Collecting

AN UNRULY PASSION

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PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Contents

Preface ix

PART ONE:
\* PRELUDES TO COLLECTING \* 1
Chapter 1
Passion, or the Wellsprings of Collecting 3
Chapter 2
First Possessions 14

Chapter 3
Of Toys and Treasures 25

PART TWO:
\* MAGIC OBJECTS \* 49
Chapter 4
Skulls and Bones 51
Chapter 5
The Headhunter's Bequest 62

PART THREE:
\* THREE PSYCHOBIOGRAPHIES \* 71
Chapter 6
"One Copy of Every Book!" 73
Chapter 7
Two Collectors: Balzac and His Cousin Pons 101
Chapter 8
Ventures of Passion: The Vicissitudes of Martin G. 135

PART FOUR:
\* EXCURSIONS INTO HISTORY \* 163
Chapter 9
Renaissance and Reconnaissance 165
The source of this book is curiosity, closely linked to the dimensions of my psychoanalytic work and my complementary research in anthropology, in the field as well as at the desk. The connection is in no way coincidental because the common aim is a deeper comprehension of the essential nature of man and my concern with the emotional content of the human experience as we find and observe it in the vast arsenal of affects, feelings, and perception.

My larger inquiry goes back several decades after reading Donald W. Winnicott’s seminal essay on what he described as transitional objects and transitional phenomena providing a widened spectrum in our understanding of the intermediacy of “objects that are not part of the infant’s body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to the external world,” (p. 230). Here Winnicott draws attention to the infant’s integrative needs and capacity and the reliance on maternal and subsequently environmental support. The essence of this support is illusory because it depends on what the baby creates out of the object, regardless whether it is a doll, a blanket, a teddybear, even a lullaby. The importance lies in the experience of an object or, rather, the subjective relationship to the object, transitional or temporary as it may be, because it is meant to undo the trauma of aloneness when the infant discovers mother’s absence. This is the causative factor for the baby’s reaching out and, by having and holding the object, denying the fact of separation.

This point of view extends and enriches earlier psychoanalytic propositions with respect to the emotional antecedents of the motivational forces to collect.

This book is written from a psychoanalytic perspective. But while my findings concur with many previous approaches such as the obsessional leanings of the passionate collector, they

consider variables other than genetically defined fixations, and my widened outlook owes much to my talks with Donald and Clare Winnicott.

A study of this kind can only be carried out with the help and cooperation of many people and institutions. I benefited from my participation in a conference on “Collectors and Collecting,” organized by Paul Mosansy at the New School for Social Research in New York, in the late 1960s. I spoke of “Why do we collect?” At the suggestion of my late friend Lionel Trilling I submitted an outline of my ideas to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, received a fellowship, and made the acquaintance of the president, the late Gordon Ray, himself a devoted book collector. We soon became friends. Mitchell S. Rosenthal, another friend, introduced me to a colleague, the late Douglas Bond, president of the Grant Foundation, which also decided to support my research. I gratefully acknowledge their interest and generosity.

My attempts to validate my ideas and theoretical approach owe much to patients, friends, colleagues, and the many collectors who understood my aim and cooperated with my project.

A number of collectors preferred to remain anonymous. I am much indebted to David Daniels for our talks at the early time of my project. They helped me to first scan the various libidinal forces accounting for the collector’s zeal.

I have been fortunate in my meetings and correspondence with Sir David Attenborough, Frederick Baekeland, the late Marquess of Bath, Monique Barbier-Mueller, the late Peter Bull, Robert Benson, the late Bruce Chatwin, the late Ralph Colin, Andrew Ciechanowiecki, Giuseppe Eskenazi, Everett Fahy, Count Baudouin de Grunne, Carlos van Hasselt, E. Haverkamp-Bege mann, the late H. P. Kraus, Annemarie Logan, Edward Lucie-Smith, the late Frits Lugt, Neil MacGregor, Malcolm MacLeod, Agnes Mongan, Carlo Monzino, the late A. N. L. Munby, Edgar Munnell, Peter Neubauer, J. W. Niemeijer, George Ortiz, the late Mario Praz, the late Charles Ratton, the late Nelson Rockefeller, Frieda Rosenthal, Francis Russell, David Sainsbury, Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury, A. W. Scheller, the late Count Antoine Selern, the Freules Six, David Somerset, the Duke of Beaufort, the late Paul Wallraf, the late Katherine White, N. M. A. ter Wolbeek, M. L. Wurfbain, and Helmut and Marianne Zimmer.

I thankfully acknowledge their readiness to talk to me and thus further my research.

My colleague Bernard L. Pacella was instrumental for an introduction to the Vatican where I found much cooperation from Msgrs. C. Brown, C. Rogers, and Mario Testori.

My inquiry in historical sources was much facilitated by the opportunity to work in that unique institution, the London Library. I want to thank the ever ready help of its chief librarian, Mr. Douglas Matthews and his staff as well as the staff of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and Mr. T. D. Rogers at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Robinson Trust. The Hampstead Clinic in London kindly permitted me to consult their case histories with respect to children’s collecting.

I am not sure whether this book would have seen daylight had it not been for Irwin Hensey’s persistence and encouragement.

I am very appreciative of Elizabeth Dickey’s, Benjamin Kilborne’s, and Allen Rosenbaum’s counsel after reading a draft of the manuscript. Mark Johnson assisted me patiently in the preparation of this book.
PART ONE
PRELUDES TO COLLECTING

*
CERTAIN ASPECTS of human conduct seem at first glance not at all exceptional or mysterious. Yet on closer inspection we see that they can be quite perplexing and not easily understood. One such trait is collecting. Collectors themselves—dedicated, serious, infatuated, beset—cannot explain or understand this often all-consuming drive, nor can they call a halt to their habit. Many are aware of a chronic restiveness that can be curbed only by more finds or yet another acquisition. A recent discovery or another purchase may assuage the hunger, but it never fully satisfies it. Is it an obsession? An addiction? Is it a passion or urge, or perhaps a need to hold, to possess, to accumulate?

Observing collectors, one soon discovers an unrelenting need, even hunger, for acquisitions. This ongoing search is a core element of their personality. It is linked to far deeper roots. It turns out to be a tendency which derives from a not immediately discernible sense memory of deprivation or loss or vulnerability and a subsequent longing for substitution, closely allied with moodiness and depressive leanings.

It is not even the phenomenon of collecting as such which may seem strange to the outsider, but rather the spectacle many collectors make of themselves, their emotional involvement in the pursuit of objects, their excitement or distress in finding or losing them, and their at times peculiar attitudes and behavior. Indeed, a detached observer often finds it difficult to understand the immense passion and overriding concern a collector can exhibit about such things as old maps or a rare coin or military ribbons.

Is it more like an unquenchable thirst? Even a very serious and reflective collector is hard put to offer a clear, convincing explanation of his inclination or the intense emotion that occasionally occurs in the process of obtaining an object.

The aim of this book is to throw some light upon the habits of collectors in an effort to answer these questions and explore the
underlying emotional and experiential conditions that provide a setting for this kind of craving. In order to do so, I shall first offer a definition of what I consider collecting. I will define collecting simply as the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value. Note that I emphasize the subjective aspect of collecting because the emotion and often the ardor attached to the collected object or objects is not necessarily commensurate with its specialness or commercial value, nor does it relate to any kind of usefulness. To the truly dedicated collector, the "things" he collects have a different meaning and indeed even a potentially captivating force.

It is, of course, a given that whatever is collected is of particular significance to the individual collector. Obviously, his collection is bound to reflect certain aspects of his own personality, his taste, his sophistication or naiveté; his independence of choice or his reliance on the judgment of others. While others go their own independent way with no need for role models and with little or no regard for what is in fashion in this respect, many collectors tend to be affected by current trends or the opinion of fellow collectors, specialists, or dealers.

Here is a reason why it is not uncommon to find collectors among the nouveaux riches, for the objects contribute to their sense of identity and function as a source of self-definition. They then seem to justify a feeling of pride, even superiority.

Irrespective of what kind of objects collectors choose to assemble, there are clues that help us understand their behavior and the nature of their passion, which is often marked by feelings of exhilaration and states of transport but is also reflected in moments of tension, sensations of distress or restless nights, and harrowing doubts. Often the very process of acquisition is a transparent source of excitement, though at the same time it may prompt stirrings of guilt and dis-ease. If one observes collectors in pursuit of an object, one quickly recognizes conspicuously telling individual attributes—the different ways of how they go about acquiring a new object, how they express their craving, or how they transmit overwhelming feelings of pleasure; on the other hand, after having obtained an object, they may maltreat themselves with doubts and self-reproach, often quite incomprehensible to the noncollector. For there is no "average collector."

Many years ago, I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of an outstanding and truly dedicated man, Georg Tillmann. A German by birth, he was first known as a collector of exquisite porcelain. Scholars, always welcome guests in his house, made studies of many objects in his possession. He visi-
ably enjoyed company with which he and occasionally his wife could share his interest. His astonishing knowledge and discerning eye enabled him to assemble superb specimens, and his name is still mentioned with awe among porcelain connoisseurs to this day, more than half a century after his death.

Tillmann eventually left his native Hamburg for the Netherlands where he first became acquainted with ethnographica, especially Indonesian works of art and textiles. Here, not at all un-
typical for collectors, he embarked on an entirely new collection, containing predominantly sculptures and textiles from West and Central Africa, Indonesia, and the Pacific. As before with porcelain, he ventured into his newfound field with zeal and thoroughness, and the sure instinct of a man of impeccable taste. He sent scouts to Indonesia and West Africa, again sought the acquaintance of specialists in the respective fields, and soon became as knowledgeable as he had been with porcelain.

Tillmann was a very engaged collector who liked to share his enthusiasm with like-minded people—fellow collectors, specialists, students, and aestheticians. He also kept an extensive correspon-
dence and often had prominent scholars as houseguests, who had a small cottage located behind his townhouse at their disposal. A man with boundless energy, he was often carried away with a new find, a recent purchase, or the result of his last research. There seemed to be no end to his passion. Among other things, he made a study of Indonesian textile designs, and discovering what he felt was a hitherto unknown or different pattern or type was like a spiritual victory for him, and quickly became an incentive for elaborate enquiries and spirited discus-
sions. I recall when my telephone rang long after midnight. When I answered, he did not even mention his name but spoke right away about an exquisite African mask he had just brought from Paris and asked me to come over and share his excitement.

A telephone call at any hour of day or night was no exception. It was a testimony to his total engagement. When in the company of fellow collectors or scholars, he often forgot about
time and conventions, not infrequently carrying on conversations until the early morning hours. Such conversations usually took place in a very large kitchen clearly designed for the purpose because these gatherings were often accompanied by memorable meals which he himself would prepare while continuing to talk with his guests about this or that object either in his collection or in a museum or in somebody else’s hands.

I am sketching this setting because scenarios of this kind are not at all uncommon among collectors who delight in sharing their joy and appreciation with like-minded enthusiasts. Such dedication of collectors can be all-absorbing—now and then exhilarating, at times tyrannizing, and, indeed, occasionally ruinous.

In some instances collecting can become an all-consuming passion, not unlike the dedication of a compulsive gambler to the gaming table—to the point where it can affect a person’s life and become the paramount concern in his or her pursuit, overshadowing all else: work, family, social obligations and responsibilities. We know of numerous cases in which moral standards, legal considerations, and societal taboos have been disregarded in the passion to collect.

Historical examples of this mental attitude are indeed too numerous to mention. There was, as an instance, Philip von Stosch (1691–1757), a German scholar and antiquarian, who became a willing spy for the British government in order to fulfill his overwhelming passion for the finest gems, and apparently thought nothing of stealing from collections he was invited to visit as one of the foremost experts of his day. Or take Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792–1872), who, in his never-ending pursuit of “one copy of every book in the world,” was not perturbed by letting his wife and daughters live in squalor and putting off his material obligations to the suppliers of his books and manuscripts for years, in some cases driving the dealers to bankruptcy. Even so august a collector as Queen Christina of Sweden, whom Hugh Trevor-Roper described as “that dreadful woman, the crowned tempestant and predatory bluestocking of the North,” was not above letting her passion swamp her moral sense, as in 1648, when she seized the extraordinary art collection of Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor, only a few days before the Peace of Westphalia, bringing an end to the Thirty Years’ War, was to be signed.

In the context of our observations, there is a valuable lesson to be learned from such examples. For the dedicated, the “hooked” collector—an occasionally fitting designation used by some collectors in referring to their own habit—the experience is not simply recreational but an enriching respite from the sometimes frustrating demands of everyday life. My focus is psychological. By that I mean that I want to explore the generative conditions leading up to the cause of the collector’s obsessional infatuation with the objects. Their presence reduces—for a period—an inner longing, or, in psychoanalytic terms, the tension between id and ego. Inner longing and external representation achieve a temporary balance. Anyone acquainted with habitual collectors is well aware of how much of their time and effort is absorbed by their hobby and how the never-ending search for yet another acquisition generates excitement, anxious expectations, a thrill, but also, almost unavoidably, uncertainty and indecision as well. At the same time, it is transparent that this kind of involvement has also other dimensions and is usually determined by unconscious concerns as a device to screen off and master deeper doubts and ambiguities, a point I shall deal with in greater detail.

Still, I must emphasize that, while the response to ownership, the love of one’s possessions, the inner pressure for more and more acquisitions, and the manner of giving expression to the ownership of the objects, among other things, exist in all collectors, neither personal style nor circumstances are ever identical. Rather, they differ according to the inner causes or what one might describe as the particular individual’s collecting sentiments. This is true even when collectors pursue similar objects and similar aims.

Indeed, each single item in a collection usually has a distinct meaning for the owner, and this meaning is inevitably determined by a great many external and experiential factors. Thus, while two collectors may crave the same object (think of several bidders for a specimen in the salesroom), their causal reason for desiring it, and the way they may go about obtaining it, may be, and usually are, entirely different. As a result, their individual
choices or tastes may coincide, but what drives them depends on their personality, on particular sociocultural conditions, and, in a deeper sense, on the nature of their antecedent mental experience.

There is, then, a distinctly individual and often wide disparity in the private incentives that motivate collectors. My stress lies on the affective value which pari passu contains both a projective and a creative element by contributing to the collector's fantasy world. The reasons they themselves give for their infatuation, their taste, and their personal preferences are, needless to say, subjective, and, considering the unavoidable self-consciousness of collectors I have interviewed, I tend to question the validity of the various conscious explanations they give in this regard. Taste, choice, style are inevitably affected, albeit often unconsciously, by the Zeitgeist, the spirit and the sociocultural climate of an era.

What concerns us here is the question of the causality of the drive to collect. This can only be understood if one is aware of certain underlying factors, the most important of which is the constant search for new objects, new additions or acquisitions. My emphasis is on the overwhelming significance of objects to the collector. In this context I should stress that the area of specialization is not without relevance, but my focus is centered on the complexity of the collector's total experience.

It is this aspect of his or her concerns that should provide some clues to the individual collector's urge if not nagging obsession. It is an intrinsic element in any collector's repertoire, although it should be evident that this is but a surface deflection. I could describe it as a feedback mechanism arising from deeper needs and salient causes. There is an essential underlying condition that is reflected in the collector's use of the object.

Observing dedicated collectors in their often consuming pursuits, one can detect an overmastering search for objects. Paying attention to certain people as they browse through flea markets, one has here and there a chance to recognize a kind of persistence behind which seems to lie a compulsive preoccupation, and like all compulsive action is molded by irrational impulses. As I shall describe shortly, these may range from such concrete incidents as physical hurt or emotional trauma or actual neglect to more or less tangible states of alarm and anxiety, particularly when no real help and comfort was forthcoming. In one case, I encountered a collector of bells of all sorts, from cowbells from the Swiss Alps to Tibetan prayer bells and Chinese temple bells. I soon learned that the man had been brought up in a Catholic missionary orphanage under conditions that seemed pitifully grim and depressing. Only the sound of the bells of the little mission church had seemed to provide some source of comfort. There may be other considerations that motivated this man, but there is much empirical evidence to indicate how crucial such childhood experiences are.

The significance of early events like these lies in the fact that they may establish a disposition for special techniques to alleviate the lingering dread of a repetition of exposure to trauma providing the hurt child with a sense of security. Child observation shows us that the infant may look to alternative solutions for dealing with the anticipation of vulnerability, of aloneness and anxiety, and often will be looking for a tangible object like a comforter, a cushiony doll, or the proverbial security blanket to provide solace which is not, or rather was not, forthcoming. Thus, 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. From this point of view objects of this kind serve as a powerful help in keeping anxiety or uncertainty under control. This has little to do with an objective appraisal of the actual situation. Rather, emotionally fragile children may just be afraid of the dark and seek protection by holding on to an object that will, in the child's mind, magically alleviate the dread of aloneness and provide instant support.

Thus, favoring things instead of people may be one of several solutions for dealing with emotions that echo old traumas and uncertainties. What I am suggesting is that affection becomes attached to things, which in the eyes of the beholder can become animatized like the amulets and fetishes of preliterate human-kind or the holy relics of the religiousist. Such special objects may even be given a name, like a person, and help assure the child of companionship and open an avenue for mastering doubt and anxiety.
THE WELSPRINGS OF COLLECTING

This is not a fanciful assumption. Many observers have pointed out how one or the other kind of fear or anxiety can invoke a wide array of precautionary measures. Giving a doll or some other object a “soul” or a name is one telling example. This is a phenomenon anthropologists are long acquainted with. It is known as animism. In psychological terms, it has been described as “attachment,” or “clinging response,” not only among children but in adults as well.

The concrete manifestations vary. Some people remember a favorite toy; others recall the first attempts at collecting baseball cards or campaign buttons, or perhaps going in search of shells or minerals. Preferences and taste are under the influence of prevailing trends and environmental conditions, especially as one grows older. Still, despite all possible variations, there is reason to believe that the true source of the habit is the emotional state leading to a more or less perpetual attempt to surround oneself with magically potent objects.

Over many decades, I have encountered all kinds of collectors, from all walks of life, of all different ages, ranging from children to octogenarians. Some of them recalled childhood events of a clearly circumscribed kind, which caused anxiety—war, a parent’s suicide, prolonged illness, physical handicaps, death of a sibling, or simply not-good-enough early care. As one example, I shall discuss the case of one of France’s most outstanding authors, Honoré de Balzac, who suffered from parental neglect throughout his childhood. Regardless of his eventual achievements as an author as well as a man of the world, it remained a gnawing pain and led to his restless pursuit of various possessions: bric-à-brac, paintings, porcelain, rare carpets—anything that struck his momentary fancy. Or there is the example of Sir Thomas Phillipps (whom I have mentioned before), an utterly capricious and stubborn personality who clearly took up the collecting habit out of severe inner problems. Born out of wedlock, he grew up without any maternal care. His first ostensible interest was in local documents such as church registers and gravestone inscriptions. It is not difficult to suspect that this manic interest—first in the history of his county in the Cotswolds in England, later in other sources of historical relevance, and eventually in any sort of printed material—was intimately connected with the circumstance of his illegitimate birth.

THE WELSPRINGS OF COLLECTING

Some of my informants had had traumatic war experiences or had suffered from severe childhood diseases. Others were torn between divorced parents. The Marquess of Bath recalled his mother as being an invalid far as long as he could remember.

Whatever the motivation, there is little question that collecting is much more than the simple experience of pleasure. If that was the case, one butterfly, or one painting, would be enough. Instead, repetition is mandatory. 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. The sense following the acquisition is usually that of blissful satisfaction and excitement, at times accompanied by flagrantly exhibitionistic elation (as I spoke of when Georg Tillmann wanted to show me an object he had just brought home, even though it was long after midnight).

Perhaps a look at a rather different kind of collecting will shed some light on some underlying driving factors. There are, to be sure, all sorts of collectors and facets of collecting. While one would ordinarily not think of the infamous Spanish nobleman Don Juan Tenerio as a collector, did he not in fact collect the chaste young maidens he seduced one after the other?

A young patient of mine, to all appearances a good-looking man of superior intelligence, self-possessed, well spoken, and in his mid-twenties, seemed to be following in the footsteps of the original Don Juan. He used to refer to the numerous women who caught his fancy and whom he was able to seduce as objects. “I discovered an irresistible object in the subway,” he began one of his sessions, not without challenging pomposity. He had little love for these young ladies who used to fall for him. He idolized them as long as they were out of reach and served as subjects for his fantasies. Their main attraction lay in the kind of a pleasantly hallucinatory state they first evoked in him. The less accessible they were, the more infatuated he became, and he would find strikingly ingenious ways to approach them and make his pitch.

The final “conquest,” as he liked to put it, had a magical, but unfortunately only momentary, healing effect on his deeply disturbed self-image, for his sense of victory was always short-lived. Once he had succeeded in his seduction maneuvers, he was in pursuit of yet another conquest.
The Don Juan theme has inspired nearly four hundred variations and artistic elaborations since the Spanish monk who wrote under the assumed name of Tirso de Molina brought out the first play about him, El Burlador de Seville (The Rake of Seville), in the seventeenth century. All these plays and operas depict in a variety of colorful details the wish-fulfilling fantasies of Don Juan, and all suggest an ardent yearning, a driven passion that can only be checked for a short while, but never fully mastered or gratified.

The lustful escapades of Don Juan were not just an unusual young man’s unusual adventures. C. G. Jung might have seen Don Juan as the archetype of prurience and fickleness. However, this would be a lopsided interpretation of the true nature of his instinctual demands. Don Juan is more than simply a champion of license and lustfulness. He is not driven by a plausible purpose or concerned with understanding his amorous adventures. Notwithstanding his numerous affairs, he is sensitive to his own feelings. He is not truly loving but in need of reassurance that he is wanted and lovable. In essence he is lonely and forever trying to gain reassurance from what our young Don Juan described as objects.

Against this background, it can be seen that much of what has been said about the Don Juan also applies to many devoted and passionate collectors. The intricacies of the find; its discovery or attainment; the sometimes clever ploys utilized to effect an acquisition; the fortuitous circumstances of the lucky strike; the energy expended in obtaining the object, and occasionally the waste of time; the preoccupation with the challenge, with rivalry and jealousy—all these emotions are shared by devoted collectors and Don Juans alike.

Seen as a script, the quest of the Don Juan does not vary appreciably from that of the fervent collector. Both savor the rewards with at least a preconscious knowledge that no acquisition, no new encounter, will break the spell. An old and often well-disguised urge, an emotional hunger, seems to lay the foundation for this needfulness. It is frequently accompanied by a vivid and even imaginative fantasy that embodies the inner drama the satisfaction-seeking collector can experience.

This unconsciously continual urge motivates the search—another woman in the case of the Don Juan; another painting or
* CHAPTER 2 *

First Possessions

Listen to a dedicated collector’s penetrating observation regarding his own habits: “The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. . . . One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired.”

This is part of a self-observation by Walter Benjamin, a highly perceptive essayist who loved books. Benjamin was musing over his books’ past. But here, quite obviously, the books’ past and the collector’s harking back to his own early experiences and memories, seem to merge. It is almost as if the new owner is reliving old, hidden, and either actual or perhaps illusory sensations of former times, and, in doing so, ascribes to his objects a life and history of their own.

Thus, by searching for objects and, with any luck, discovering and obtaining them, the passionate collector combines his own re-created past consoling experiences with the fantasied past of his objects in an almost mystical union.

It is the fiber of these sensations—the excitement of possession, with all its attributes—with which we are concerned here, since we are seeking to find the generative force unconsciously influencing these emotions. If we are to comprehend the collecting phenomenon, we must first pay attention to the striking intensity—sometimes all-consuming and, to the onlooker, rather bewildering—with which the dedicated collector pursues his aim.

What Walter Benjamin described as the collector’s “most profound enchantment” is reminiscent of the joy children show over a Christmas or birthday present. This joy is not born out of greed or covetousness, but goes much deeper. It leads back to unconscious or concealed memories, to profound hopes and desires.

It is of course true that the pleasure of collecting is prompted by a delight in possessions. While a book, or a glass, or an old typewriter is to most people simply an object, to the knowing collector, such an object, in Benjamin’s words, lives “the period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former owner.”

These are the elements that imbue the object with magic or mana. (Here, mana is taken to mean an intrinsic life force, in the same sense as when the concept is used by the native Melanesians. I shall return to this aspect of experience later.)

It would be an oversimplification to view the collector’s longing for objects as an irrational passion. Nor would I do collectors justice by describing the thrill of acquisition as a “discharge of tension,” or by reducing what is often a suspenseful, occasionally dramatic, and not always rational state of mind to any schematizing formula. To the passionate collector, no formula or definition can truly express the inner experience he or she undergoes when contemplating and possibly acquiring another new object. Moreover, the visible manifestations of this experience do not tell us, as observers, any more than the fact that the objects collected seem to have a special meaning to their owner, and in fact that they seem to hold a curious power over him or her. I am not reducing the collector’s objective or infatuation to an emotional, let alone pathological, state of mind. We are simply trying to comprehend the nature of the collector’s unconscious motivations, to trace the affective mainsprings of his zeal and yearning.

In essence, collecting is a highly personal and more often than not solitary affair, as Walter Benjamin clearly understood. “Ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects,” he noted. “Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.”

No collector would quarrel with this portrait. In its deliberate subjectivity, it characterizes the transfiguration of objects in the collector’s mind. It echoes emotions that have their roots in old affective experiences of oneness; in early sensations of wish fulfillment, and in relief of the child’s anxiety and frustration that comes with feeling helpless and being alone. Objects in the collector’s experience, real or imagined, allow for a magical escape into a remote and private world. This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect in any collector’s scenario. But it is not enough
to escape to this world only once, or even from time to time. Since it represents an experience of triumph in defense against anxiety and the fear of loss, the return must be effected over and over again.

As noted, there is a resemblance here to the recurring state of hunger, and the periodic need for replenishment, with variations in the reliving of the experience itself. Regardless of how often and how much one ingests, within a few hours hunger returns and one must eat again.

Not surprisingly, these phenomena have their root in early childhood. They originate in the baby’s experiences not simply with hunger and satiety but with the subjective perception of closeness and belief or, negatively, doubt in magical control. This is usually perceived as a sense of emptiness and disillusionment and the need for both physical and emotional replenishment. Thus, the values attached to one’s holdings usually follow an earlier affective prototype of yearning.

In this inner affective state, a soft doll or the edge of a pillow or blanket can provide a sense of touch and the illusion of protection against the dread of being alone and powerless. Later, a toy or some special object can bring the same kind of comfort, thus providing the first passion for possession.5

This reference to passion harbors within it the predicament of passivity, almost as though the experience of helplessness lies at the core of the collector’s habituation.6 Walter Benjamin instinctively knew this, for there is in every collector’s plight the dialectic tension that exists between rational thought and the force of passion.

If, within this ambiguous climate, we search for the antecedents of the collector’s dilemma, it is the demonstrably emotional significance of the child’s earliest tangible possessions which lies at the heart of the matter. These are the objects that are always there when the child’s need for comfort and a soothing touch is not immediately met; when the child does not have a mother’s breast, or a loving pair of arms to allay frustration.

Having discovered the palliative effect of her doll or his teddy bear, the infant soon tends to credit these first possessions with magical power. Out of this intricate nexus of helplessness and let-down, and the comforting relief inherent in touching and holding the object and having it, arises the relief from anxiety together with the growing notion that loving care is not always immediately at hand. Children perceive the object or objects in a subjective way.

In each situation internal factors and external circumstances account for the evolving pattern meant to heal the scars of early injuries. Whatever the visible response, it is always marked by some kind of emotional disengagement and by the sheer limitlessness of it, like the sheer limitlessness of individual adaptive measures.7 They may be cautious or boastful, depressed or grandiose, but it implies that they always echo the disappointment or occasional trauma suffered at the time of total dependence on others.

My late friend Katherine White, a prominent American collector of African art, understood this essential link between her childhood experiences and her later devotion to works of art, particularly the hundreds of African masks and sculptures with which she used to surround herself. She was not at all surprised by my inquiry about the origins of her specific interest. In fact, since several people had asked her the same question, she put some of her childhood memories in writing:

My mother collected as a matter of course. She grew up on a southern plantation in the motionless years after the Civil War. . . .

Mother’s determination to instill in us what she called herself ‘an inquiring mind’ saw our growing years pelleted with a variety of meaningful exposures. Our trips together were a series of grand entrances into places like the Mellon Gallery, the Smithsonian, the Peabody, the Gaspe Peninsula, Stratford Hall, tours of Natchez, Capistrano, Old Gump’s Department Store, Yosemite Park, and the archaeological mesas of New Mexico.

We graduated with the ‘cathedral treatment’ in Europe when we were at the proper age. And so it was the accident happened. The postcard counter at the Cathedral of Poitiers had among its souvenirs a little American handwoven figure astride an antelope.8

Kat, as her friends called her, soon began buying all sorts of art objects, ranging from Japanese temple guardians to Navaho bracelets and African artefacts of all kinds, until her large house was once described as ‘nothing but a rat’s nest of precious ob-
Despite all the attention lavished upon her, Kat was not a happy child. Much of her upbringing stemmed from her mother’s personal style and widowhood. The fact that she was fatherless and the character of her mother had left their marks on Kat’s personality, and she was well aware of this.

People tend to search in later life for the equivalents of the love and tenderness they may have lacked during their early years. Some find relief in religious pursuits; others in an identification with those in need of care and protection. They then become helpers and caretakers such as nurses or even physicians. Still others turn to supposedly magical aids such as alcohol or drugs or indulge in a never-ending search for some kind of cause or some kind of goal to find an expression for their need to relate.

In view of the demonstrable connections between childhood experiences and the adult’s personality, it is evident that, if we are to learn what motivates dedicated collectors, we must first examine the various stages in a child’s emotional development as the vicissitudes of early life inevitably leave their mark and have their instructive (or destructive) effect on the person’s individuality.

To begin with, intimate body contact—touch and sucking—are the first instances of a baby’s need for gratification. It is apparent that the feelings that accompany this initial care are of cardinal significance. Is the mother or the mothering person warm and caring, or inattentive or impatient? Was the baby wanted or unwelcome? While the infant’s responses to conditions such as these seem soon forgotten, they cannot fail to have an effect on later character development. At a time when helplessness coincides with hopelessness and anxiety, it is easy to see how the first use of defenses such as inklings of magical solutions help tolerate infantile frustrations and come to the baby’s rescue. Security is sought elsewhere. The notion of symbolic substitutes is but a short distance from these circumstances.

Take thumb sucking, for example. It is an intuitive substitution for the mother’s nipple at the time of weaning or a reaction to the fear of the loss of the nipple and at the same time a means of reassurance. Or should we say that it represents a first step toward self-sufficiency when the environmental provision is inadequate or no longer available?

It may be one or the other or conceivably rooted in the baby’s living experience. It would be difficult to determine the various elements involved in a child’s constant search for substitutes for attachment and tangible closeness. One point is beyond question: the baby is in need of satisfaction, and may also be hallucinating a state of well-being and security. But I must emphasize here that the thumb, unlike the nipple, does not supply milk, and a doll, no matter how soft and cushiony, is not a warm comforting human body. Nonetheless, regardless of such imperfections, the thumb does provide some presence in the mouth and the doll does offer some indication that touch is more than just interacting with another human body. The thumb and the doll thus give the child relief from distress and offer a measure of contentment in the face of frustration, and so imagined or borrowed security is provided by handy substitutes. In other words, the thumb and the doll are subjectively invented alternates solely to come to terms with insufficient care or other traumas at an early age.

This all too brief outline delineates the wider implications of basic factors arising from the interlocking of biological needs and environmental conditions, and the consequences for the child’s emotional responses. There is no doubt about the lasting importance of these factors in the development of the child’s personality and his or her subsequent motivations in later life. Here is a vast spectrum of experiences and responses that form the basis for future susceptibility to frustration, to vulnerability, to doubt or trust, to introversion and a sense of self-reliance.

It will be noted that this is the kind of dialectical predicament in which the habitual collector finds himself. Particular modes of response to inner and outer stimuli, like grasping and clinging and, at a later point, exhibitionistic leanings or accumulative inclinations—characteristics that, to be sure, are quite similar to those found in a goodly number of collectors—can be understood to be derivatives of experiences during the crucial steps of individuation.

Seen from this angle, it is easy to understand how a person’s basic outlook and attitudes are essentially molded by the effects
FIRST POSSESSIONS

of inner processes and outer conditions as well as the overall tone of his total environment; in particular the mode of care and mothering the child receives during the crucial phases of early development.

Much the same is true of other childhood bodily experiences such as bowel training and learning to walk. Collectors are often referred to as anal-retentive types. This, too, has a basis in infancy.

We know from experience that the young child is only gradually prepared and able to hold on to his excretion. And then it may feel good "to collect the stuff and hold it for a while before passing it on."10 Winnicott refers here to a physiological action which under certain circumstances can contribute to a sense of mastery. But this is not simply mastery over one's bowels. The child soon learns that by holding on or opening up, he or she is in command.

It is already possible here to perceive an echo of certain collectors' dispositions. Once they are actually in possession of a cherished object, they will never let go of it. They may want to show it or they may keep it hidden from anybody else. This is reminiscent of many children's attitude toward their playthings. By the time they have reached that stage of behavior, much has already occurred in the preceding phases. Stubbornness and the symbolic meaning of holding back or letting go are inherently fostered by the emotional conditions of the infant to that stage and the interaction with the immediate environment.

In Western culture, bowel training often coincides with the weaning process,11 and depending on the ability of the mother to provide the appropriate conditions, may frustrate the child and endanger the trust and confidence he has placed in those around him, and thus provoke anxiety. It is often during this period that withholding and collecting his feces essentially constitute a shield against what is construed as threats or deprivation, thus initiating primitivist defenses such as compulsive obstinacy with the aim to control a sense of deprivation, but, what is more, to express alarm about the more hidden fear of object loss. In fact, infants' reactions can be very complicated. For example, they may derive satisfaction from gathering and clinging to fecal matter or instead make a mess, attitudes that may eventually play an overwhelming part in the broader approach to ways of collecting—namely, tendencies to select or, on the other hand, to make heaps, or in terms of our context, to hoard indiscriminately.

It is certain that a child's early experiences with excretory functions have an influence later on the adult's ways of giving and taking, of holding back or letting go. Building up "heaps of things" in a collection or piling up money or amassing rubbish such as old newspapers, empty beer cans, or discarded umbrellas, in addition to equally useless items (as I had an opportunity to observe in an aging spinster), often clearly and quite understandably functions as a bulwark against deep-rooted uncertainties and existential dread.

In this regard it has been argued that the typical collector represents an "anal type" who gains satisfaction from symbolic equivalents, much like the toddler who builds mudpies instead of playing with his excretion. "The childhood attitude toward feces is often found transplanted into the later attitude toward the individual's personal achievements.... The anal retention, which always contains the two components, fear of loss and enjoyment of a newogenous pleasure, may also be displaced to another object. Cupidity and collecting mania, as well as prodigality, have their correlating determinants in the infantile attitude toward feces," Otto Fenichel explained.12

Provoked by early, possibly unfavorable conditions or the lack of affection on the part of not-good-enough mothering, the child's attempt toward self-preservation quickly turns to some substitute to cling to. Thus, he or she has a need for compensatory objects of one or the other kind. This can also be interpreted as a self-healing attempt. In later life, this attitude leads to a biased weighting for more money or more possessions, as if they could provide magic protection and shield the individual from new frustrations and anxieties.

To put it in another way, such a person requires symbolic substitutes to cope with a world he or she regards as basically unfriendly, even hazardous. So long as he or she can touch and hold and possess and, most importantly, replenish, these surrogates constitute a guarantee of emotional support.

Here one can recognize the first specific link to the grip that the obsessional collector cannot and will not shake off. There is a good deal of logic behind the child's inclination to restore
what has been taken away. But what I am dealing with goes beyond the harmless desire to substitute one thing for another. If a frustrated child responds to not-good-enough mothering, or one or the other kind of harm or injury, by attempting to protect himself against new hurt or disillusionment, the objects he clings to can become a shield against all sorts of dangers, real or imagined. As such, they provide the child with a feeling of mastery and a measure of independence. This is illusory, but it is entirely appropriate and, under the circumstances, an efficacious device.

Freud offered an illuminating example of that magic experience of ownership and control. He had noticed certain routines in what seemed to be play in the behavior of his eighteen-months-old grandson. The little boy had the habit of throwing toys into a corner of the room or under the bed. He had also invented a game with a wooden reel to which a string was attached. When he threw the reel over the edge of his bed, it disappeared. He then mourned the disappearance with an "o-o-o-o" sound, expressing an at the moment puzzling reaction. He pulled the reel up again and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" (there).

This was a kind of ritual game. What the little boy enacted was a particular sequence: disappearance, apparent loss, and eventual return. He translated into action a specific series of events, and Freud found the key to his grandson's creative action.

A further observation subsequently confirmed the interpretation fully. One day the child's mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met by the words, 'Baby, o-o-o-o!' which was at first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image 'gone'.

The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation... which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as if
First Possessions

Traumatic experiences must be dealt with. Depending on the circumstances, the baby may seek rescue in other affective stratagems. Whether he sucks his thumb or holds on to the edge of his pillow, it provides the young child with the feeling of mastery. It relieves the sense of precarious dependence and achieves a modus vivendi.

There is no denying that every child sooner or later is exposed to the dilemma of substitution. Mother is not nearby all the time. Giants and dwarfs, E.T. and Mickey Mouse, populate the child’s universe as aloneness and vulnerability seek self-soothing through fictional creations. Dolls, teddy bears, or even a wooden reel become equivalents for people, and objects are used to transform frustration or discontent into a state of well-being, if not pleasure.

Like the dedicated collector, the child absorbed with his toys “dreams his way not only into a remote or bygone world, but at the same time into a better one.”

# Chapter 3

Of Toys and Treasures

The discovery that the passion for collecting is closely linked to a deep attachment to objects which substitute for, and quite often supplant, people still leaves us with a number of unsolved questions.

Why, for example, do some collectors hoard, while others search and select with great care and discrimination? Why does one man assemble his objects in the most meticulous manner while another one buys or makes his finds at random? Why does one person choose to collect campaign buttons, while another accumulates paperweights, and a third amasses American quilts? What is the lure of candlesticks, or candy wrappers? An outsider may consider them trivia. Inevitably, however, the collectors themselves would hardly share that point of view. Such individual differences pertain also to the way people collect. Why does one collector seek to own only outstanding specimens, or only a handful of objects, while another acquires everything in sight? I have met collectors who seek a single example of everything within a particular category (for instance, masks from the Ivory Coast in West Africa), and others who opt for one specific type of object (such as female representations). It would not be too difficult to draw up a long list of variations. Those variations may depend on historical period, or on fashion and social environment. But the significance the individual collector attaches to the objects themselves and the meaning of what he or she is collecting depends on individual character, on personal taste and sentiment. These are, to be sure, secondary elaborations or maneuvers with the basic aim to attach, often frantically, one’s emotions to playthings or objects, or here and there to animals, but not to people. It is apparent that individual tendencies not only reflect different temperaments but correspond in many ways to the individual collector’s total personality. To some it may be sheer possessiveness—an unquenchable thirst, as it were. To others it is the thrill of discovery or, as in
the case of antiquities, the powerful emotional experience of owning an object that was cherished a millennium ago, by an appreciative Sicilian or Roman citizen. It serves as evidence of continuity and symbolic communication with a distant past.

We cannot go back and ask whether prehistoric man had an inclination to collect or hold on to a certain object that he did not need. The flints and potsherds found in ancient burial places provide no answer, since we believe that they were offerings or funerary donations designed essentially for the peace of mind of the survivors, rather than for the soul of the departed.

Equally inconclusive is our knowledge of the collecting instinct of animals, even higher mammals. Some gather foodstuff or glittering stones or tree branches or twigs for different purposes, although close examination of animals that gather may teach us something about a variety of certain anthropoid traits and habits with regard to assertiveness or efforts to anticipate seasonal food scarcity.

However, while resemblances may be suggestive, they are not conclusive, and apparent similarities in modes of behavior and attitudes cannot be taken at face value. In fact, even ostensible similarities, like a dog's instinctual impulse of "collecting" toys to play with, can be deceiving. Indeed, we must be aware of our tendency to anthropomorphize higher mammals and to overemphasize certain seeming similarities between their behavior and that of *Homo sapiens*.

The human condition is different in terms of intra- and extrauterine development as well as in physiological and psychological complexity and with respect to sociocultural and economic constellations. As I explained earlier, possibly the most salient feature in human development and individuation—the extent of total helplessness and the absolute dependence on others—implies a fundamental condition of anxiety or imperilment that makes seeking and reaching out for presumably protective objects imperative. Without empathetic mothering and good-enough care over a considerable period of early childhood, no human being can survive to adulthood. This long passage from helpless beginnings to self-awareness in all its facets and vicissitudes is full of hazards and conflicts which, indeed, help mold the core of the individual and color the nuances of preparedness for mastering reality.
In this context, we would be hard put to deny their value. They are important because they reconcile the needful child to the critical awareness of separation or the threat of being alone or the belief of having been forgotten.

There is a paradox here. These surrogates for people add a new dimension to the child’s empirical observations. Touching or holding those objects seems to banish fear and frustration. This fantasy provides the objects with power and helps create the illusion of being able to cope. In trying to overcome these elementary dreads, being, having, and holding are now inextricably interlocked. By discovering that he can improvise companionship, the baby can, at least for a while, push aside the menace of the real world. One has but to observe a young child absorbed in his playthings. Here imagination helps provide what the outside world cannot. The paradox is that although these playthings seem to the child independent of other people, he tends to become even more attached to and dependent on his toys.

Wish fulfillment with the aid of dolls or, for that matter, any other object is no abstract conception. Fancy and illusion enable the child to create a private cosmos of magic secrets and potency. He can now rely on a self-composed universe, something the outer world cannot or does not provide. The toys achieve what nothing else can. They work like a drug or a palliative. They transform the child’s feelings of loss and anxiety into well-springs of activity and imagination and provide some sense of control and dominance, as the example of Freud’s grandson showed.

There is an emotional affinity here to the efficacy many preliterate peoples attach to all sorts of inanimate objects such as bones, stones, amulets, carved images, or anything at all that can serve as an agent promising relief or comfort due to its immediacy. Such objects become, then, carriers of intrinsic power. Or, more to the point, they tend to alter the child’s disposition (and that of preliterate peoples) because they tend to deter frustration and doubt.

And yet these states of well-being are tenuous and hence always needing to be invoked. There is always a restitutive and reparative aim. We have considerable documentation on how children use toys and invoke imaginary playmates to cope with their lingering, ever-present doubts. This tallies with Winnicott’s observation—namely, that in the baby’s mind he “creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created.” Surrounding oneself with objects one cares for, and expressing that care by clinging to them, is characteristic of many, though not all, children. Ideally, this is but a transitory stage. Only under particular circumstances will a child keep holding on and continue to give meaning to what is obviously a substitute, for the object is not a loving person.

It is quite evident that there is a close ideational connection between the child’s projective anthropomization of his playthings and the sensory transcendence that is also so prominent in certain religious experiences. For example, one of history’s greatest patrons of the arts, Abbot Suger of St. Denis (1081–1151), left behind a pertinent description. Enshrined by the St. Denis altar decorated with precious gems, he tells us:

When—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored stones has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of sacred virtues; then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the universe nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; in that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an analogical manner.”

This self-induced, trancelike state of mind is immediately reminiscent of the blissfully absorbed little child who delights in his or her thumb or whose attention is captured by a cuddly doll or some other inanimate object. For the moment, he or she is oblivious to the external world, and indeed seems not to need it. As I explained before, this protective reverie is a defensive technique and has at the same time an adaptive purpose. It represents an escape route that gives the child support enabling him or her to cope with disillusionment and uncertainty.

To extend this argument, I would like to describe the case of a little boy who came to my attention more than a decade ago. At the time, Paul was about four and a half years old. Paul’s mother had spoken to me about her son’s recent difficulties, at
home and with his friends. When I met Paul, he was a grumpy young fellow, rather small for his age, and stubbornly taciturn. His parents were quite concerned about him, as they had been unable to change his mood and attitude. Paul seemed depressed to me, but at the same time willful and tightly controlled. He was determined not to talk to me nor to respond to my questions. According to both parents, there had been a conspicuous change in his entire behavior. What had been responsible for this change?

Ever since he had come home from an extended visit with his grandparents, Paul had refused to go back to kindergarten. He stayed home, sitting in his room and playing with a new toy, a stuffed dog which had become his favorite the moment it had been given to him. He carried the dog around all day, brought it to the dining room table during meals, and even took it to bed with him. All of this did not seem appropriate for the boy’s age. According to his parents, the difficulties had started roughly six months earlier. He had spent the summer with his grandparents in a comfortable house in the country. He liked the place. He could play with his grandparents’ dog, or wander around in a large garden, and he knew some of the older children in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, Paul’s parents had gone abroad, accompanied by the boy’s older brother.

This was the longest separation yet from both parents and his brother for Paul. Nobody had paid much attention to this, nor had anyone expected Paul’s distress. Paul himself had voiced no objection. Moreover, he was fond of his grandparents and an old housekeeper who used to tell him stories at bedtime.

Then during the second or third week of his visit, the grandfather had had a stroke and been hospitalized. During those anxious days he had seen little of his grandmother, but the old housekeeper had looked after him. One day she presented him with a toy dog, which he gave a name, Micky.

Paul and Micky quickly became inseparable, but a week or so later the boy asked for and received another toy dog. At that point, we could reconstruct, he became withdrawn. The parents told me that, because of the grandfather’s illness, the grandmother might have been less attentive to Paul than he might have expected. When his parents and brother returned from their holiday, they too might have shown more concern for the grandfather than for the little boy. They did bring him several gifts, which he put on a shelf in his room but then absolutely ignored. In the meantime, he had asked for another toy dog, although Micky remained his favorite.

Here the links are clear between certain events in Paul’s life and his feeling of having been deserted. There had been no actual threat to his security, nor was there any reason for him to feel estranged in the grandparents’ house, since he had been a frequent and welcome visitor there. But then the grandfather’s sudden illness seemed to have disoriented Paul’s emotions, primarily because attention had shifted away from him to the grandfather. Such were the circumstances when the toy dog came to his rescue. Was Paul merely resorting to the old remedy of a pacifier?

Many weeks after I had met him, Paul confessed that he and Micky conversed in a secret language. Was this perhaps like Abbot Suger’s meditation using the glittering stones on the altar of St. Denis as a vehicle for his discourse with God?

In essence, Walter Benjamin’s experience was similar. He described every acquisition and addition to a collection as an experience of renewal, “from touching things to giving them names.” Paul had stumbled on an effective device to help fortify himself against repeated hurt because of being alone and feeling excluded. With his fetishes, he could suspend his anxiety. Micky together with the other toy dogs would never leave him behind. Their presence helped guarantee him support and not-aloneness. In his self-established collection of toy dogs he had discovered a source of comfort and a specific presence in everybody’s absence, at first comprehensible to his parents. It was a technique I have observed among many collectors. Their involvement keeps them seemingly active, even adventurous and enterprising; however, in a deeper sense, this is only to ward off undercurrents of doubt and a dread of emptiness, even depression. It seemed that only his toy dog could bring relief to little Paul.

But, then, what else are collectibles but toys grown-ups take seriously? They are signposts in the struggle to overcome the reappearance of the notion of old feelings of abandonment, of separation anxiety, as the example of Paul demonstrates. There is evidence of these traits in all dedicated collectors. George
Ortiz, today possibly the most prominent collector of Greek antiquities, stressed his disbelief "in any divinity and life after death." But in his remark regarding artistic accomplishments ("the ultimate" he called them), he found "a message of hope and faith in the inherent goodness of man and his living qualities." Here religious beliefs and unmitigated reliance on God, having lost their intended meaning, are replaced by aesthetic passions and commitment, and finding "pro-life and anti-death manifestations," in Ortiz's words, in aesthetically outstanding works of art.

Evidently, this way of reasoning is anchored to an essentially profound doubt in a supreme power. But such pronouncements are defensive because they but camouflage a child's doubt in parental credibility. In the obsessional search for "goodness," relief is found in narcissistic expansion articulated in the ownership of "things." For men like Ortiz, examples of rare aesthetic beauty are proof of an incomprehensible superhuman power.

There are various approaches to steeling oneself against the reemergence of doubt, of crises, of helplessness and abandonment. One mode is the taking up of manageable companions, be they toy dogs or carefully selected works of art. In point of fact, they may be objects of any kind, as I said in the beginning; they may be pressed flowers, guns, or in some cases even animals.

In the course of my research I met a man who had been bedridden for more than a year at the time of puberty. Neither books, pictures, or toys could alleviate his endless hours of misery and boredom, his illness having occurred before the arrival of television. Visitors came and went, but still he felt half-forgotten, and nothing could lift his mood.

Then one day an empathetic relative brought him a fish tank. All of a sudden the melancholy, reflective boy found companionship and playmates. He could watch the movements of the fish. He could choose his favorite. And, at least in his own experience, he felt renewed vitality as if participating in the activity of his current roommates. (What was perhaps equally helpful was the awareness that finally someone understood his predicament. This was more reassuring than any promise of recovery.) Now he could watch the fish, enjoy their agility, delight in their play, and learn by close observation. It was an informal course in animal behavior, not without revivifying earlier memory traces or fantasies of primal scene impressions, as he came to understand in the course of our talks. It constituted the basis for a lifetime avocation. By the time of our acquaintance he had become a well-established collector of marine animals and enjoyed the respect of professional ichthyologists.

This is an instructive vignette because it brings to light possible causes of the development of a passion. The effect of early distress or infirmity is oftentimes a significant element in the rise of feelings for objects of all possible kinds. Clearly, inner motivation must invoke enthusiasm for owning a certain kind of thing, be it fish, bus tickets, or toy soldiers. In many cases, the search and obtaining sound like adventure stories or a magical-romantic pursuit.

It is tempting to recognize in such enterprises, as in boys' sometimes habitual rovings, forerunners of a later inclination to collect or perhaps to gather in a more systematic way. Surprisingly enough, this is not often the case. Collectors are not Huckleberry Finns in whose pockets one can find matches, dried flies, a piece of string, an adhesive, a chestnut, and a few coins. This is the actual description of one nine-year-old's accumulation. He was one of those carefree children who roam around in the woods and fields in search of flowers to be pressed or birds' eggs, and who often arrive at home with an injured animal to attend to.

What is brought together under such conditions is very much a matter of what the physical environment can provide. It constitutes a manner of luxuriating in the adventure, reaffirming an earlier inking of mastery and self-confidence.

Most of us can remember the pride we took as children in a bunch of marbles or postal cards. We liked to show them off or traffic in them. This is usually a whimsical attribute of children, who without even knowing it want to draw attention to themselves and arouse envy in others, often in an attempt to overcompensate for doubt and uncertainty. The true nature of such endeavors became manifest in the case of one three-year-old girl who had been piling up as many Christmas cracker toys as she could lay her hands on. A grown-up gave her what she could. Suddenly the child stopped, looking wonderfully at her adult friend, and in a voice filled with bewilderment and incredulity asked, "Don't you want lots?"
Such aspirations may lose their appeal and novelty, and fade away. On close inspection, they are found to be only part of a phase when anything new seems desirable and has its own fascination. Children want to explore and widen their horizons, and the accumulation of such treasures helps them to assert themselves.

This concern with more is also found among adult collectors, but not necessarily with an emphasis on amassing one or the other kind of object. Nevertheless, even among some of such collectors quantity is often a defensive maneuver as a representative of an inner experience of security or power, while quality, rarity, or significance of an individual object are more akin to a narcissistic representation: “I have something special” should often be understood as a function of a denial of self-doubt. On the other hand, the man who asks how many items a fellow collector owns is thinking of accumulation as if he were motivated by a quest for food: “How much is in your larder?”

The narcissistic inclination is crystallized in a young man whom I shall call Nick, who owned a single exquisite object. The factor at work here was his intense need for approval; for being outstanding. There could be little doubt that the object was a representation of himself. Nick’s entire behavior as a “one-object collector” was characterized by a single-minded attempt to outshine everybody else. He felt driven by an incessant search for yet a better specimen. Once he had discovered it, he always disposed of the previous one.

It is reasonable to ask if one object can accurately be described as a collection. The person who looks for one example of surpassing rarity or perfection, and is satisfied by it, is not a collector by my definition. However, if he continuously searches for a better example, and then another better one, and still cannot put a halt to his search, then he is a collector to me. What must be taken into account here is the obsessive driving force that distinguishes the collector from someone who simply enjoys an object for whatever it means to him.

The elemental cause of Nick’s need for exclusivity was a persistent childhood concern. His father, a strong, domineering, ex-army colonel, dreaded by the entire family, allowed no contradictions. He was pedantic and judgmental. No one could live up to his expectations, least of all Nick, the only son. No mark in school or achievement in sports was good enough. If the boy received an A in one of the subjects, the father’s predictable question would be, “Why not an A plus?” usually accompanied by a resounding, “You’ll never amount to anything.”

Nick reacted with the inevitable feeling of inadequacy. His never-ceasing search showed a vestige of his never-resolved relationship with his father. There remained a sense of vulnerability and irrevocable self-doubt. In some ways, Nick, whom I met when he was over forty, was still a minor and a solitary individual who harbored within himself an ever-ready hope of paternal approval. It was almost as though the entire world had taken over the paternal role; not too far removed from a paranoid variant, Nick felt he had to prove himself time and time again by finding yet another and even better specimen.

Effectively, Nick had been maneuvered into a way of life dominated by this tyrannical father and a demanding ego-ideal. It seemed as though an inner voice was constantly commanding him to recapitulate what he had suffered throughout his childhood—namely, to escape the deficiency he had been accused of. After careful research, he would track down one outstanding piece and then eventually another and far superior one. It was an ongoing venture. He was absorbed in it, even elated, and yet at the same time strangely depressed, since he was chronically haunted by, “Will I ever find a piece worth an A plus?”

Nick had shown the first specimen he had found to a well-known dealer who was a highly regarded connoisseur, a man quite different from his father. Always anticipating reputation and the concomitant threat to his self-esteem, this man’s acceptance and approval of the object he owned at the time brought out a new and hitherto unknown sense of self. The dealer was not only willing to take Nick’s object for an unquestionably better one but even suggested an easy installment payment plan.

Nick was elated. What is more, the man’s approval had the effect of a release from constant inner persecution. It even tended to transform Nick’s obsessive doubt into an intensity of passion quite inconceivable to him. At the same time, he became increasingly devoted to the dealer. The man’s role soon shifted to that of a paternal friend, though—understandably—not without a measure of conflict which Nick unconsciously transferred from the father to his guiding patron.
Only years later, after his dealer-friend had retired and moved away, did Nick realize what had caused his constant need to perform well. He became aware that his repeated quest for a better and still better specimen had become the indispensable narcissistic demonstration of the perfection his father had demanded. More profoundly, it was a never-ending means of ultimately gaining the approval of his now long-deceased father.

Once we examine the numerous studies on collecting and the life-histories of a number of collectors, it becomes evident that a relatively high level of ego support appears to be a major motivation of their endeavor. In interviewing a large group of collectors, it became obvious that many different roads are taken to establish proof of selfhood, self-definition, and, often enough, self-absorption, as in the case of Nick, torn between persecution and, on occasion, a phallic-narcissistic display of bravado.

With this understanding, it is not difficult to recognize one central aspect: there has to be a more or less continuous flow of objects to collect. It is this flow that helps sustain the collector’s captivation. It might be expected that, since scarcity tends to increase the value and importance of an object, collectors would aim for specimens that are not readily available. Yet almost the exact opposite is true. It has been proven that collectors tend to lose interest in certain types of items when supply diminishes. Clearly, a more or less steady though sometimes difficult flow is essential.

Here one must keep in mind that dedicated collectors expect that obtaining an object is never an easy matter, and that the path to new and worthwhile acquisitions is not without obstacles, sometimes diplomacy, even anguish, and occasionally ingenious detours. Later, I shall deal with some striking routes collectors may take to satisfy their aims or, more strictly speaking, to give way to the relentless and intrinsically narcissistic aim to find tangible support in order to erase the archaic experiences of anxiety and, possibly, to help undo trauma during the formative years.

As I see it, the flow of this essentially nutritive supply should be understood as a magical remedy against doubt and uncertainty and thus as an ego-supporting provision. Here again is an instance of the paradox I mentioned earlier. Collectors who as a rule insist on specialization, and then make a point of owning only the very best or rarest objects, narrow the area of availability while fostering an almost ritual aura of uncertainty and suspense. Such collectors seek distinction through perfection, but the perfection can only be obtained at a price, namely more or less perpetual apprehension.

Is this an echo of the baby’s subtle response to not-good enough care in providing him with both physical and emotional nutriment? Such nutriment and, for that matter, the fulfillment of all the infant’s requirements are key factors because they are the means whereby the child’s basic dialogue with the outside world develops.

In this regard, there are indications that people of particular aesthetic sensibility become quite selective at a comparatively early age. George Ortiz’s mother told me how, even as a very little boy, her son had shown an inclination toward certain foods, flowers, and colors.

Not that there is a straight path from mouth to eye, but there does seem to be some correlation which might be thought of as a convergence of taste. The taste for finer things seems to begin in the mouth and then wanders to the eyes and ears.

This idea was admirably expressed by the late Paul Sachs, an outstanding collector of master drawings and professor of art history for many years at Harvard University. He stated categorically, “Anyone who professes an interest in the fine arts and is indifferent to the joys of the palate is automatically suspect,” a most acute observation which I have found correct time and again.

I am not speaking of blind impulses here, but rather of the subtle perceptions that bring about passion states as well as the agreeable sensations of having and holding into existence, and the sheer cravings and affects. Professor Sachs was describing the response to pleasing stimuli that give rise to physical and emotional rewards—on the one hand, in the case of oral pleasures; and on the other, fine works of aesthetic appeal.

Around such a display of aesthetic judgment, powerful emotional needs are brought into harmony, in many instances compensating for emotional trauma or physical injury that has left its mark on the subject’s inner state.

In this connection, it might be instructive to examine the history and life experience of a different collector’s personality. Among Dirk van T.’s first memories were stories and pictures of
animals of various kinds, and of household pets. Cats, dogs, rabbits, and the like were part of his immediate orbit. His childhood coincided with World War II in the Netherlands. One after the other the animals died or disappeared, and, because of the increasing food shortages brought on by the German occupation, they were not replaced. Dirk missed them a great deal and in school soon turned his attention to "insects, roach-like creatures, and sea horses," as he recalled during our talks. Shortly thereafter, he added shells to his list because they are "more beautiful and easier to arrange. Seashells are more interesting than bland land shells," he noted.

He had not been quite ten years old when Holland was invaded by the Germans. His house was damaged by a bomb that exploded across the road. No one was hurt but the family was forced to evacuate the building and move. Dirk stayed with relatives until, more than a year later, the family was reunited. Since the ongoing war created ever-present uncertainty and a continual sense of danger in everyone, the reunion offered only partial relief.

Dirk recalled that he had repeatedly asked for a pet, but to no avail. There was hardly enough food for people, his mother told him. How could he even consider owning an animal? But Dirk responded to his mother's rhetorical explanation as though it was a verdict, a permanent punishment.

Actually, there was no moment of real calm. Not being allowed to own the animal he had been longing for, and the critical conditions of wartime shortage and survival, were two separate events in the ten-year-old's view. One must keep in mind that "peace time" had no internal representation for a child whose conscious memory related only to the happenings of living under the constant threats of war and the ever-threatening occupational forces. He had no expectation nor any mental concept how this condition would come to an end, and he failed to understand how this related to pets, anyway. And so he discovered his shells.

This progression from animals in storybooks and pets to insects and subsequently to sea horses and seashells sounds almost standard. However, once we probed somewhat deeper, the steps that changed him from a child who liked animals into a passionate and virtually uncontrollable collector of all sorts of things began to emerge.

At the time of our encounter Dirk van T.'s personality was reflected in his various collections, but even more so in the manner in which he went about making his finds and acquisitions. A complex and erudite man, he eventually discovered numerous possibilities in gathering specimens in, as it seemed, diverse (though in a deeper sense closely linked) areas, such as old medical instruments, anatomical dissertations, and a particular kind of early clocks. His collection was by no means arbitrary because his primary question seemed to be focused on "How do bodies function?" By the age of thirty he was already a distinguished collector. Each of his collections was as complete as possible, the clocks forming the most comprehensive of its kind. He had even grown proficient in taking some of his clocks apart and putting them together again, although he had no particular mechanical inclination or skills.

He was well aware that his obsessionality had developed out of desire for control. Thus, he had the best and presumably most complete collection of this type. In describing this desire, he suddenly pointed his hand at me and counting on his fingers, he exclaimed: "One-two-three-four-five—Damn it! Get it all!" as if to demonstrate his insistence on allness. In one stroke he pointed to his goal, ostensibly in the area of accumulation, but even more demonstrating his inner standards bordering on pathological narcissism.

I have heard about this sentiment from many collectors: "I simply must have it!" or "I couldn't live without it!" but never put so explicitly as in Dirk van T.'s case.

The point I am making here is that his imperious demands and consequent action were in part a reparative response to wartime worries and deprivations, especially in consequence of having been separated from his mother at a time of actual danger. Many children shared such experiences, but without becoming prey to a frantic need to achieve allness. This was his response to the enforced separation from his mother and his animals. He turned anxiety into infantile aggressive longings, his unconscious motive being: I want all of my mother.

Clearly, the habit of collecting itself, and the way one goes about it, depends on a variety of factors in an individual's history and personality structure, even though the empirical connections that reveal a collector's leanings are often obscured.
Why does one collector insist on all while another obsessionally limits himself to possession of one single object? It often took many encounters with collectors before I could recognize the links between his or her needs and the manner and modalities of obtaining. There are, of course, all kinds of ways collectors go about satisfying their aims, and the process of acquisition is usually as meaningful as actually obtaining the object, something Walter Benjamin recognized in himself. While the eventual addition to their holdings is the culmination of the experience, sometimes the skill involved in making their discoveries, the various strategies—in some cases even deceptions—employed, the detours they were forced to take, and battles fought to get a specific item are all part of the ultimate reaction to the early narcissistic wound, real or imagined. Indeed, for many collectors the seemingly tortuous process of procuring an object and the emotional and occasionally monetary investment that goes into it reveal much of their basic character.

Dirk van T.'s motives and methods seem to spring from a series of more or less specific traumas and events which make not only the reparation but also the ambition and intensity imperative, in many instances at the cost of emotional attachments to people. Dirk's childhood desire for a pet was probably an early indication of his later primary interest in collectable objects rather than a deeper relationship with people. His imperious claim to "all" sounded like an overweening ambition to win his fight at any cost.

Rightly understood, this kind of accumulation shows an orientation that has vestiges of early demands and, implicitly, an incapability of putting a halt on rapacious appropriation. It aims at nothing less than all. It is true that collectors tend to endow their possessions with a life-force or, as I mentioned earlier, with manto. However, I must emphasize the affective involvement, for it is evident that the owner achieves through these possessions what are essentially reparative emotions that he dares rarely (if ever) develop in interpersonal relationships. Whatever the objects, in all their guises they are never adequate substitutes for people. They can never provide the emotional dimensions of that attachment to another human being.

"How can one love pieces of wood?" a lady asked Mario Praz, who, like so many of his fellow collectors, could fall "so deeply in love with [a chandelier]" that he "would have done anything in the world to acquire it."25

In the description of his vast apartment in the Villa Giulia in Rome, Praz reminisces about the innumerable objects that used to fill the rooms. Every piece has its story—related to places, people, episodes, and yearnings—that springs from his absorption in and memories of the past.

I met Professor Praz ten years after he had written about that apartment. Since then he had moved to an even more impressive flat, brimming with Empire furniture, decorative objects, and books. It seemed more than fitting that Praz had found a home in the palazzo that Napoleon had occupied during his stay in Rome, although the professor, a small unassuming man, rejected any identification with the emperor. Nevertheless, his "mania for Empire furniture" had found appropriate surroundings. "My limited number of interests tend to become manias: the mania for Empire furniture, the mania for books of emblems, the mania for Russian, just as, when a child, I had the mania for dolls and statuettes of saints and, as a boy, a mania for stamps."26

I was received with great kindness. Every corner in the vast apartment, every wall and corridor, the decorations in and on bookcases and cabinets, on tables, credenzas, and even doors reflected the professor's taste, as well as his horror vacui (the avoidance of empty space). Seated in his drawing room overlooked by an open library, Praz spoke of the beginnings of his collection but persistently stressed the considerable link with his unhappy personal life. He had had a short-lived marriage, something which might have been foreseeable considering that he had insisted on spending his honeymoon in Roman antique shops, instead of in some more appropriate site for a just-married couple. His major concern was the objects he might possibly discover, and not his new young bride.

The professor was quite aware that some of the manifestations of his collecting could easily be traced to his childhood, and he cited the example of his enthusiasm for wax portraits and busts of famous men for he understood it as a reminder of the good times he had had with his grandmother on frequent visits to churches, where he first admired the wax statues of saints.
Some people might find his Roman abode overcrowded, he remarked (not without a measure of irony), but he had different standards; in fact he found it pleasing and very to his liking. From his writings as well as our conversation, I soon became aware that Mario Praz was a man deeply immersed in detailed memories and reflections. He had learned that his objects helped him recall still more of the events of his past.

His intense love for the objects—and he used the expression love time and again—be it a chandelier or a decorative emblem, is revealed in his elaborate descriptions of his possessions and his manifest joy in them. His enthusiasm bespeaks an almost erotic excitement. What, one must ask, is the true origin of his passion?

He had been a lonely, only child, he remarked repeatedly. His father had died when Mario was four but had been absent from home earlier, and was probably hospitalized, for he had died of syphilis, to which Praz ascribed his own physical deformity, a clubfoot.

In true Proustian fashion, a distant clap of thunder brought back a forgotten childhood event—a visit to an orthopedic clinic for treatment of his foot. The deformity prevented him from joining the army during World War I. He spoke about his feelings, but also came back to his reactions in writing: “I was unfit, and I felt diminished in front of my companions who went off full of great ideas.” The same emotions prevailed while he was a student at the University of Bologna. He mentioned the extent of his depression and loneliness and reminded me of a particular reference in his book. While he was alone and felt excluded, a friend of his had introductions to influential Bolognese families. After an elegant dinner party in one of the aristocratic houses, his friend described to him the “Empire armchairs, with gilt sphinxes, in their drawing room.” It was probably the first time that the Empire style had come to his awareness. In any event, he remembered these circumstances, which pointed quite to his eventual predilection.

A visitor to the professor’s opulent apartment would immediately become aware of the gilt enrichments and patterned embellishments of the Empire style which dominated the overall taste. Praz had started to acquire Empire furniture and decorative objects as a young man in Florence, when he had to content himself with “modest objects: such was the chest-of-drawers, the fount and origin of mania.” However, his conclusion was hardly correct. The acquisition of this chest-of-drawers merely brought his already dormant obsession into the open. The reparative attempts are only too evident. And here Professor Praz himself was witness to the injured child’s sense of inferiority and rejection. He had in many respects felt disowned. Now he knew how to outdo his fellow students as well as those aristocratic families to whose houses he had not been invited. Thus, his collecting had become a primary means for sublimating if not healing the trauma of his physical infirmity and an overcompensation for seeing himself as an outcast.

Conditions, or rather preconditions, such as these drive home the fact that the inanimate objects’ function is essentially compensatory and that they are being used not only as an attempt to disguise old wounds but at the same time to serve as reminders of past injuries and humiliations.

George Ortiz searches for concrete reassurances of faith and hope in “the ultimate,” putting together a collection of objects, most of them of unsurpassed excellence, while Dirk van T. seeks illness and Mario Praz wanted an environment grander than the Bolognese aristocrats who, as he indicated to me, had snubbed him. Thus, the objects of whatever kind, whether amassed or selected with the greatest of care and perspicacity, become an attestation of the collector’s guard against renewed hurt. It is clear that the passionate collector shows an emotional coherence when it comes to transforming what once had to be passively endured. The reaction can be intense indeed, with old traumatic experiences now overcome through active countermeasures.

It goes without saying that the overt aims of collectors vary considerably. But whether the focus is on the search for the aesthetically pleasing or the completion of sets, or whether the emphasis is on rarity or antiquity, closely related dynamic forces underlie the habit. What is prevalent is a need for reassertion in order to undo an old narcissistic wound. The objects are meant to give a sense of affirmation and magical support. This holds true for little Paul’s toy dog, for a believer in holy relics, or the mana-laden head taken by the natives from their enemies in Indonesia and Melanesia.

Collectors share a sense of specialness, of once not having received satisfying love or attention or having been hurt or unfairly treated in infancy, and through their objects they feel
reassured, enriched, and notable. The overt attitude may range from ostentation to apparent modesty, or occasionally even secretiveness (which after all is often a covert form of exhibitionism). But most characteristically, there is always an addictive component—a potential but always present unconscious modality of affect linked to a powerful reparative need.

Due to this ever-present affect-laden core, the challenge of reassertion by means of more or less constant replenishment, the gathering of what are in essence reparative substitutes of the primary (i.e., maternal) object is the most conspicuous feature of habitual collecting. All sorts of presumably magical objects provide a feeling of contentment because they defuse—temporarily—the reemergence of traumatic anxiety. What follows the acquisition of a new object belongs to the paradoxical state to which I have referred earlier: renewed provision generates pride and pleasure, in some cases subtly, in others phallic-ostentatiously. But we must keep in mind that it is the fundamental condition of this need for repeated nutriment that makes an eventual new supply mandatory.

The intensity of this search is thoroughly attested to by another collector, a man with a lively interest in historical documents. “I am a sponge,” was one of his self-critical observations. As he associated in the course of a psychoanalytic session: “I get a feeling for [a particular historical] period. I want to read [certain documentary source materials]. The era when every army officer had an easel and brush in his bag—a whole new set to collect. Primitive paintings by soldiers. I want to suck in everything. Very exciting. The Renaissance man. The sensitive steelworker. The soldier who becomes excited by a rare butterfly or a flower. As if I have to hold it until I know everything. It is like a lust. It is like a burning force. I go into this or that store and try to scoop the whole thing in. I go with my hands along all those things. I cannot be discriminating. I have to have it.” The ultimate pleasure is to show them off to the family. [Uncle] Joe and I are alike, stamps and books. He is more pathetic; I am more impressive. It’s a hedge against nothingness. I keep busy instead of sitting at the typewriter. I never write more than a page. (There is) always something new, never-ending supply. All those books. I am an expert. I am an authority. I want to be a snotty expert. A never-ending series, a whole apartment house.
Carrying on a family tradition by adding to an existing collection or by elaborating on it in a new and creative way is not at all uncommon. Another example is the Marquess of Bath, who inherited a superb collection of printed books. Collecting was a centuries-old family tradition, and the library had been assembled by many generations of his ancestors. As a child, Henry Thynne (Lord Bath) did not expect to fall heir to the title. But when his older brother was killed in World War I, the title came to eleven-year-old Henry quite against his wish. He saw it as an overwhelming responsibility, he pointed out. But while Lord Bath kept the original family collection intact, he chose to collect contemporary children's books and memorabilia connected with Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. He had assembled paintings by the Führer, parts of his uniforms, a first edition of Mein Kampf, and numerous other items. He also had first editions of all of Churchill's writings, owned a number of his paintings, autographs, and personal belongings—even one of his famous cigars, half-smoked, which a bar attendant had preserved.

I had another encounter that echoes this complex connection with the past. Members of the Six family are well-known for their appreciation of Dutch art. Their most famous ancestor, Jan Six, was the mayor of Amsterdam at Rembrandt's time. The mayor's portrait by the master impresses one still as one of Rembrandt's most sensitive paintings. But there are numerous other and predominantly later works of art in the Six collection, today a private museum. I had the privilege of being received by the Ladies (Freules) Six, two sisters who represent the family. Discussing the family's tradition, I observed numerous works of art not only by seventeenth-century masters but also later and even twentieth-century ones. Commenting about this, the ladies explained quite matter-of-factly, "But the family always collected modern," they stressed emphatically. And true enough, when Rembrandt painted their famous forebear it was a contemporary work of art, after all.

These last two examples help us appreciate the broad range of conscious choices available to the collector, which may range from an attempt at undoing frustrations of early childhood experiences to falling in line with examples set by one's ancestors. Still, there is one common denominator—the imperative and compensatory having and holding of the object. Granted that Nelson Rockefeller and the Marquess of Bath were perhaps not collectors entirely of their own choice, since they were following a family tradition. However, to them it was a commitment, almost an obligation, each adding a distinctly personal articulation by emphasizing fields quite different from previous generations.

The American collector was fully prepared to abide by the pattern established by his grandfather. He saw collecting as both a private endeavor as well as a social commitment. Failure to obey a moral responsibility would have aroused inner conflicts, since he saw collecting not just as an endeavor of his own choice but rather as a blending of sentiment, debt, and duty. However, instead of merely adding to the prominent holdings of his family, he followed more in his mother's footsteps by gathering objects that would have pleased her and met with her approval.

Collecting, then, emerges as an instrument designed not only to allay a basic need brought on by early traumata and as an escape hatch for feelings of danger and the reexperience of loss. However, because it is an effective device for relief from these pressures, it is felt as a source of pleasure and wish fulfillment.

Many collectors are aware of this bind and may even go so far as to play one or the other confidence trick on themselves in order to come to terms with their hidden conflict. The late P. C. Meulendijk, a noted Dutch collector of Oriental and tribal art, whose house almost literally overflowed with well-selected although not outstanding examples, assured me that he had never spent more than a limited, and by all standards small, amount for any one object. Not unexpected for a true Dutchman, he observed self-discipline. In fact, he tamed his penchant for acquisitions, using frugality as an alibi to reconcile his needfulness and enthusiasm and, on the other hand, his self-controlling parsimonious inclination.

Such instances of ambiguity are not at all uncommon. Sir Robert Sainsbury, the well-known British collector, told me that he had established an annual budget for acquisitions of works of art. But then his son David impishly added that "on occasion" his father would "borrow" from next year's budget if a very desirable specimen came his way. This is a touching description of an often observable conflict. Do wish-world and internal excita-
of toys and treasures

ition prevail or should, in terms of what is perceived as common sense, the object be given up? I am describing the inner contention in this way because the situation demonstrates the split between instinctual demands and the role of self-imposed restriction and rational, culture-induced decision-making, especially when there is an established tradition of self-restraint and frugality. It is tempting to recognize here a dramatic variation of the infant's pleasure-seeking impulses to have all of mother for himself or to modify the wish and reconcile his desires with the limitations imposed by the superego.

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. They function as defenses in the service of self-assertion. They are magic remedies to ward off existential doubt and, most of all, they are witnesses of credibility.