären Begeisterung für die »material culture studies« mit Beginn in den 1990er Jahren zu einem vieldiskutierten Thema. Die Flut von Fallstudien ist bis heute nicht versiegt, wobei die zunächst bevorzugte Forschung zu den Kunstkammern der Renaissance und der Barockzeit rückwärts bis in die Antike und vorwärts bis in die Gegenwart ausgedehnt wurde. Der leidenschaftliche Privatsammler, seine Motive und seine Persönlichkeit wurden zum Forschungsgegenstand für Soziologen, Psychologen und Philosophen. Der Übergang einer Privatsammlung in die öffentliche Hand ist eine Herausforderung für alle Beteiligten. Unterschiedliche Motivationen und Begriffe, Rechtsräume und Freiheitsbedürfnisse treffen aufeinander, wobei die wohl größte zukünftige Herausforderung die Frage der Provenienz ist.

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The turn of the millennium seems to have brought with it a shift in academic research, the so-called »material turn«.<sup>1</sup> Established as a parallel to the »linguistic turn«, a paradigm change in philosophy that can be discerned one century earlier, this term tries to capture the framework of material culture studies that started in the 1980s. It has to be said that material culture studies do not always focus on material remains themselves, but are concerned with thinking about the ways in which material objects have shaped culture.<sup>2</sup> This may, in part, explain the large interest that met an international congress of art historians in Nuremberg as late as 2012, titled »The Challenge of the Object«.<sup>3</sup> In any case, re-

search on the objects of the past has been a core business of museums since from the very beginning. For similar academic research to take place in universities, a proper collection has to be available, but only few universities have made real use of the objects in their collections yet, as has been a good tradition in the case of musical instruments at the Universities of Edinburgh, Leipzig, Tübingen or Vermillion, South Dakota. In Germany, the situation is about to change on a large scale, as the German state ministry for research and education has launched a program to develop academic collections through expert knowledge from research museums such as the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.<sup>4</sup>

1 Cf. Martin Schubert: Einleitung. In: Materialität in der Editionswissenschaft. Ed. by Martin Schubert. Berlin, New York 2010, p. 1. Schubert refers to publications edited in 2003 and 2004.

2 See the overview of theoretical approaches in Schubert 2010 (note 1), pp. 1-14.

3 G. Ulrich Großmann, Petra Krutisch (Eds.): The Challenge of the Object.

33rd congress of the International Committee of the History of Art. Nuremberg, 15-20 July 2012 (Wissenschaftliche Beibände zum Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums 32). Congress proceedings, 4 vols. Nuremberg 2013.

4 E.g. the project »Objekte im Netz« (objects in the web), University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum. March 2017 to

Collecting is a phenomenon that engages with materiality in a particularly striking way, and it is a preferred subject in material culture studies. By no means a new subject, collecting became a hot topic in the 1990s. A vast range of case studies continues to be published even today: the interest in Renaissance and Baroque cabinets of curiosities which initially held a prominent position within scholarship has been extended chronologically, backwards to antiquity and forward to the present.<sup>5</sup> Thoughts and texts about collections and collectors have been gathered together in the extensive archival and field work of Susan Pearce and Paul Martin's four volume series »The Collector's Voice« which is an outstanding source of interesting and often revealing statements by collectors through the ages.<sup>6</sup>

As collectors, especially private ones, are of utmost importance for the preservation of cultural heritage, it is not surprising that they have been and still are an object of research themselves. In 1989 Uwe-Volker Segeth proposed that research on collecting had to consider the phenomenon of collecting itself as well as the personality of the collector and their incentives. Segeth quotes an impressive amount of historical evidence as well as his own case studies. For Germany, he estimates the number of private collectors to be around ten million in 1989.<sup>7</sup>

Werner Muensterberger's »Collecting. An Unruly Passion«, published in 1994 and in a German translation in 1995, has been the perhaps single-most influential book about collectors.<sup>8</sup> Muensterberger was a renowned psychoanalyst, but had also earned doctorates in ethnology and history of art. A collector of art himself, he interviewed many collectors about their passion, tracked their life down to early childhood and undertook research on historical collectors such as emperor Ferdinand II, the ardent book collector Sir Thomas

Phillipps, and the French writer Honoré de Balzac. Muensterberger claims that one has to distinguish between what a collector collects – this is mainly determined by social circumstances – and why a collector collects: a factor which is determined by their personal history, as the author points out within a psychoanalytical framework of developments in early childhood.

Taking up Donald Winnicott's theory of the transitional object, Muensterberger explains that there is a moment in life when the small child discovers that it has to face the world on its own, for example when the mother or another person who habitually provides warmth and shelter leaves the room. The child, helplessly confronted with the world's dangers, is afraid, but finds relief in an object such as a cushion or a teddy bear. This is a normal process every human being has to go through, and it normally remains a transitional one, for in the end the child has to realize that the dead object cannot replace social relationships and trust in others.<sup>9</sup>

Based on his case studies Muensterberger found that most collectors were abandoned or had, at least, felt so in their childhood and kept trusting more in objects than in human beings who had failed to meet their need for love. He later makes the qualification that a focus on quantity in a collection is more apt to construct a shelter against external threats, whereas a focus on quality serves narcissist tendencies.<sup>10</sup> However, Muensterberger stresses the fact that collecting is a very strong passion that can come close to addiction, but not a mental illness.<sup>11</sup>

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's reflections about the system in which a collector is acting and living emphasize the principle of shelter as well as that of narcissism: »... whatever the orientation of a collection, it will always embody an irreducible element of independence from the world. It is because [the collector] feels himself alienated or lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom that the collector is driven to construct an alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the one who dictates its signifiers – the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself.«<sup>12</sup> In writing about the anthropology and sociology of collecting, the sociologist Justin Stagl too

February 2020. Funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung. See: <http://www.gnm.de/forschung/forschungsprojekte/objekte-im-netz/> [5.7.2017].

5 E.g. Anja-Silvia Goering, Anthony T. Grafton, Paul Michel (Eds.): Collector's knowledge. What is kept, what is discarded. *Aufbewahren oder wegwerfen. Wie Sammler entscheiden.* Leiden 2013.

6 Susan Pearce, Paul Martin (Eds.): *The collector's voice: critical readings in the practice of collecting.* 4 vols. Aldershot 2000, 2002.

7 Uwe-Volker Segeth: *Sammler und Sammlungen. Studien über ein kulturelles Handlungsmuster und seine pädagogische Dimension.* Univ. Diss. Braunschweig 1989, p. 21.

8 Werner Muensterberger: *Sammeln, eine unbändige Leidenschaft.* Transl. by H. Jochen Bußmann. Berlin 1995.

9 Muensterberger 1995 (note 8), pp. 57-58.

10 Muensterberger 1995 (note 8), p. 64.

11 Muensterberger 1995 (note 8), pp. 39, 206.

12 Jean Baudrillard: *The system of collecting.* In: *The cultures of collecting.* Ed. by John Elsner, Roger Cardinal. London 1994, pp. 7-24, esp. p. 24.

mentions fear, but also narcissism, passion, and a need for order as the main incentives for collectors.<sup>13</sup>

Although full of respect for Muensterberger's work, the philosopher Werner Sommer rejects psychological assumptions about collectors as reductionist approaches to collecting.<sup>14</sup> Sommer's book is perhaps the most comprehensive and detailed work on collecting as a cultural phenomenon. He introduces a sharp distinction between »economic collecting« – where objects that serve a practical purpose are brought together temporarily and eventually disappear after some time by being consumed or being integrated into a larger, different structure – and »aesthetic collecting« – where objects are chosen because they are distinct from other similar objects and brought together with others that fall under an identical concept. Such objects are kept in the collection as long as possible, and their sole purpose is visual perception.<sup>15</sup> Under this premise the purest form of aesthetic collection is a collection of fine art, as the collected objects were created as objects of visual perception in the first place.<sup>16</sup>

Although Sommer refuses psychological projections onto the personality of the collector, he points out that things are collected to be shown and that the collector takes a risk that the things they exhibit are not considered equally valuable by the spectators. On the other hand, if spectators admire the things they have collected, this admiration is projected onto the collector, and this in turn reinforces their identification with the collection.<sup>17</sup>

Museum curators could be considered the public counterpart of the private collector, but have received much less attention. As (replaceable) members of institutions they seem less interesting as persons, as we might understand the journalist John Windsor when he writes about private collectors: »... think how few owners of big art collections have fitted the mould of the self-effacing curator, detached from the objects of his perception. There is generally some attempt [by art collectors] to parade ownership in a fetishistic way.«<sup>18</sup>

Most institutional collections originated from one or more private collections, as is shown by some arbitrary examples of musical instrument collections in different countries:

One of the results of the French Revolution was the creation of a conservatory of music in Paris in 1793, and this was to contain a musical instrument museum. The institution already held more than 300 instruments that had been confiscated or left behind by people fleeing from the revolutionary circumstances. However, the museum was not created until 1861 when the private collection of Louis Clapisson (1808-1866), with 230 instruments, was acquired. With other collections and objects added, this became the Musée de la musique in 1994.<sup>19</sup>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded in New York in 1870. In the beginning it housed some rattles and similar items that were not yet perceived as musical instruments. In 1885, 44 instruments were given by the private collector Joseph W. Drexel and exhibited. This encouraged Mary Elizabeth Adams Brown (1842-1918) to start collecting musical instruments for the museum on a large scale. In 1889, she gave a first group of c. 270 instruments. Today, the John Crosby Brown collection with more than 4,000 objects represents more than half of the Metropolitan Museum's musical instrument holdings.<sup>20</sup>

The musical instrument museum in Brussels was founded as an annex to the Royal Conservatory of Music in 1877, uniting the two private collections of François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) and Rajah Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840-1914), totalling 270 instruments. These holdings were enlarged significantly by the collector, maker, and first honorary curator Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841-1924) to more than 3,000 objects until his death.<sup>21</sup>

A more recent example is the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali in Milan. In 1953, there was an exhibition of 200 instruments from the private collection of Natale Gallini (1891-1983) in what was then the Villa Reale. In 1957, the

13 Justin Stagl: Homo collector: Zur Anthropologie und Soziologie des Sammelns. In: Sammler – Bibliophile – Exzentriker. Ed. by Aleida Assmann, Monika Gomille, Gabriele Rippl. Tübingen 1998, pp. 37-54.

14 Manfred Sommer: Sammeln: Ein philosophischer Versuch. Frankfurt (Main) 1999, pp. 136-137.

15 Sommer 1999 (note 14), p. 8.

16 Sommer 1999 (note 14), p. 9. – This approach might shed some light on the question whether musical instruments in a museum collection should be played (consumed) or not.

17 Sommer 1999 (note 14), pp. 63-65.

18 John Windsor: Identity parades. In: The cultures of collecting. Ed. by John Elsner, Roger Cardinal. London 1994, pp. 49-67, esp. p. 62.

19 Cf. Florence Gétreau: Aux origines du Musée de la musique. Les collections instrumentales du Conservatoire de Paris 1793-1993. Langres 1996, pp. 27, 28, 43-48, 91-93.

20 Cf. Rebecca M. Lindsay: A harmonious ensemble. Musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum, 1884-2014, URL: <https://metmuseum.atavist.com/musicalinstrumentshistory> [11.4.2017].

21 <http://www.mim.be/history> [11.4.2017].

city council of Milan acquired Gallini's 270 instruments, 30 bows, and other items and created the museum, later augmented by further instruments from Gallini. The collection is now held at the Castello Sforzesco.<sup>22</sup>

From these few examples, we can see that private collections often sparked much larger collections and museums, in which the first private collection does not always remain the largest part. We have seen this for example with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and this is also the case for the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, even though musical instruments have played a very different role in the history of this institution.

The Germanisches Nationalmuseum was founded by the nobleman Freiherr Hans von und zu Aufseß (1801-1872) in 1852 in order to create a general repertory relating to the cultural history of the German speaking lands, and through this, a place of identification for a heavily fragmented German nation that was to become a German state only in 1871. Musical sources and musical instruments were part of a system or thesaurus which he published in 1853.<sup>23</sup> Supported by this system and the efforts of museum representatives who were active throughout the German speaking area in order to acquire objects, the collection of musical instruments contained about 390 items in its inventory of 1962, with almost no references in the inventory book to acquisitions of private collections. 1962 marks the starting point of an official musical instrument department which was headed by the musicologist John Henry van der Meer and the specialized conservator, Friedemann Hellwig.

This construction resulted from a clause in the contract outlining the acquisition of the Rück-collection. In the following decades, several other private collections were acquired:

	Year of acquisition	Quantity	Share
Dr. Ulrich Rück (MIR), all kinds	1962	1756	52%
Schreinzer, violin parts	1967	1	0%
J. C. Neupert (MINE), mainly keyboards	1969	340	10%
Will Jansen (MIJ), bassons	1971	36	1%
Anna Schmidt (Eberwein), brasswinds	1972	23	1%
Karl and Helga Hachenberg, brasswinds	2000	196	6%
Wolfgang Fischer, oboes	2002	70	2%
Karl Ventzke, flutes	1972-2004	24	1%
<b>Total from private collections</b>		<b>2446</b>	<b>73%</b>
Total inv. nos. of GNM's musical instrument collection		3346	100%

The Schreinzer collection of violin parts is estimated to several hundred items under one inventory number. This fact notwithstanding, we can say that roughly three quarters of the current collection were brought together by private collectors before being integrated into the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

The same seems to hold for many, if not most other collections, and research on this subject might be pushed further in the future in order to ascertain to which degree today's museum collections are in fact the indirect work of private collectors. Seen that private collections were frequently the origin of a museum collection, or contributed large parts of it, collectors can be said to have left their marks and even have been the real shaping force which was no more than streamlined by a museum's decision to buy or not to buy.

It is true that the role of the museum curator is not, in the words of Windsor, »to parade ownership« for the private collector, but to fulfill duties within the classical museum triad of collecting–preserving–presenting. These duties have been defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in their Code of Ethics:

»Museums have the duty to acquire, preserve and promote their collections as a contribution to safeguarding the natural, cultural and scientific heritage. Their collections are a significant public inheritance, have a special position in law and are protected by international legislation. Inherent in this public trust is the notion of stewardship that includes

22 Andrea Gatti (Ed.): *Musei e Gallerie di Milano. Museo degli Strumenti Musicali*. Milan 1998.

23 Hans Freiherr von und zu Aufseß: *System der deutschen Geschichts- und Alterthumskunde, entworfen zum Zwecke der Anordnung der Sammlungen des Germanischen Museums*. Nürnberg 1853. Faksimile in: *Das Germanische Nationalmuseum Nürnberg 1852-1977*. Ed. by Bernhard Denneke, Rainer Kahsnitz. Munich, Berlin 1978, pp. 975-992.

rightful ownership, permanence, documentation, accessibility and responsible disposal.«<sup>24</sup>

Although ICOM as an international, non-governmental organization has no legislative power over any museum, these rules were agreed upon by a large number of museums in the world and thus reflect legislative reality for most countries. This is even true if we consider deficiencies in the general application of these rules as Hans Lochmann and others have pointed out.<sup>25</sup>

A key point is the moment when a collection passes from the possession of a private collector into the hands of the public sector, where it is not important whether the new owner is a legal public body or a private foundation under public law. Although what has been said above is by no means a comprehensive summary on the issue of collecting, we can now try to set up a matrix that highlights the differences between private and public collecting and brings to the fore the challenges which are not exclusively public ones.

	private collector	public collector (museums)
1 Main incentive for collecting	passion	duty
2 Duty for safeguarding natural, cultural and scientific heritage	no	yes
3 Time frame	personal life span	no limit («eternity»)
4 Legal status	civilian property rights	special legal protection
5 Financial and spatial resources	personal	public (taxpayers, sponsors)
6 Permanence	personal decision	duty
7 Scientific documentation	personal decision	duty
8 Accessibility	limited	virtually unlimited
9 Responsible disposal	personal decision	duty
10 Scholarly interest	variable	high
11 Searching, finding and negotiating skills	high	variable
12 Specialist, highly focused knowledge about collection items	high	variable
13 Conceptual incentive	high	should be high
14 Number	c. 10 million (Germany 1989) <sup>26</sup>	c. 3,716 (Germany 2015) <sup>27</sup>
15 Documentation of rightful ownership	limited to last owner	extended to all previous owners

Some remarks to the table above:

1. As noted above, the private collector is driven first and foremost by a personal passion for the object, whereas the public curator fulfils a duty. The engaged curator may foster a passion for their work with the objects and may be as happy with this as the collectors are with their passion for the object itself.

25 Cf. Hans Lochmann: Tendenzen der Neubestimmung des Sammelns in Museen. In: Die Kunst des Sammelns. Phänomene des Ordners, Archivierens und Präsentierens (Schriftenreihe der Kunstvilla im KunstKultur-Quartier 2). Ed. by Matthias Strobel, Andrea Dippel. Nuremberg 2011, pp. 97-103. – For a case study, see also Wolfgang Muchitsch: Sammlungsrichtlinien am Landesmuseum Joanneum? Ein aktuelles Beispiel aus der Museumspraxis. In: Sammeln. Ed. by Wolfgang Muchitsch, Karl Stöcker. Vienna 2006, pp. 29-38.

26 Cf. Segeth 1989 (note 7), p. 21.

27 European Group on Museum Statistics (EGMUS), URL: [http://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete\\_data/](http://www.egmus.eu/nc/en/statistics/complete_data/) [26.4.2017]. – Another 2,994 museums are classified as privately owned, 261 of them in public-private-partnerships.

24 ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums (2017), URL: <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/> [30.8.2017].

2. The private collectors are, in fact, safeguarding heritage objects, but this is not their duty. They are free to destroy their collection objects at any moment if they should decide so.

3. It is wise for the public curators to be somewhat detached from the collection, as they typically step into the stewardship of a group of objects that they have not collected themselves, and they have to leave them behind when they change their job or retire from the museum. A private collector can pass away surrounded by his collection items.

4. and 5. The private collectors have no special legal protection other than common property rights and are limited by their own financial and spatial resources, whereas the public collection benefits from special legal protection and external resources from public bodies or sponsors, however limited these may be at any given time.

6. to 9. Conversely, the private collectors benefit from much more freedom, as they care for their own property. Contrary to the public curator, they have no duty to keep their collection forever, to make it accessible to the public, to document the objects in any way, or to dispose of them in an authority-monitored way, e.g. when exchanging objects with other collectors or selling them. In principle, taxpayers have the right to access objects which have been collected with public funds. Limitations apply only for reasons of security or practicability.

10. Even if a public curator did no other curatorial work than to exhibit objects and propose guided tours, they would have to do research in order to do this well. In practice, more research work than this is expected, for instance a »catalogue raisonné« of the collection. The private collector can do extensive research, as e.g. Peter Thalheimer (b. 1946) or the late Karl Ventzke (1933-2005) have done on flutes<sup>28</sup>, saxophones<sup>29</sup> or recorders<sup>30</sup>, but they are not obliged to do so.

11. to 14. Searching, finding and negotiating skills, a very deep and focused knowledge, and a strong and clear idea

of what to collect and what to refuse should be in the personality of both, the private and the public. However, public curators do not have the same freedom as private collectors. In practice, they have to be generalists rather than narrowly focused specialists, and collection concepts are not always documented when they take the responsibility for a collection. This is a crucial area in which the public might learn and benefit from the private.

14. If the figures for Germany are more or less accurate, then there are about 2,700 private collections for each public museum. Not all collections fit into a museum, but given their overwhelming number, there is a big challenge to choose among them the few collections which museums can still accommodate. This is a challenge to the private collector, too, for collections are rarely kept up by collectors' children, especially if this does not concern collections of fine art, but less prestigious and less expensive types of objects such as musical instruments.

15. A challenge common to both is the documentation of rightful ownership. It can be assumed that no museum and no serious private collector will ever intentionally buy stolen goods. But knowing if the object one buys has been obtained from a rightful owner is not always evident, especially since the declaration of the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art (3 December 1998). This urges museums to track down all their assets to check if anything has been acquired unlawfully.<sup>31</sup>

Even though there is currently no legal duty to retribute these kind of objects, there is enormous moral pressure on museums all around the world, also in the case of objects acquired through illicit traffic from Asia or Africa.<sup>32</sup> Lawyers' offices that track down looted art do not hesitate to blame museums in public, and the Washington Declaration wisely recommends »to achieve a just and fair solution«.

Provenance turns out to be by far the most complex challenge for the future, more difficult than any problem regarding space, money, or the conditions that private collectors might impose, e.g. that their collection must be exhibited, or that instruments are at disposal for playing. Private collectors

28 Karl Ventzke: Die Boehmflöte. Werdegang eines Musikinstruments. Frankfurt (Main) 1966.

29 Karl Ventzke, Claus Raumberger: Die Saxophone. Beiträge zur Baucharakteristik und Geschichte einer Musikinstrumentenfamilie. Frankfurt (Main) 1979.

30 Peter Thalheimer: Die Blockflöte in Deutschland 1920-1945. Instrumentenbau und Aspekte zur Spielpraxis. Tutzing 2010.

31 <http://www.lootedartcommission.com/Washington-principles> [26.4.2017].

32 Cf. France Desmarais (Ed.): Countering illicit traffic in cultural goods. The global challenge of protecting the world's heritage. ICOM. Paris 2015.

wishing to sell to museums must be prepared to reveal the provenance of every object they propose; and public curators must be willing to refuse the acquisition of objects of high historical value and interest because of an unclear provenance.

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