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# All the Best Rubbish

The Classic Ode to Collecting

**Ivor Noel Hume**

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# *All the Best Rubbish*

The Classic Ode to Collecting

*Ivor Noël Hume*

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## **Dedication**

For  
CAROL,  
Keeper of the Flame  
And of the Collection

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## Introduction

### *Enter the Internet and the Age of eBay*

**BY NOW** she could be a grandmother. I am referring to the little girl on the island of St. Kitts who in 1970 gave this book its title. It was written when, for me, the appearance of youth still lingered and the future seemed rich with the promise of adventures and unimaginable discoveries. As an archaeologist there would be some of both. I would come close to drowning while diving on a shipwreck in Bermuda, discover a Virginia plantation massacred by the Indians in 1622, and find the place on North Carolina's Roanoke Island where in 1585 the first English colonists set up their research laboratory. But this is not a book about archaeology; it is about collecting—about why we collect, what we find, and, most important, what we learn.

The book ended in 1973, and although on rereading it I still philosophically agree with myself, much else has changed. We are deep into the age of the computer and can examine objects in new and scientific ways. Where once we looked at an early American crock and offered educated guesses about when and where it was made, now we can analyze its clay and by identifying significant trace elements pinpoint its origin. We are no longer content to derive esoteric pleasures from the beauty of a chair leg or the blue painting of a delftware vase. We want to know what was in the mind of the carver when he wasn't carving, and about the chemical components of the ceramic decorator's colors.



1. English blunderbuss, dated 1784. 2. 17th-century-style slipware mug, dated 1983. 3. Late 17th-century style German stoneware jugs, probably modern. 4. English oak box, dated 1670. 5. English pearlware puzzle jug, ca. 1790–1800. 6. Dutch delftware fireproof tile, ca. 1650–1680. 7. Chinese earthenware tomb ewer. Thought to be a fake. 8. New York stoneware oyster jar, ca. 1800. 9. English stoneware harvest jug, dated 1843. 10. English stoneware tavern jug, ca. 1830. *Photo by David Doody.*

There is nothing wrong with such approaches. It is simply that we ask more questions because we know that in the last half century doors to the answers have been opened by historians and scientists. In 1973 there was no Internet, no televised *Antiques Roadshow*, and no eBay. Antiques in the attic tended to stay there until the owner's will was read, and even then they stood a good chance of being thrown away unrecognized. But not anymore. If we don't know what it is or what it may be worth, we can haul it to the *Roadshow*. Or, alternatively, put it on eBay and see if anyone bites. Antique dealers who used to pass the time between customers by knitting or doing crossword puzzles now spend their time scrolling down through eBay's daily offerings. If one wants an answer to an abstruse historical fact, one can look for it on the Web. Historical researchers who once had to travel to far-flung libraries in search of documents can now access them with the click of a mouse, and aging collectors like myself can be spared the horrors of airline travel by letting the sellers come to us via the computer.

As one gets older, the urge to dash over to scour the street markets of London or Paris slowly diminishes, although I confess that the last time I did it there was very little dashing. Six languid days aboard the *Queen Mary 2* proved to be a much more civilized way to approach London's Bermondsey and Portobello Road markets. Although in a later chapter I have extolled the virtues of those markets, it is my sad conclusion that most of, if not all, the best rubbish is gone. Nevertheless, my last Bermondsey treasure was to be an English blunderbuss thrice dated 1785.

As a boy I had thrilled to stories of Dick Turpin and other eighteenth-century highwaymen waylaying mail coaches on the road to York and shouting, "Stand and deliver!" The coachman invariably had a blunderbuss on the seat beside him ready to respond with a blast of buckshot and pistol balls. Those childhood memories were reignited when I spotted the gun on a market stall otherwise devoted to crockery and silver cutlery. Having deduced that the vendor was no blunderbuss expert, I saw his four-hundred-pound price tag as a bargain not to be missed. Not only were the brass barrel and the lock dated, but so was the stock, stamped 1785 between a crown and the "G III R" for George III. Better still was the name on both the lock and breech reading "H W MORTIMER LONDON." Mortimer was one of the best-known London gunmakers of his time, and in tiny letters around the muzzle of this gun was the famed Mortimer slogan "HAPPY HE WHO ESCAPES ME." Everything from the ramrod to the screws holding the lock looked authentic. I was sure I had found treasure worth thousands.

The Mortimer family of gunsmiths went into business in 1753 and stayed there until 1923—though by 1850 blunderbusses had been dropped from their inventory. Henry Walklate Mortimer turned out to have been located at No. 89 Fleet Street from 1782 until 1800 and so was at that address when my weapon was made. But it was not his.

The hoary adage about the dangers inherent in a little knowledge was never more applicable. I knew far too little about eighteenth-century gunmakers. Mortimer was then styled "Gunmaker to his Majesty" and had become so famous that rivals had discovered that their guns sold better with his name on them rather than their own. My Bermondsey Market blunderbuss was one of them. So how should I have known the difference? On Mortimer's guns his name was carefully engraved; on mine it was merely stamped into the metal. All the more galling was the memory that mistaking Mortimer had not been my first essay into firearms foolishness—as turning to page 282 will attest.

There are still dealers who, out of ignorance rather than design, misrepresent their wares and when we find out that they are wrong, will take the object back. But many will not, and the same can be said of some auction houses who hide behind "as is" disclaimers—and smugly answer "caveat emptor" (buyer beware) when we demur. Getting it wrong on eBay is a real possibility, because many sellers are inexperienced dealers or not dealers at all. Some, however, lean toward deception, albeit unstated.

My wife, Carol, our eBay scanner, found on it a very attractive English slipware mug of the kind

known as “Metropolitan” and attributable to the second half of the seventeenth century. Many examples are dated, but this seller made no such reference in his description—and only showed a single photograph of one side. Had he provided another it would have revealed that the mug was indeed, dated—and clearly. It read 1983. A descriptive oversight? We think not.

An inexplicable characteristic of eBay’s commerce in antiques is that in the space of a month similar objects can turn up from different corners of the world and then as quickly disappear, never to be seen again. In a six-week span in 2007, three small, German-looking stoneware jugs came on the market. The first turned up in New York, and because it looked interesting and cheap, I bought it. It was highly decorated with applied flowers and incised designs in both cobalt blue and manganese purple. On the front was the badge emblem of Bunzlau in Silesia, a stoneware potting region about which Western collectors know very little—myself included. However, if the style dated from the late seventeenth century (as I thought it did), the jug looked too new to be true. A sortie through the few relevant books failed to illustrate a parallel, but one author did say that the glazed surface of Bunzlau stoneware had a brownish tinge. This didn’t.

Two weeks later an almost identical Bunzlau-decorated jug was offered for sale by a dealer in England who admitted that he knew nothing about it. The accompanying photographs showed that this jug very definitely possessed the brownish tinge. Again there were few bidders, and when the new treasure arrived it had the right color and looked older than the New York jug. It was, however, an extraordinary coincidence that two little jugs that were illustrated in none of the books should surface on two continents, one looking authentically older than the other. Could they both be right? Could one be old and one not? Or were they both tourist souvenirs from East Germany? I was still pondering these questions when a third jug turned up in California.

This time the seller was convinced that she was offering a rare gem and so put an exorbitant reserve price on it—even though she had no idea where it came from or how old it really was. For her it was enough to be pretty and therefore pricey. When I suggested that I suspected that the jug was a modern reproduction, her response lacked cordiality. She had no intention of lowering her reserve price. So, rather than letting jug Number 3 escape me, I reluctantly paid her price. Carol was even more reluctant. When the jug arrived, it looked newer than the one from New York. With all three together, it was hard for me to believe that any of them were three hundred years old. What, I wondered, were the chances of a hitherto unrecorded antique jug turning up within weeks of two copies surfacing? There the enigma rested until the author of the book from which I had obtained my spattering of Bunzlau knowledge came to dinner. After examining the trio he concluded that the brown-tinted jug was original—but so, too, were the others. Novices must listen gratefully to the experts, but should we always believe them? In this instance, the answer may be: not necessarily. I even risk the arrogance of a novice and suggest that all three jugs were made in the Westerwald district of the Rhineland, no earlier than the 1870s, for sale to Silesian tourists.

I should add that after that brief burst of Bunzlau juggery our eBay excursions have yielded no more.

With the jug puzzle still in mind I risked asking a real-estate appraiser friend how he came to his valuations. How can one broker, who also appraises the contents of houses, put a price on everything in them? How does he know enough to put a value on a potato peeler, on an Art Deco dresser, or an ancestral portrait? My friend answered with a smile, saying it calls for educated guessing—the education born of experience. You study auction catalogs, he said; you read specialists’ books and when in doubt, call a friend. As the contents of a home can be as mundane as a yard sale or as esoteric and diverse as the stock of an antiques mall, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that one appraiser’s assessment may differ from another’s. Fortunately, for the educated guessers, within the framework of law and insurance, possessing an appraiser’s license assures its holder a seat on the right hand



God. The opinions of dealers, auctioneers, curators, and collectors, on the other hand, have to be taken on trust, while keeping the caveat emptor warning constantly in mind.

Like estate appraisers, auctioneers do their best to accurately describe their lots and put estimated values on them. But in country auctions, the hammer man (or lady) is often handling large numbers of totally disparate objects, some of them familiar and others very definitely not. Potential bidders looking for bargains hope that they are wrong—as they were at a Virginia tent-in-the-yard auction whose catalog listed: “Lot 173. 1 English Carved Wooden Box with Date of 1670, Copper Penny Inserted, and Iron Hardware.” On reading that description, bells of interest began to tinkle. There were no such English pennies in 1670. If the coin was a *copper* penny, it could not date before 1797, and that was the case, why was it set into a box already more than a hundred years old? At the auction preview I found the answer. Copper-tinted by old varnish, the coin was a silver shilling of Queen Elizabeth I, probably minted between 1594 and 1596. But why make it part of the design for this elaborately carved lid? And there was another mystery—one that I did not recognize until I had it home. Carved into the lid’s floral design were two small demonic faces slyly staring out and asking, “Figure us out if you can.” The owner’s initials, D. J., were also part of the design, and on the plain back were seared the letters E. K., presumably identifying the maker. The inside had been lined with bright blue paper, most of which had been ripped out. The lid was cracked, causing someone to stick a George V penny postage stamp across the split, presumably to determine whether it would get worse. It didn’t. All the stamp told me was that the box had been in an English collection prior to 1935 and that the owner had been prepared to invest an unused penny stamp in his conservation research. There, alas, the trail went cold. What was the significance of the coin? And why the evil faces? The questions remain; but that is my point. Searching and guessing are the warp and weft of collecting.

A ceramic puzzle jug provides another classic example of the “one-of-a-kind” enigma. It had been brought to New York’s prestigious annual antiques fair by an English dealer, but it failed to attract a buyer and was on its way home when I saw a photograph of it. Like the 1670 box, I convinced myself that I had to own it. So back it came. Puzzle jugs can be categorized as simple jokes for simple folk and have been around for hundreds of years. Fitted with three teat-like spouts above a fretwork collar, the game was to drink the contents without spilling. The secret lay in covering a small hole in the underside of the handle through which the liquid had to flow. What made this jug simpler yet was the fact that it had only *one* spout. Made in pearlware (see p. 154) and delicately polychrome-painted, it bore the name John Bloome. Decorated on one side with a deep purple to black rose (perhaps a cynical play on his name), it had on the other a carefully painted merchant ship whose stern bore the name *Hopewell*. There was nothing startling about that. In the late eighteenth-century many presentation bowls and jugs were decorated with profiles of named ships. What made this nautical rendering different from any other was the bow’s figurehead in the shape of a long-eared jackass.

The fascination, therefore, is not with the jug but with John Bloome, whom someone considered not smart enough to handle a three-spouter. The most obvious choice for that someone had to be Mrs. Bloome. When she ordered it made, had she, perhaps, just realized that her husband had sunk the savings in the failed voyage of the *Hopewell*? Was Mrs. Bloome smiling when she gave it to him, and did he manage a laugh when he received it—or did he even notice the jackass? These are the kinds of questions that carry us beyond ceramics or wooden boxes and open doors into the mystery-rich close of yesteryear.

I think it highly unlikely that I shall ever find another jackass jug, but I have learned over time that one should never say never. An example: I thought I had bought a unique treasure when a London dealer sold me the mermaid-decorated powder horn you will find on page 262. Forty years later another, almost certainly by the same soldier in Jamaica, was sold in Philadelphia and illustrated in the collecting’s principal monthly, the *Maine Antique Digest*. Unfortunately, the second mermaid

disappeared before I could land her. The first, however, had set us on a nautical creature course that still endures. I wrote a book about them, and Carol went into business calling her company Mermaid Arts. Neither prospered, but together they launched us into collecting seventeenth-century delftware tiles painted with sea monsters, fish, classical sea deities, and mermaids in all manner of poses, from copulative to spinning. Most of them were bought on eBay, and collectively (we have about a 150) they embrace the spectrum of the contemporary Dutch thought as it related to whatever lurked in the depths of the sea. For those of us unable to afford the canvas-painted art of the great (or even marginally great) Dutch artists of the seventeenth century, these little pictures on clay are the real thing. Studying them, we are in touch with the artists and can speculate about the scope of their imagination that let them paint a sea unicorn or a sea dragon. We can also wonder what the man (or was it a woman?) who painted a sea giraffe had been drinking.

The passion that developed from a Jamaican powder horn and led to walls hung with framed maritime tiles inevitably broadened as friends brought us mermaids of all sorts, blown in glass, carved in wood, molded in pewter, plastic, and even soap. In a weak moment I invested in a life-sized lady made of fiberglass from the Philippines. Suspended from a bathroom corridor ceiling, her pendent attributes evoke only silence from embarrassed visitors who pass beneath her. The mermaid from Manila is of no antiquity, but another may be—or so I thought. Offered on eBay by a seller in Shanghai, a white earthenware bottle glazed in green and orange (so-called *sancai* colors) is shaped like a fish with a human head, and has a bird's wings and feet. Human arms and hands grasp the head of an angry dragon while a thin and impractical handle stretches from the crown of its head to the tip of its tail. When this remarkable hybrid creature arrived, I found it coated with a vigorously adhering encrustation that looked like the result of long burial. That, coupled with the weak handle, suggested that this was an item of tomb furniture filled with wine or oil for use in the deceased's after life. The *sancai* glazing resembled that of the T'ang period (A.D. 618–906), which was famed for its elaborate tomb wares. Packed in the same box with the mer-person, and without explanation from the seller, was a small, hollow-cast female figurine, molded in the same white earthenware and of the kind commonly found in tombs. My attempts to reach the seller went unanswered, but a knowledgeable oriental collector told me that while the little figure was genuine T'ang, the mer-person almost certainly was not. But why would one be genuine and the other fake? I later found that the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (U.K.) possesses a less elaborate tomb mer-person there attributed to the eighth century. Not positive proof, to be sure, but it left open the possibility that both objects were dug from the same T'ang-era tomb.

The soup of uncertainty thickened when a friend sent me an ad placed in a 2001 magazine by a Hong Kong dealer, in Chinese antiques illustrating (in accurately rendered *sancai* colors) another fish-and-bird person and claiming it to be an original vessel dating from the Liao Dynasty (A.D. 916–1125). T'ang or Liao, I was sure that both had to be either right or wrong. In a failing Internet search for the Hong Kong dealer I came on another with the same name, but this one was in Singapore. In answer to my inquiry he promptly replied that in his opinion both are fakes, and furthermore he was considering suing his Hong Kong namesake for bringing the good name of his long-established Singapore company into disrepute. My helpful (and evidently irked) correspondent added that “The thrills and dangers of collecting antiques have both heightened exponentially since 1973,” when thermoluminescent testing was discovered, making possible the relatively accurate dating of fired clay. Unfortunately, the cost of the process is longer than its name, and appreciably more than I paid for the pot. Consequently, my oriental mer-person has been spared the indignity of scientific examination. Besides, if one likes a mermaid for who she is, it is impolite to ask her her age.

Audrey, my beloved first wife of forty years, claimed that you should never throw anything away because sooner or later you'll wish you hadn't. It was a philosophy that led to a good deal

overcrowding, but now and again it paid off. On page 193 you will find the beginning of a discussion about eighteenth-century Dutch wine bottles. In 1970 or thereabouts, a couple of American adventurers looking for diamonds in Guyana came upon a ruined fort on Flag Island in the Essequibo River and, in the mud around it, an untold number of discarded bottles. After failing to make their fortunes as diamond prospectors they brought home the bottles, along with at least one cylindrical stoneware jar of unknown origin, date, or purpose. Because I had bought examples of their bottles they gave the jar to me, sure nobody would buy it. The jar sat on a shelf, unidentified and unloved until the summer of 2008, when I received a letter from Susan in Springfield, whose brother-in-law had been in Guyana in 1968 and had brought home several bottles and a strange cylindrical jar. She wanted to know its purpose and asked whether I thought it came from England, as it had a type impressed inscription on one side that read “DANIEL JOHNSON No. 24 LUMBER STREET N York.” My own inquiries over the years had yielded only two suggestions: the jars were made to be inserted in the ceilings and arches of church to improve the acoustics, or they were containers for oysters. I had no documentation for either, though I had found one clue while visiting the Arabia Steamboat Museum in Kansas City (unquestionably the best museum of its kind) to view the wonderful preserved cargo of the paddle wheeler, which sank in the Mighty Missouri in 1856. Aboard was a wooden crate labeled “Fresh Cove Oysters from Price & Littio Baltimore” containing metal cans of similar shape to the stoneware jars from the Essequibo River. I was sure that the *Arabia*'s clue was half a century later in date, and that if “N York” stood for New York (as I thought it did), there would be merit in Susan searching the city's early nineteenth-century street directories for a Daniel Johnson. Barely a week later she told me she had found him. The directory for 1799 listed him as “Johnson Daniel, oysterman, Lumber,” while that of 1800 was more precise: “Johnson, Daniel, 24 Lumber Street, 276 Water [Street].” In 1796 he had been at No. 1 Lumber Street; in 1804 the street's name was changed from its oral pronunciation to Lombard Street. I was amazed by the speed at which detective Susan had gathered all this and more information and that she had gone to the trouble of traveling to New York to find it. “But I didn't,” she told me with a laugh. “I looked him up on the Internet.”

Susan's oyster jar had to have been made between 1796 and 1804, and was almost certainly the product of a New York State potter, possibly the 1790–1814 factory of John Remmy or Clarkson Crolius on Pot Baker's Hill at the edge of New York City. The only collector's book on oyster jars mentions none of this stoneware type, nor any so early in the nineteenth century, making her jar the oldest known—and mine along with it.

I submit that retrieving collectible treasures from the mud around an uninhabited South American island is evidence enough that they can turn up just about anywhere—including a Houston, Texas thrift store specializing in used cowboy boots.

In the wake of our pursuit of mermaids, Carol and I had begun broadening an already large collection of English brown stoneware of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A London dealer friend sold us a large jug decorated with farm implements, inscribed on the bottom with “A Present from John Bacon, Potter, Bradley, Nr. Bilston, Staffordshire” and dated 1842 on the neck. It was a splendidly accomplished piece of potting, yet John Bacon of Bradley was not mentioned in any book on English pottery. A month later, an even larger farm-related jug was auctioned in Boston, Massachusetts, and on its bottom, in the same hand, the message: “Made by John Bacon at Bradley Pottery 1849.” So here, out of nowhere, came two John Bacon jugs made seven years apart but drastically different from each other in shape and color—a warning to collectors that one cannot rely on those attributes to tell one potter from another. Now to Houston and the thrift shop.

In 2006, an even larger (six-gallon capacity) English brown stoneware jug was to be auctioned in Georgia by a company specializing in relatively modern American folk art. Not surprisingly, the description was imprecise, but the auctioneers thought enough of the jug to illustrate it in the *Main*

*Antique Digest*, where Carol found it. Being odd-pot-out amid hundreds of lots devoted to painting and wooden toys, the jug attracted little attention and was sold to us at a modest price. Unlike the Bacon jugs, with their farm tool decoration, this monster was adorned with a motley of hunting scenes, lions, the British shield of arms, and, around the neck, portraits of William IV and his wife Queen Adelaide, who inherited their thrones in 1830. It is likely, therefore, that the jug was made to commemorate William's coronation in 1831. Although most of the design elements are known on other smaller stoneware vessels, we have found no parallel for the jug itself. How, we asked ourselves, could this huge pitcher have found its way to Texas?

Attempts to find out led us back from the auctioneers to the Houston collector of Americana who bought it because it was cheap, kept it a while, and then, finding it no longer relevant to his interests, sent it to auction. He, too, had wondered from whence it came and was told by the keeper of the shop where he purchased it that it had been brought in by a "bag lady" whose name he did not know. No one bothered to ask how such a person could haul around a jug that when empty weighed more than twenty-seven pounds.

It is a tragedy that antiques, unless published by one or another of their owners, possess a traceable history no longer than their last acquisition, while even those that get into print may do so under false colors. If the first to write about them is wrong, it is likely that other writers who follow them may be perpetuating myths. An example:

In 2006, along with other literary work, I wrote a play about Virginia colonist John Smith for production during the four hundredth anniversary year of the colony's founding. The play was set in London in 1636 and had prompted a good deal of research into life in seventeenth-century London. In turn, the success of *Smith!* led to my writing another play, this time about Samuel Pepys and his famous diaries. In reading them I found the following entry for February 25, 1667:

At my goldsmith's did observe the King's new Medall, where in little is Mrs. Stewart's face, as well done as ever I saw anything in my whole life I think—and a pretty thing it is that he should choose her face to represent Britannia by.



Silver medal ordered by Charles II featuring his best ship and his paramour Frances Stewart posing as Britannia, 1666. Diam. 56 mm.

Frances Stewart was one of Charles II's several great loves, and it was her pose as Britannia that would grace the reverse of Britain's copper coinage from 1672 to 1960. The medal was designed by John Roettier, a French artist working for the King's royal mint, and is as strikingly beautiful as Pepys said it was. In a rash moment of extravagance I prevailed on a London numismatic dealer to find me one that I could give Carol for Christmas. And he did. When listed in a catalog published in 1884, the medal was said to have been designed to commemorate the Peace of Breda that ended England's

Second Dutch War (1665–1667), during which each navy wrought havoc on the other.

Mrs. Stewart shares the medal's reverse with a rendering of a large man-of-war that appears to be flying the king's royal standard. As the king had his hand in Roettier's design, it is reasonable to deduce that this was the ship that brought him home from exile in 1660, one previously named for the Battle of Naseby (which his father lost) and tactfully rechristened the *Royal Charles*. The Roettier design said nothing about peace with the Dutch, since the treaty was not signed at Breda in Holland until July 21, 1667. How, then, could Pepys have seen a finished "Peace of Breda" medal almost four months earlier? And that was not the only problem. On June 10, the Dutch attacked a British fleet moored in the River Medway, burned several ships, and captured the *Royal Charles*, which triumphantly towed away to Holland. One historian has called this insult the worst humiliation in English naval history. It is hardly likely, therefore, that the king would have ordered his stolen flagship to be remembered on his medal when (and if) it was adapted to recall the Breda agreement. For their part, the Dutch commemorated the peace with silver medals of their own that showed the burning English ships. King Charles's medal, I suggest, was created to recall English naval successes earlier in the Dutch War and to impress an elusive Frances Stewart. She, however, was not persuaded and scarcely a month later, having tired of Charles's attentions, she dumped him and eloped with the Duke of Richmond. With the king's goddess gone and a lot of undistributed medals still in stock, someone wisely ordered a Latin inscription added to the thick outer edge, reading in English: "Charles II, August restorer of Peace and of the Empire." But as Carol now knows, her Christmas gift had more to do with unrequited love than with international peace.

The moral to this Aesopian story, like the book that follows, is that we should never accept conventional wisdom as fact until it has been tested and debated. To do less is to risk further enshrining myths and making their explosion even more difficult.

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## ONE

### “What’s Past Is Prologue...”

JUST AS A PAINTING is viewed with greater respect if the canvas bears the name of a distinguished artist, and as an oft-voiced plan is suddenly adopted when heard from the mouth of a costly consultant, so authors seek stature for their paltry thoughts by quoting someone else. Not wishing to lose points early in the game I, too, propose to begin with a quotation. The words are those of the respected French art expert and auctioneer Maurice Rheims, who, in his book *The Strange Life of Objects*, has this to say:

An object’s date is of prime importance to a collector with an obsession for the past. He values for its associations, that it belonged to and was handled by a man he can visualize as himself. The object bears witness: its possession is an introduction to history. One of a collector’s most entrancing daydreams is the imaginary joy of uncovering the past in the guise of an archaeologist. In reality most finds are a few fragments of bone, two or three bronze rings, or at most a necklace of some precious material.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Rheims’s reference to collectors with an *obsession* for the past leaves little doubt that he holds a small brief for such people and their folksy approach to collecting. Nevertheless, setting the offending word aside, I must own that he has succinctly described the satisfaction of one aspect of collecting, one that I happen to find fascinating and which is to be the warp if not the weft of this book.

Collectable objects can indeed provide an introduction to history, and it follows that if they are to do so we must know to which period they belonged. It is equally true that the use of objects as signposts to the past inescapably carries the explorer into the realms of archaeology. After all Webster’s primary definition of the word is that archaeology involves “the scientific study of the material remains of past human life and activity.”<sup>2</sup> Although rather a superficial definition, it does serve to support M. Rheims’s contention, for to me collecting and archaeology are two tines of the same fork; they are a means of learning about the past. With that said, we part company. M. Rheims’s vision of archaeology smacks too much of grave robbing and his disappointment at the poor quality of his imagined loot echoes the chagrin of the foiled treasure hunter. It is a venerable but outdated concept that lingers on among booksellers’ cataloguers who lump “Art and Archaeology” together and in auction houses that still mount sales devoted to “Antiquities and Works of Art.” Archaeology had earned its place there as the means of acquiring works of art from out of the ground: marble statuary, bronzes, burial urns, gold and silver cups, and painted Grecian vases, all objects of sufficient artistic caliber to be admired, and bid for, alongside the works of medieval masters.

When we look, say, at John Zoffany’s picture of London antiquaries swamped in a sea of classic statuary in Charles Towneley’s library (Fig. 1) it is evident that the Age of Enlightenment had fostered an appreciation for beauty rather than a burning enthusiasm for studying the past through its material remains. It was an outlook that in 1803 prompted Lord Elgin to ship home two hundred crates of marbles from the Athenian Acropolis for display in his private museum in London, and which encouraged President Lincoln’s consul to Cyprus, Luigi Palma di Cesnola, to bring back the vast collection of antiquities that in 1870 would become the pride of the new Metropolitan Museum of Art.

in New York. Nobody was much concerned with broken household pottery, ancient tools, cooking utensils, or other humble artifacts, which were shoveled back into the ground. It is an attitude that did not change, particularly in those countries where ancient art objects of great size, beauty, and worth are still to be found. I was dramatically reminded of this in 1968 on a visit to the village of Miseno on the Bay of Naples. There a farmer flattening a tiresome and unproductive hillock was in the process of destroying the cella of a subterranean shrine dating from the first century A.D. When I got there only the end wall was still more or less intact, temporarily relieved because a magnificent pair of life-sized statues of the Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus stood in niches set into it, flanking the standing altar. These, I was assured, would be saved, for they were works of art, and valuable; as for the rest of the shrine, it was already rubble, and only the fragments of painted plaster still clinging to the remaining wall testified to the quality of what had been destroyed. Awed though I was by the splendor of the figures (Fig. 2), I found myself more interested in trying to make sense out of the piles of debris. It was evident then, as it has been for years, that as far as traditional antiquarianism was concerned, I was an unrepentant radical.



1. An antiquary, his dog, his friends, and one or two odds and ends. John Zoffany's 1782 painting of Charles Towneley in the library of his home in Park Street, Westminster. The clutter is artist's license; the objects had been brought together for the picture from various parts of the house.





2. Archaeology by bulldozer. The remains of a Roman shrine at Miseno, Italy, accidentally discovered while grading in 1968. The figures are those of the Emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69–79) and his son Titus. They were claimed by the state and are preserved at Bai

I hasten to add that this is not to be a book about archaeology as such, though it will inevitably slip in now and again. It can hardly do otherwise, for this is to be a personal view of collecting, and I have happen to have plied the trade of an archaeologist for most of my working life. If, however, you interpret archaeology in its loose, Websterian sense, using it to mean searching for, finding, and interpreting elderly objects, then indeed archaeology is the name of the game. While working on this manuscript, I have been asked repeatedly by friends and colleagues to describe it, and when I told them it was about collecting, they were prone to reply “Oh, no, not another one of those!” It was far from a too encouraging comment. Libraries and remainder bookstores are full of books on antiques for specialists for specialists, grab-bag A to Z compendia—the Complete Book of this, or the Concise Encyclopedia of that; and grand coffee-table volumes of greater size than substance. It will be evident from the present format that mine will do nothing for the nation’s coffee tables (except, perhaps, for those having one leg shorter than the others). There are some other things that the book is not: in the concept of collecting does not extend to botany, gemology, lepidopterology, mineralogy, philately, or collecting to birds’ eggs. Furthermore, I have no intention of trying to tell anyone all he needs to know about anything—even supposing I was able to do so. On the other hand, the book *is* about antiquities, by-gones, memorabilia, books, manuscripts, a miscellany of antiques, and a dash of numismatics, which when all lumped together comprise what used to be known as *curiosities*. It is not a bad term for that; it identifies the objects as being out of the ordinary, exciting curiosity—and that is what collecting and the book are all about.

The objects in any collection generally reflect their owner’s taste and interests, but in my case, my taste—by which I mean artistic appreciation—has little to do with it. I have collected not for aesthetic satisfaction but to bring together objects having something to say about themselves, about the people who made them, or about the times wherein they were used or enjoyed. This may sound a bit stuffy, even pompous, but I hope to be able to show that in reality there is tremendous fun and satisfaction to be derived both from finding and finding out, and that can be a far cry from collecting objects for which they may be worth or for the impression they may make on one’s peers. I am as interested in the idea of collecting as I am in the objects themselves, and with luck this will emerge not only from the text but also through the illustrations. Many of the pots, bottles, and miscellaneous odds and ends are of no great artistic merit, but they are typical or evocative of their times, and that is what makes them worthy of one’s attention.

It is questionable whether the collector is ever as interesting as the collection, but it cannot exist without him, and for this reason I cannot escape from these pages. Nevertheless, in an effort to prese



as fleeting a target as possible, I propose to dispose of a few essential autobiographical confessions once in the hope that I can be kept firmly in my place thereafter.

I was raised as an only child in England in a family whose memories of the way things used to be served as a bulwark against the cold wind of present reality, and so from a very early age I was drawn toward a world of make-believe, to the theater, to history, to archaeology, and to a fierce but outdated patriotism. Tales of past British glory, of battles, heroes, kings, and castles, were more important to me than mathematics, football—or even cricket. I was dispatched to my first boarding school at the age of six, and thereafter my thrice yearly return home for the vacation months was met with minimal rejoicing. Under the eye of a succession of housekeepers, I was deterred from making unsuitable friends by being denied the opportunity, and was encouraged to make my own amusements—quietly. Consequently I learned to find pleasure in solitude.

Early in 1942 we moved to the prewar yachting haven at Salcombe in south Devonshire, where the wild, spray-swept headlands and deserted coves well suited my developing temperament. Local legends told of hidden treasure, of lantern-waving wreckers who had lured eighteenth-century merchantmen onto the rocks, and of smugglers' caves and of tunnels cut through the cliffs from the beach to a distant village church. Intoxicated by these stories, I spent months searching but found only one tunnel, and that turned out to be well known. Nevertheless, the tales of wrecks and wreckers were often true; there were documentary records to prove it, but more convincing to a treasure-hunting boy was the sight of the occasional Spanish silver coins found in the sand after a winter's gale. There were cannon, too, salvaged years ago from the 90-gun man-of-war H.M.S. *Ramillies* that went down near Bolt Head in 1760. Beaten to pieces on the granite rocks, little of the great ship remained to be salvaged, but another four-masted sailing ship, the *Herzogin Cecilie*, which went aground close by of the Hamstone Rock, was pulled off and towed to a sheltered bay—where she sank (Fig. 3). On a starry day, at slack tide, and with the sun at the right angle, her hull and barnacle-covered spars were visible resting on the bottom, and by the hour I would hang over the side of my dinghy, peering down into the water and seeing in her all the romance of Britain's maritime past. It was not, as it happened, a very remote past; the *Herzogin Cecilie* was one of the last of the great clipper ships; built at Bremerhaven in 1902, she had been lost in 1936 homeward bound with a cargo of Australian grain. But that made no difference; to me she was the *Golden Hind*, the *Marie Celeste*, the *Flying Dutchman*, anything I wanted her to be.

Five miles east along the cliffs and clinging to a ledge no more than six or eight feet above normal high water stood the deserted remains of the fishing community of Hallsands (Fig. 4). The roofless and crumbling walls of a handful of cottages were all that was left of a village whose life had abruptly ended on a January night in 1917. A storm of unprecedented ferocity had hurled waves and shingle against the cliffs high over the houses, stripping the roofs and felling the chimneys, pouring thousands of gallons of water into the rooms until doors and windows burst out, and finally carrying more than half the buildings away in the undertow. When the seas subsided only one house remained habitable and it continued to be lived in by a stubborn survivor until her death in 1964. The old lady's stories of life at Hallsands in the years before the storm (her father had been landlord of the London Inn) and her memories of the storm itself were as fascinating to me as the legendary seaman's tales that inspired the youthful Walter Raleigh.



3. The grain ship *Herzogin Cecilie* after hitting the Hamstone Rock on the South Devon coast in 1936. She subsequently broke her back and sank in Starehole Bay.

It was these ruins, the wreck of the *Herzogin Cecilie*, and a house that I will come to later, which were to be the principal influences directing my future—but not just yet. Realizing that my peculiar antiquarian and unfashionably jingoistic interests best fitted me for a life of dilettantish ease (and knowing that dilettantism and impecuniosity made impossible bedfellows), I took the only remotely appropriate course and volunteered to accept a commission in the Indian Army. Invalided back into the real world in 1945, a series of accidents of no relevance enabled me to escape into the never-never land of the museum profession. In 1949 I joined the staff of London's Guildhall Museum to assist the curator in the recovery of antiquities revealed during the rebuilding of the bombed city which was then beginning. A week later the curator came down with pneumonia and never returned, and his deputy quit, leaving me to do battle alone against the bulldozers and mechanical grabs for possession of the remains of two thousand years of London's history. Six years of hard-fought but general losing battles ensued before I surrendered and accepted an invitation to move to Virginia and take over Colonial Williamsburg's department of archaeology. Ever since I have remained deep in the eighteenth century—with occasional forays deeper into the seventeenth century and forward into the nineteenth century.



4. The ruins of Hallsands, a Devonshire village washed away in the great storm of 1917. The sea and the gulls make the only sounds still heard there.

Since I entered the museum world through the back door, it is, perhaps, no surprise that I am more at home in the storerooms and laboratories than in the ordered sterility of the galleries. I find potsherds as stimulating as intact objects, and the commonplace of yesterday more evocative than its treasures. As a collector I take the same view, being happier searching the dusty shelves of junk shops than being guided by obsequious assistants through the salons of expensive dealers. I find it infinitely more exciting to hunt the unrecognized and the unidentified through the antiquarian thicket than to have my prey handed to me all patched, polished, and packaged, with nothing left to do but pay. I must confess that the pursuit of a bargain has often been as much a necessity as a pleasure, for my desire to acquire has frequently been bludgeoned into whimpering quiescence by the need to remain solvent. Like most people, I dream of being free of such restraints, but as this is unlikely to occur, I argue that fiscal responsibility injects a useful hazard into the game and makes winning that much more delectable.

Limited not only by price but also by space, most of my collecting has been directed toward relatively small objects, most recently to ceramics in use in British and American homes from the sixteenth century onward. Always my interests have developed in step with my professional career, moving ever later as my "need to know" draws closer to our own era. When my digging days were devoted primarily to Roman London, I was enraptured by the sophistication of classical artifacts and could see no merit in anything surviving from the squalid, medieval world.

Later, however, I would be moved to see this supposed squalor as a captivating simplicity to which the florid vulgarity of the subsequent British renaissance was no better than a whorehouse haberdasher. So it went, step by step through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each alleged lowering of moral standards punctuated by anguished cries of "Thus far and no farther!" I almost choked on the Industrial Revolution and swallowed it only by looking beyond its belching chimneys and its grimy terraced dwellings to the clean air of the countryside and the rural craftsmen who continued to do their own thing through most of the nineteenth century. For years I looked with disdain on the development of transfer printing on earthenwares and condemned it as the death knell of the creative potter's art. Today, the need to understand and evaluate these wares in their own contexts has taught me to see beyond the mechanical multiplication to the source of the engravings, to the hand that held the burin and to the girl who applied the tissue-papered print to the vessel and whose efforts to conceal the joint revealed that there was still room for human frailty. I confess, nonetheless, that I have yet to coax more than a Vicar-of-Brayism past the mid-nineteenth century, and even if I should survive for another thirty years, I doubt whether I can expect to discover aesthetic pleasures in a plastic cup. But while I may balk, others will not; as the supplies of collectable antiques dwindle and as new generations of collectors grow up, so our yesterdays become their ancient history and our rubbish a legacy from

another age.

My choice of pottery as the principal thrust of my collecting stems in part, as I have said, from the ease with which it can be housed, but more from the fact that pottery making is one of man's oldest artistic achievements; it survives from cultures that bloomed almost at the dawn of history, and through its stylistic and technological evolution one is able to trace the rise and decline of civilizations. Through ceramics we can watch the development of a nation's taste and, as often as not, the influence of foreigners upon it. I venture to suggest that we can read the character of an era in a single piece of pottery. A mold-decorated Gaulish Samian ware bowl of the second century A.D. (Fig. 5) epitomizes to me the brash, mass-produced provincial Roman culture, the glory of the gods glowing still, but the sharpness of the Augustan Age weakened by repetition, the edges smeared, and the image not as clear as once it was.



5. Press molding, an early ceramic technique, seen here in the making of a Samian ware bowl attributed to the potter Comitalis Rheinzabem in about A.D. 160–170. Diameter 9/2 inches.



6. A London delftware dish, decorated in blue, green, orange, and yellow in a design of some antiquity. About 1640. Diameter 1 1/2 inches.

We can see the England of the first Stuarts in a tin-glazed dish decorated with Adam and Eve in the garden, all in bright yellow, orange, blue, and green; the whole naïve, God-fearing, and not too far removed from the Catholicism of its Italian maiolica predecessors (Fig. 6). The maturity and elegance of mid-eighteenth-century Britain abides in a redware coffee pot adorned in relief with Chinese figures and rococo foliate scrolls, together embodying the lightness and purity of line, the taste for chinoiserie, and the slightly frightening confidence that was England at the end of the Seven Years

War (Fig. 7). Such a piece is a far cry from the hideous, transfer-printed effusions of leaves and flowers garlanding a molded Gothic pitcher that is my ceramic portrait of Victorian Britain a century later, or the brown-glazed cuspidor which I see as the embodiment of the United States in the same period (Fig. 8). Such fanciful thinking will doubtless be condemned as thoroughly unprofessional, yet the collector who thinks along similar lines can find comfort in the realization that he can do so only after first acquiring a better than passing knowledge of the histories and ceramics of the periods thus portrayed.



7. Sprig molding was an ancient technique, but it is seen here in its elegant eighteenth-century form, decorating an English redware coffee pot of about 1760. Height 7¼ inches.



8. An American tortoiseshell-glazed cuspidor, mold-decorated with stars and stripes. Perhaps made in Baltimore in about 1870. Diameter 10½ inches.

With rare exceptions, hand-thrown ceramic objects, no matter how mundane, display a fluidity and unity of form that plastic clay simply cannot avoid. So, too, does glass in the hands of a craftsman, though it lends itself to being assembled from a miscellany of disparate parts (bowls, stems, knobs,

cushions, feet, handles, spouts, and bits of fiddlededee) and thus too often falls victim to its creator's bad judgment (Fig. 9). At its best, the splendor of glass lies in its simplicity, in its transparency, in its reflective quality, its cold winter sparkle, and its strength in the guise of fragility. For me, however, glass remains aloof, evoking more respect than affection, and perhaps for this reason my interest in it has largely been directed toward wine bottles whose dark and often opaque colors pay no more than lip service to the material's potential. Indeed, I have never collected bottles as glass, but simply as bottles. Like household crockery, they evolved with the passing years, and to the collector seeking an entree to the past, or to the archaeologist attempting to determine where he is in time as he digs in the ground, bottles are signposts most clearly marked (Fig. 10).

When I first became interested in bottles in the early 1950s, they were not widely collected. In England the few people who were collecting them were predominantly men in the wine trade, and in America they were sought by collectors with a fairly scholarly enthusiasm for relics of the early American glass industry. Today, bottle collecting has become one of the United States's most popular hobbies, and an early Coca-Cola is as prized as a sealed Piermont Water of the mid-eighteenth century is in Britain. A Dr. Davenport's Snake Root or a Bulmer's Bitters of the 1870s can aspire to the ultimate compliment of being copied for the benefit of connoisseurs unable to secure an original. The British have yet to come as far, and most collectors confine themselves to wine bottles; but as supplies shrink and prices escalate, it may not be too long before venerable milk bottles will be offered in the sale catalogues of Sotheby's and Christie's! If that prospect seems to tax credulity, it is worth noting that in the United States there already is a National Milk Bottle Collectors' Club colloquially known among its members as MOO—Milkbottles Only Organization! Given the smallest encouragement, a sense of competition, and a club to belong to, people will collect just about anything.



9. Ancient glassblowers were given to excesses. A green glass vase or unguentarium; probably from Syria, third to fourth century A.D. Height 7½ inches.



10. English wine bottles being excavated from a tavern site in Williamsburg, Virginia. The bottles were buried in about 1745–50.

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## TWO

### *To Have and to Hold*

“WHY DO YOU COLLECT?” I asked the large lady in the small red dress at an Antiques Forum cocktail party.

“Have a sausage,” she replied. “Oriental Lowestoft. We collect Oriental Lowestoft. My husband just loves porcelain. We collect it all the time.”

“Why?” I persisted.

“Why what?”

“Why do you collect porcelain?”

“Why does anybody collect anything?”

“Ah,” I replied, chewing on my sausage.

I realize that this was not one of the world’s more profound conversations, but it was typical of the responses I have elicited to the apparently simple question, Why collect? It is generally received first with jaw-sagging surprise and then, when no neat answer leaps trippingly on the tongue, with a kind of dismayed and defensive belligerence. Why is this idiot asking such a question? In fact, of course there are many possible answers, the simplest being that collecting is a fundamental human instinct and everybody knows that instincts are there—they need no explaining. By adopting that stance we can conveniently avoid the glum truth that just as many instincts are singularly unattractive, so the urge to collect is not one of our better traits. If it is any consolation, it is not ours alone; we share it with magpies, crows (indeed with all the *Corvidae*), with squirrels, pack rats, dogs, and even with an archaeologically oriented groundhog of my acquaintance. Though we all like shiny things, the human animal does not confine his evaluation of an object’s desirability to the quality of its reflective surface. We have the advantage over the aluminum-foil collecting crow in that, for us, paper money shines as brightly as silver or gold.

There can be no denying that value has much to do with the collecting instinct, for once two people want the same object it acquires a commercial price. Here it is that we differ from our animal cousins: they have no means of obtaining their neighbors’ treasures short of theft or mayhem. We first try trading. Competition is a basic element of the collector’s makeup, and the competitive spirit, everyone knows, is thoroughly praiseworthy and should be fostered in every contributing member of society from Cub Scouts and baton-twirling moppets to football-playing assassins. In the world of collecting, this healthy philosophy is often tastefully interpreted as “screwing the dealer.” It is, fortunately, a sufficiently reciprocal pursuit as to retain the essential element of sportsmanship.

Sport and sportsmanship, like collecting, are words capable of diverse interpretation. Smiting a diminutive white ball and riding after it in a small vehicle to see where it went (golf is such good exercise) is sport of a sort; so is sitting in a stick hut on a marsh making oral sexual advances to passing ducks. The sporting spirit of the collector is equally free and quite as bizarre. It is stimulated by greed, by love, by patriotism, by loneliness, even by madness—though the madness comes later and the collection takes command of the collector. I am not thinking of the little madnesses we display in hoarding pieces of string, collecting hotel match folders, or bringing home junk from trips to the beach. I am referring to the lunacy that will allow a collector to starve rather than sell his treasures, to live in utter squalor so as to be able to buy things of beauty. It is the same mania that makes the



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