VENTURES OF PASSION

answer to an urgent need for replenishment, if not an essential guaranty of life and continuation. It is evident how and why Martin G. was compelled to collect by a deep and turbulent hunger for retrieval and healing with the aid of tangible things as a protective shield against disillusionment.

The actual course of events following the Hong Kong episode makes no difference with respect to the motivating factors. It should only be a reminder that, inevitably, the collected objects remain just that—objects. They may elicit feelings, but they have no life. And so it is the search—successful or not—that ever promises hope, suspense, excitement, and even danger. The quest is never-ending. It is, as one can see time and again, bound to repeat itself, while the ultimate pleasure always remains a mirage.

PART FOUR
EXCURSIONS INTO HISTORY

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CHAPTER 9

Renaissance and Reconnaissance

In our search for the roots of the collecting habit, we have focused on individual experience and have seen the need for attachment and clinging to objects as a primary incentive for the accumulation of tangible possessions. For the individual collector this concentration on objects can become a way of life, as I tried to show in the three profiles sketched in the previous chapters.

But while the fundamental motive is based on the individual’s history and essential events, the type and style of selecting and collecting is effectively guided by the prevailing culture pattern, the mood and values of the time. Indeed, many collections in all their diversities are a visible testimony to the substance and standards of the particular era, even though the sentiment of one generation may not simply fade away during the next.

Take the case of Cosimo de Medici III (1642–1723), an eighteenth-century zealot. He had a special yearning for holy relics, which was a throwback to medieval times. From this point of view, he can be taken as an example how certain earlier traditions and beliefs (in his case, in religious benefits) filtered into the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Collecting holy relics at this time had in effect anachronistic overtones. Inconsistencies such as this example put into question any attempts to make strict delineations and compartmentalization into exact phases or periods.

Any student of history will agree how misleading it can be to draw historical demarcation lines. While there are always prevalent trends—political, intellectual, social, cultural—it would be naive to think of the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages or the Renaissance as definable periods of sophistication with demonstrable differences, be it from a technological, ideological, aesthetic, or economic point of view. The appellations we devise are in fact little more than attempts to set apart dominant features and states of progression and change.
The dynamic nature of sociocultural development and corresponding technological advances do not entirely justify the historian's attempt to set up more or less circumscribed chronological phases. We use these historical divisions for our own benefit, just as we attempt to divide child development into dominant, organ-specific stages. But we are quite able to see that, for example, oral or anal or phallic elements help constitute character traits in the adult personality, in the same way as medieval ideologies can still be found today, even in a highly rationally functioning and industrially focused society.

What counts are crucial events: catastrophes such as wars or epidemics. Take the Black Death during the middle of the fourteenth century, which generated new outlooks, changed intellectual trends, caused shifts in priorities. Nor can different tastes and interests rely on uniform acceptance. It is mainly for that reason that I cite Cosimo as an example of a person who lived with one foot in one era and with the other in a different one.

Or take another case: More than two centuries before the time of King Louis XI (1423–1483), Aristotle's philosophy was introduced at the relatively new University of Paris. Aristotelianism, the credo of reason and the basic principle of knowledge, was fundamental to rational study and the exploration of logic. However, since it was essentially atheistical and thus implicitly a threat to Christian teaching, it was condemned and banned before it could further endanger the spiritual instructions of the Church.

We need hardly look for other examples in order to describe the existence of regressive trends and advancing movements side by side. They are part and parcel of the historical process. There is no question that the ingredients of verifiable changes and transformation are not dictated by any single force or circumstance, by expansion and political outlook, or by manifestations of popular movements, or by emerging spiritual, cultural-economic developments. And there are different and often highly effective causes, such as famine or epidemics or other catastrophes, that vitally contribute to shifts and changes in the lifestyle of an entire era. Also, we must not forget that there are great inventions, like the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century or the introduction of the use of eyeglasses a century or so earlier or, possibly more important, the use of movable type.

all demonstrates a trend of an increasingly more penetrating influence of realism and at the same time a potentially greater complexity of external stimuli and a more intricate stimulus-response pattern.

I just mentioned the invention of the mechanical clock, one of the major technological advances of the fourteenth century, which we owe to Giovanni da' Dondi (1318–1379). Dondi was a physician, architect, clockmaker, and, last but not least, dedicated collector. He belonged to the circle of Petrarch (1304–1374) and was actually his doctor, although not one of those "godless physicians" so vehemently attacked by the humanists. For Petrarch was a romantic. If he was a champion of the technical progress Dondi represented, it was only because he was a champion of the momentous movement that forged the dramatic conquest of the past. It was idealistic humanism that started to ring in the advent of the Renaissance. Petrarch stood between the traditional preachings of Catholic beliefs and the gradually advancing ideas of a rational conception of being as represented by the Aristotelians, who in turn had been influenced by Islamic philosophy.

The Church, it must be remembered, was in turmoil, and divided as never before. There was one Pope in Rome, who was considered a heretic. The other Pope was in Avignon, which remained the seat of the Curia until 1377. And for a short while there was even a third Holy Father in Pisa. This schism reflected the power struggle that was going on not only within the Church but in effect against all ecclesiastical teachings. It was one expression of the spiritual change and the increasing realism as also exemplified by the installment of town clocks or church clocks, which gave people a greater awareness of time. It all indicated a change in conceptual trends and shifts in priorities.

The creation of numerous universities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is but another proof of the growing influence of the new consciousness and intellectual approach, of which Petrarchian humanism was one of the most significant and vociferous manifestations.

As far as Western Europe was concerned, the first few decades of the fourteenth century constituted a time of torment and suffering. There were two years of severe famine, from 1315
to 1317, especially in France, the Low Countries, and the British Isles. The whole period was accompanied by deep economic depression. This in turn was responsible for social upheavals and a religious and intellectual crisis that threatened to unglue the unifying power and claims of Rome. “So many people died every day,” wrote the Abbot of St. Martin at Tournai, “that the air seemed putrefied.”

It took many years for Western Europe to master the disastrous consequences of hunger, illness, and hopelessness and as far as the lower classes were concerned, oppression and exploitation. It was in consequence of these years of continued trauma and suffering that the ecclesiastical and sociocultural mold underwent fundamental changes. Such critical and potentially explosive experiences tend to undermine any sense of reliance and criteria of security.

Then, about three decades later, came the worst epidemic in human memory, the plague, which began to spread throughout Europe, with lasting consequences for the whole structure of human existence by hastening a new world view in social, religious, and ideological terms. To many the Black Death was nothing less than a sign of God’s wrath. The horrifying effects of the plague helped dismantle the influence and traditional power the Church had appropriated. According to all accounts, Western Europe’s population was reduced by one-third to one-half. The illness killed prince and pauper alike. For eighteen months, about eight hundred people a day died in Paris alone. There is a great deal of evidence that the illness eroded the entire mood and moral fiber of the times. “Brother was forsaken by brother, nephew by uncle, brother by sister and oftentimes husband by wife,” Boccaccio, who was an eyewitness to the plague, recounts at the beginning of his Decameron. All moral rules, ethical codes, and traditional loyalties evaporated under the constant shadow of illness and death. Mass psychoses as expressed in group flagellations, pogroms, witch-hunts, and sexual bestiality became daily occurrences. The emotional climate of the time seems to have mobilized everybody’s hysterical extroversion.

The Black Death hit France during the middle of the fourteenth century. Largely because of the war with England, the country had been torn apart. In 1345 the English had beaten the French in the battle of Crécy. At the time, Jean de Berry (1340–1416), the third son of the future king of France, was six years old.

While Boccaccio had eloquently depicted much of the desperate social scene in his Decameron (speaking of parents abandoning their own children under the impact of the plague), Jean had remained in the good care of his mother and grandmother. Nonetheless, he had undergone the ravages and desperation of the times. Even before the war with England, France had been immersed in internal unrest. By all standards the Duke of Normandy’s family was poor. The duke himself was with the army. Jean’s mother, Bonne de Luxembourg, had to borrow money to feed and dress her nine children. Much help and care came from the queen, Jeanne de Bourgogne, who seemed have a special affection for her grandson Jean. But the pestilence took its toll. In 1349, at the height of the Black Death, both mother and grandmother fell victim to it, and Jean found himself motherless at the age of nine.

Here is a telling example how a trauma of this emotional dimension leaves a lasting mark on a person’s entire development and inner coherence. Jean de Berry became one of the foremost collectors of his time. In fact, one of his biographers, the late Millard Meiss, described him and his brothers as “the most remarkable fraternal group of collectors in history.”

Jean was the most prominent of the brothers so far as eye, selectivity, influence, and fame are concerned. And not unlike many dedicated collectors, he seems to have been essentially a lonely man, restless, dynamic, and enlightened. He was constantly moving, from one of his residences—no mean feat considering that he had ten or twelve of them. Meiss characterized him as a “wealthy nomad,” a trait that can be observed among many collectors who seem to be in constant search of new acquisitions. Jean de Berry had three sons. None of them survived him, and after the death of the last one, also named Jean, in 1397, he began (to us as observers, not at all unexpectedly) to collect on an even larger scale.

Famous for the many paintings and illuminations he commissioned, and especially for his prayer books, the Très Riches Heures, his collection resembled in some ways that of his great-grandnephew, King Louis XI. They both had a great deal of affection for animals, and in particular for dogs. They were both
also devoted collectors of holy relics (always a clue to a powerful sense of insecurity and dread of ultimate damnation). In 1384, Pope Clement VII gave Jean some fragments of the nails of the Holy Cross. He was also the proud owner of the chalice from which Christ had taken wine at the last supper, had a piece of the Crown of Thorns, and a head of one of the Innocents.

Here is striking evidence for the close relationship between the reliance on the possession of holy relics supposed to magically protect the owner against the threat of suffering in purgatory and my argument that fright is a determining factor for all kinds of collecting. Whatever the individual collector selects, any “thing” is ultimately destined to constitute an unconscious prophylactic device to assist the owner in mastering a feeling of threat and to control a sense of helpless frustration.

Thus, Jean de Berry was not only an avid collector of Christian relics. He was well recognized for his predilection for aesthetically specially appealing objects. His library contained about three hundred exquisitely illustrated books, and his collection of precious stones, gems, seals, and cameos as well as medals had largely been supplied by Florentine dealers. One of his most important suppliers was the jewel designer Antoine Machin or, rather, Antonio Mancini, who worked in Paris as well as dealing from his Florence residence, which suggests to us how Florentine culture blossomed at the French court.

Jean de Berry was among the first collectors whose enthusiasm and infatuation could not be confined to a single area, which is always indicative of a less rigid and less monomaniacal approach. In fact, he could be described as a forerunner of the Wunderkammer or curio cabinet collectors, about two centuries later (to be discussed in the following chapter). But if, because of his imaginative involvement with all sorts of objects, Jean de Berry can be called a curio collector, he not only did it in grand style, he also had an edge on the fashion by several generations. It should be recognized that, while he stood at the threshold of an era which developed a more concrete sense of reality, Jean de Berry was still a barely modified true believer, as his frantic assembling of holy relics suggests. Nevertheless, he had an individual, discriminating mind and, while still prey to the pieties of the fourteenth century, he made a conspicuous effort to look at the world in a more “modern” way. It should be recalled that he was, after all, a contemporary of the early humanists. Had he lived among them in Florence or Padua, instead of in France, he would probably have been counted among the followers of Petrarch, since he was a distinctly forward-looking man.

I mean to suggest here that certain collectors’ concerns toward the end of the Middle Ages were closely interwoven with the modes of intellectual orientation resulting from the ills of their time. Quite conceivably, individual and cultural elements interact and have a cumulative effect. And here existential anxiety and disillusionment as one consequence of the plague helped pave the way to turn away from the Church in search of other sources of inspiration. “The epoch of Humanism put in place of a closed medieval world image (Weltanschauung) a completely and fundamentally different perspective of God, the world but especially of man himself,” concluded the Swiss historian Walsrodt.

For example, both Jean de Berry and King Louis XI kept a kind of private zoo, possibly as an essential part of new sentiments and broadened interests, which stressed observation and the quest for greater knowledge. Such knowledge provided a more reliable basis for the understanding of natural phenomena; even so these were still conceived of as being confined within the boundaries of a divine plan. Thus, it may be said that while the primacy of the Church of the Popes was on the decline, the style and spirit of collecting at the time reveal new interests, especially for the past, for the world of the forefathers, in other words for antiquity and, almost imperceptibly, a changing world view.

At the time of Jean de Berry there was a growing popularity of gems and cameos, witnesses of the Greek and Roman cultures. They were a pictorial representation not simply of the talent of fine stone-carving during earlier centuries. They represented the inescapable conclusion of artisans’ accomplishments long before the Christian era. And yet, even while collecting these treasures of antiquity, Jean de Berry continued to be on the lookout for holy relics and to believe in the tales and legends attached to them, underscoring the importance of unrealistic (i.e., magical) projection, which determined these objects’ function.

The notion of an overall transformation from belief in miracles and mysteries to the discriminating study of man, animals, and natural phenomena presents a new avenue for the collector.
One might say that it initiated the collection of evidence—evidence of the achievement of past generations; evidence of natural phenomena; and most tellingly evidence "of what the human body was like, as shown in the illustrations of Guido da Veyano (ca. 1280–1345) in his Anathomia per figuram designata."

In addition, technical advances began to facilitate travel. Specimens of all kinds from foreign lands and unknown civilizations opened new vistas to the curious, perhaps less so in the Italian states than in France and eventually in the Northern countries. With the advent of the Renaissance, man was beginning to lose his innocence.

This was not only a time of physical scarcity but also one of spiritual famine and socioeconomic transformations, changing values and ideals, although these were predominantly confined to a progressive intellectual elite. This change appears in a variety of symbolic expressions, although the more systematic study of human anatomy is the most suggestive sign of a shifting mood and intellectual climate. But the arts, especially painting and poetry, are equally witness to the gradual change toward the objectification of the universe.

Take for example the time between the 1420s and the 1530s. During that hundred years we see a conspicuous shift away from religious themes in paintings. There was a gradual change in favor of secular topics from about 5 percent to 20 percent, although such statistics are hardly reliable because they are often used to prove doubtful hypotheses.

In any event, it is not surprising to find Petrarch among the collectors of Roman coins and medals, since it was chiefly he who stimulated his contemporaries' pride in their Roman ancestry. Such pursuits were much more than just idle pastime since they constituted but one aspect of the new search for tangible facts, rather than the long-held belief in (nothing but) doctrinal teachings of the Church. The thrust was in the direction of reason and more evidential information, as exemplified by what Lewis Mumford has called "the key machine of the modern industrial age." He was speaking of the clock, "the foremost machine in modern technics." 

As I have mentioned, Petrarch saw the intellectual merit in antiquarian studies, and he encouraged a group of his young disciples to pay special attention to old Roman specimens. He had close friends who shared his pleasure in ancient coins. His adviser in old age and the executor of his will, Lombardo della Seta, followed the master's example and collected antiquities, as did his doctor-friend, Giovanni de' Dondi. Considering the wide span of his interests, Dondi was doubtless a man of great erudition with by all accounts genuine visual curiosity. "I have trained myself to look carefully at everything marvellous," he had written, "to reflect on what I see and never to allow myself to become unduly amazed." He was not only famous as a clockmaker. He was also an antiquarian and astronomer, besides being a physician, who described his work with the same meticulous precision with which his clocks functioned.

Dondi was another true forerunner of the later Wanderkammer collectors, for even at this early period he attempted to find a kind of order for the objects he was collecting. Dondi was actually some two hundred years ahead of the time when collectors divided their possessions into naturalia and artificialia, natural or artificial (man-made) specimens. According to Dondi's order, the miracula of the universe were juxtaposed with the miracula. In other words, there were finite marvels, in addition to miracles. Like other humanists such as Brunelleschi and Donatello, during his visit to Rome he was not drawn to churches and other holy places. Instead, he explored archaeological sites and acquired antiquities as an affirmation of a rich past of which he was deeply in awe.

These fourteenth-century collectors were no ordinary men. Petrarch himself had been brought by his family up to Avignon, where he spent most of his youth in the environment of the Papal Court, his father being an exile from Florence. But the popes from Rome and Avignon, involved as they were in feuds and schisms, had lost much of their aura of sanctity, and Petrarch's "enthusiasm for the ancient world [became] greater than for the saints," in the perceptive remark of Jacob Burckhardt.

Christian devotion no longer had to outweigh antiquarian interests, and the burgeoning trend toward visible or tangible evidence showed that at least the intelligentsia was looking for natural phenomena rather than reverting to theological explanations.

This was quite in keeping with the humanists' dedication to their Latin ancestry. It may be that Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–
1446), as a promising young architect, painter, and sculptor, was somewhat of an eccentric when he went to Rome not as a pilgrim but as an enthusiastic collector in search of antiquities. He wanted to find inspiration and affirmation in his cultural heritage. This enthusiasm for archaeological finds was entirely in step with Petrarch’s Florentine followers, for the master had been perfectly correct when he prophesied in his Africa that “our grandsons will be able to walk back into the radiance of the past.”

By today’s standards a journey from Florence to Rome is no complicated undertaking. But at the turn of the fourteenth century (and even later) Italy was divided into warring city states. In Brunelleschi’s case, his Roman venture seems to have been a blend of sincere devotion and sentimental journey. If we can rely on a description left by one of his younger friends, his biographer Antonio Manetti, the architect left Florence in the company of Donatello (1386–1466) who, although still a teenager, belonged to the circle of his admirers.

In order to finance their voyage, Brunelleschi sold some property he had inherited. “Neither of them had family problems,” Manetti recorded, “since they had neither wife nor children… They were generally called quelli del tesoro (the treasure hunters) as it was believed that they spent and looked for treasures. They said: the treasure hunters search here today and there tomorrow. Actually they sometimes, though rarely, found some silver or gold medals, carved stones, chalcedony, cornelians, cameos, and like objects.”

The two young friends’ inspired exploration of the Roman ruins and monuments and their collecting of artifacts constituted a sincere and passionate dialogue with the past, and their stay in Rome left a discernable imprint on their later art and conceptions. “Brunelleschi’s command of ancient Roman architecture and Donatello’s mastery of the antique presuppose a painstaking study of what was left of ancient Rome,” Roberto Weiss concluded.

Nor were they alone in this genuine response to classical Rome. They were soon joined by others, among them Lorenzo Ghiberti, the sculptor, but most importantly by their slightly younger contemporary, Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464). It was a closely knit group of forward-looking, enthusiastic third-generation humanists. Collecting antiquities, sculptures, and coins and medals as well as manuscripts became a subjective as well as objective experience among the members of the group.

The curiosity for the past was but an expression of embracing a different future. It should be seen as evidence for a possibly unconscious rebellion against the spiritual straitjacket of ecclesiastical dogmas. It revealed the same kind of intellectual appetite that had brought Giovanni de’ Dondi to Rome in 1375, about a quarter of a century before them.

These Roman ventures were much more than exercises in sight-seeing or even in discovering or obtaining collectable items. This kind of collecting must be seen in the light of a pronounced desire to learn and understand more about one’s heritage and in essence more about one’s self in the world. (I might mention here in passing that much of this kind of interest in the past is but a sublimated way of asking the age-old question, “Where do I come from?”)

For the humanists their past or their universe was no longer a matter of mystery or of blind acceptance. There was a lively curiosity and an incessant search for illumination, in the same way that young adolescents who collect butterflies or postal stamps discover more about nature or the world at large. All these men shared a strong and, I believe, basic desire to acquire a fund of knowledge through visible and tangible objects from antiquity as a requisite for romanticizing their Roman forefathers above the credo of the Church. In their idealized vision of the Rome of Caesar and Cicero, they created a subjective rationale that helped them repudiate their present reality as dominated by feuding popes and the rulers of the many city-states of the Italian peninsula.

One of the enthusiasts in the circle of Cosimo de’ Medici was a somewhat controversial but nevertheless remarkable man by the name of Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). He had many of the characteristics and the habits of the tireless aficionado. His predominant concern was old manuscripts and literary sources. In many respects he was a fifteenth-century (though more civil and civilized) predecessor of Sir Thomas Phillipps. Moreover, not unlike Dondi, he was one of the forerunners of the virtuosi or dilettanti, largely motivated by an essentially narcissistic curiosity though in the disguise of intellectual inquisitiveness.
In all events, Poggio Bracciolini became one of the most notable bibliophiles of the Renaissance, in addition to being a collector of Greek and Roman sculpture, old coins, medals, and gems (if this indeed was all he collected). Already known by his late teens as one of the best copyists of ancient manuscripts, he became a self-made man of humble origins who started to earn his keep as a scribe. Because he was a prolific correspondent, and as many of his letters are still preserved, we know quite a bit about his activities, his circle of friends, the way he gathered his treasures, and the variety of his interests.

Poggio, as he is usually referred to, came from a hill village near Arezzo. There, in Terranova, his father was a small farmer who supplemented his income by dispensing medicinals. Poggio pictured his early childhood as pleasant and carefree, though this must have been a somewhat distorted sentiment since it is known that he had to earn his keep by child labor before the age of sixteen or seventeen, he worked as a copyist in Florence. Moreover, he studied to receive the prestigious degree of notario. By the time he was twenty-two years old he could add to his name the title of “ser” in this status-conscious society.

Poggio was doubtless a very ambitious young man who was soon moving in Florence’s intellectual circles. This came about because he had the same animus as some of the Florentine collectors who were infatuated with old books, which had to be copied for their libraries, and Poggio’s ability, learning, and enthusiasm had come to their attention. Among these men was Coluccio Salutati, scholar, writer, and teacher, but first and foremost “the spiritual heir of the great master” Petrarch, and a fatherly friend, Niccolò Niccoli, a well-to-do member of the Florentine aristocracy, who spent most of his fortune in building up an important library. In addition to his passion for books and old inscriptions, Poggio was a devoted student of Cicero’s writings. Salutati and to some extent Niccoli and the young Poggio soon grew close, possibly because the young notario was in search of an intellectual father since his own unscrupulous father, deserting his whole family, provided neither the outward sustenance nor the model Poggio had been looking for.

Poggio was not in need of too much help. In the atmosphere of the early fifteenth century, the young man’s enthusiasm for classical literature, for epigraphic texts and original inscriptions, was well received and supported among the influential and responsive humanists who were also among some of the leading citizens of the city republic. All this Poggio shared with one of his fatherly protectors, Coluccio Salutati.

Cicero’s eloquence and oratory mastery had become something of a paragon, a living connection with a rhapsodized past. The identification with that aspect of Roman culture was a logical outcome of these humanists’ urge to collect, and Poggio was indeed an acutely conscious representative of those who saw themselves as the true heirs of their Roman ancestry. He began to search for old documents and hitherto unknown texts of Cicero. In a short time he was to become one of the most successful discoverers of old manuscripts, which to the fifteenth-century humanists were sacrosanct ancient records.

Through the network of his well-positioned Florentine patrons, Poggio found employment with the Roman curia, eventually advancing to the influential office of papal secretary, always with the principal aim of making more and more discoveries for his collection. The Vatican was a treasure trove of rare and hitherto unknown ancient texts, and he copied many of them with what was by this time his well-known calligraphic skill. Besides, he made copies of the inscriptions on Roman stones and sent the material up north to his mentor Salutati. Poggio’s position and prestige in Vatican circles advanced quite rapidly, and he soon became a member of the papal entourage. Nevertheless, Florence remained his spiritual home.

Was it his close identification with Salutati and the Florentine humanists that brought about the dedication that enabled him to make discovery after discovery? His enthusiasm in inscriptions and epigraphy may at times have carried him away. It would seem so, at least according to Leonardo Bruni, a contem-
porary who was also papal secretary and a friend of Salutati. Bruni described his colleague as romantic, carefree, not too reliable, and occasionally inconsiderate, though likable. Poggio was also something of a charmer, and it would appear that this combination of character traits helped him to obtain many desirable items for his own collection.¹⁶³

I have observed similar personality traits among other self-serving collectors who, regardless of their truly genuine enthusiasm, can sometimes be tempted to acts of dishonesty and, owing to a certain lack of self-criticism, fall victim to their uncontrollable, largely unconscious longings. In this connection I may refer to an incident when Poggio, as a member of the Pope’s inner circle, spent some time in Bologna. During this sojourn he seized the opportunity to visit his beloved Florence. Florence, it must be remembered, was at the time not only the center of Renaissance culture, of the study of antiquity, and, as far as the elite was concerned, of decorum (a concept borrowed from Cicero),⁶ but it was also, in more economic terms, a major center of cloth manufacture. On leaving the city-state, Poggio managed to smuggle out a large piece of expensive cloth under the very noses of the frontier guards.⁶³

Were it not for the fact that the papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini used similar techniques to obtain valuable manuscripts, such an incident would be of little more than anecdotal interest. However, it was a deliberate, well-calculated move used some years later when he discovered a storehouse of hitherto unknown Latin texts under the dust and debris in the library of the old monastery at Einsiedeln in Switzerland. And since his dedication was stronger than his moral codes, he could prevail upon the monks to let him browse at will. At the bottom of the monastery’s library, "housed in a dingy, dirty dungeon . . . he found Lucretius’s De rerum natura, a history of Ammianus Marcellinus, a book on cookery by Quintilian." Poggio later rationalized his appropriation as an act of merely a rescue operation and an affirmation of the bond that existed between the Latin ancestry and present humanist fervor, whereupon some of the finds promptly disappeared up his sleeves.⁶⁵

I am using this example in order to illustrate a personality trait that can be understood in terms of an infant’s self-centered demand with an outspoken indifference to moral values. I would not describe it as common thievery, since Poggio unquestionably believed his own intellectualized interpretation of the event, founded as it were in his idealistic commitments as a rescuer. Indeed, those manuscripts would probably have disappeared or disintegrated since they were virtually buried and unprotected among the many other and presumably irrelevant documents in the dungeons of the monastic library. To all appearances Poggio was a man of formidable charm and, considering his history, of great persuasiveness. I have heard arguments about one’s mission as a rescuer from several dedicated collectors and dealers in antiquities as well as from unscrupulous grave-robbers and burglars when valuable but unprotected objects could be obtained through bribery, inveiglement, or sheer deception.

Without denigrating Poggio’s enthusiasm and achievements, one can hardly underrate the skill and talents of a man who knew how to outwit such authorities as the Florence border guards or the Swiss monks who were the gullible custodians of the Latin manuscripts. It is possible to think of men such as Poggio as people who know how to mobilize aggression in the guise of charm and allurement. It is easy to see that Poggio the collector would probably have defends himself on the grounds that his subterfuge saved, after all, important historical documents from ruin; that he did what he did as a savior in the service of his scholarly and antiquarian pursuits. I have heard similar arguments from other collectors or archaeologists. One cannot always refute their own perspective. However, accepting their explanation differs from understanding the inner nature and unconscious meaning of their action. In view of their personality, their habits are under the sway of, if not motivated by, a drivenness arising from aggressive-possessive impulses and imperatives. Thus, in psychoanalytic terms it is an obsessional, repetitive attempt at testing one’s magic: their ability to mobilize their personal magnetism works to their advantage. Here is an obvious link between the Don Juan and the persuasive collector.

By the time of the historical Council of Constance, from 1414 to 1418, Poggio had become one of the anti-Pope John XXIII’s private secretaries. In that position he had easy access to abbeys and monasteries. True to his obsessive character, rather than
wasting his time in drawn-out disputes and arguments, he traveled further north hunting for more documents and new treasures. And in the course of these endeavors he made enormous finds in the monastery of St. Gall. He left the place with no less than two wagon-loads full of old manuscripts, after explaining to the monks that he only wanted to copy these treasures, since he was one of the best copyists of his time. Whether it was the ignorance or innocence of the monks or, once again, the papal secretary’s powers of persuasion, they let him have his booty against a simple receipt.69

He also visited the monasteries of Langres, Cluny, Basle, and Cologne, and while he was not by far as successful as he had been at St. Gall, he still managed to unearth more Ciceronian orations and a number of ancient maps of the city of Rome.67

Only the abbot of the well-known monastery at Fulda was disinclined to succumb to Poggio’s entreaties to part with the manuscripts he found there.

In August 1430, Poggio accompanied the Pope to Grottaferrata and explored the entire district, visiting many of the old villas in the vicinity, quite a few of which were still “filled with various bits of ornaments and fragments of statues. . . .” At Grottaferrata there was a villa which must have been Cicero’s,” he concluded in a letter to his fatherly friend Niccolò Niccoli.68

Poggio was now fifty. He was established and well known, and yet still in need of an ideal father. He knew not only about Cicero’s country villa but also of his collection of statues. And so, like Cicero, he too acquired a country villa. Not surprisingly, he chose no other location than Terranova, the hill village he liked to refer to as castellum splendidium, which he and his pauperized family had to leave under pressure because his own father was a fugitive debtor when Poggio was a young boy. Now he returned, not only in an exalted position in the Church but later as a chancellor of the city-state of Florence. The poor boy from the provinces came back as an urban patrician who wielded power and was a paragon of classical learning and education. It is quite likely that many of the actions in his career, in his social ambitions and his endeavors as an outstanding collector, were motivated by early wishful fantasies of a high station, so that as a middle-aged man, now a member of the Florentine elite, he could reestablish himself in his home village, the successful son of an impoverished runaway.

Poggio apparently thought of himself as an antiquarian with scholarly ideals. Even though his primary concern was with Greek and Roman texts, his enthusiasm for the plastic arts was hardly less fervent. And here he knew how to make use of his high office. On one occasion he tried to persuade papal envoys in Greece to supply him with fine examples of ancient sculpture.69

However, when one of his scouts in the Greek Islands offered him an entire collection of statues that had presumably been discovered in a cave in the island of Rhodes, he was not immediately carried away and became suspicious.69 Another of his suppliers was a “Master Francisius,” or Fra Francesco da Pistoia, who had already obtained for him three marble heads of Juno, Minerva, and Bacchus and further wrote to him about nearly “a hundred undamaged marble statues in marvelously beautiful workmanship.” Unfortunately, after having promised Poggio the sculptures, he also offered them to Lorenzo de’ Medici, who, being far the richer collector, got away with the prize.

One recognizes in Poggio not simply an arbor for antiquities as witnesses of a glorious past with which he and many of his fellow humanists tried to identify, but also an unrelenting obsessiveness that has almost a childlike quality. For example, in 1457, at the age of seventy-seven, he received word about some manuscripts of Livy which had been found in a monastery in Denmark. He immediately tried to persuade the newly appointed Bishop of Bergen to make the discovery available to him. In his manic state he had already worked out a convenient route for transporting the manuscripts via Bruges and Geneva to Florence, where he was now residing after leaving the Roman curia. Two cardinals would serve as intermediaries, he noted, and he was quite prepared to bear all the expenses.70 Clearly, like many collectors, even in his advanced age he was engrossed by a never-ending need for new acquisitions.

What sort of a man was Poggio Bracciolini? Documents such as his own writings and his vast correspondence are implicitly and explicitly revealing as to his aims and ambitions. One can
sympathize with his tribulations and sense the enormous energy involved in his acquisitiveness. In Poggio we find a frenzy, a dynamism, which is not too unusual in collectors of his disposition.

An epicurean who liked to display his collection, Poggio lived in his villa in Terranova in the way becoming a very successful man. The villa had been decorated in the style of Cicero, with a number of Greek and Roman statues. At the villa he received many men of position and renown who were supposed to admire what the poor boy from this very village had managed to acquire. One of his visitors was Lorenzo de’ Medici; another was Donatello, by that time considered an expert on antique works of art. “Donatellus vidit et summa laudavit,” he wrote to Niccolò Niccoli.177

Of major interest in Poggio’s personality is his flamboyant effort to resurrect “what still remained of the ancient Rome,” in Weiss’s words.178 His dynamism was certainly rooted in an attempt to overcome an initial source of insecurity caused by an unreliable father. He found substitute fathers in sponsors like Salutati and Niccoli—Salutati as the acknowledged heir of Petrarch, and Niccoli as “unquestionably the most important Italian art collector of the early 15th Century.”179

Aside from his personal need to find a new identity by way of attaching himself to mentors who were intrigued by his charm and resourcefulness, he was also seeking some kind of spiritual heritage. This he shared with the intellectual vanguard of his time, as men such as Giovanni de’ Dondi had foreseen: marveling at the world instead of accepting the traditional axioms of the Roman Catholic church.

In a letter to Battista Guarino, Poggio described his success in the monastery of St. Gall. There we find a most revealing comment: “When Mother Nature gave the human race mind and reason, two wonderful guides to a righteous and happy life, she could think of nothing finer to give.”180

This, written when he was the anti-Pope’s secretary, crystallizes how little credit one of the most influential churchmen of his time gave to divine providence, and how much a collector’s taste can be under the spell of the spirit of his era.

*CHAPTER 10*

The Age of Curiosity

One would be hard put to deal with the predominant leanings of all the humanists at the time of Poggio Bracciolini whose taste and antiquarian interests also aroused a desire to own old sculpture or epigraphic texts or whatever might relate to the humanist world. However, there were a few who seem to have gone beyond antiquities and contemporary works of art. One of them was Sigismondo Tizio, a man with a preference for Etruscan objects, although his attention was also directed toward “natural curiosities.” While others concentrated exclusively on Roman remains, a man like Tizio seems to have been well ahead of his time.

Remarkably, Poggio, whether consciously or not, also seems to have had ideas not too far removed from this. Poggio did not just collect statues and manuscripts. “He was not satisfied with merely giving a description of what he saw,” Weiss wrote. “Instead he chose to question and seek answers from the old remains.”181

What all this seems to tell us is that such men were guided by a new spirit of inquisitiveness and an intellectual curiosity that was soon to define many collectors’ concerns and preoccupations. For the first time, man dared to ask: Where did all this come from? Such questions are solidly embedded in childhood emotions, although now on a higher (or sublimated) plane. There comes a time when children want to know where they come from and are no longer satisfied with hearing about the stork. At this point, generalizations have little appeal for children, since they are actually curious about their parents’ sexuality.

Men like Poggio must have felt quite ready to leave traditional taboos behind. They helped usher in a passion for remnants of the past, which in turn led to investigations of the true roots of being. The next few centuries saw the passing of miracles and marvels. Collectors leaned toward a distinction between man-made and natural specimens (artificialia and natu-
ralia) in their possessions. Rational observation made its presence felt.

This intellectual transformation gave collections a different complexion. In the beginning there was a subtle change of mood that could be distinguished in many respects and on a variety of levels. A thirst for knowledge lay behind the humanists’ speculations about the Roman and Greek past, and Arabic and Hebrew history. The collecting of old manuscripts and Roman and Etruscan antiquities was more than a replacement for traditional expressions of piety. It was almost a new kind of religion, or at least an “almost religious veneration for even the crumbs of Antiquity.”

Needless to say, there are various aspects to such phenomena. Regardless of whether we look at antiquarian interests, or science, or travel and exploration, they all carried the mark of the times. If curiosity prevailed it was clearly in the spirit Burckhardt had observed.

The rapid advance in navigation stemming largely from the Hispano-Arab cartographers and the invention of the compass brought demonstrable proof of other cultures and hitherto unknown foreign goods. The “romantic” search had been started in Rome (by Tuscan explorers), to travel to strange countries brought marvelous revelations of the things and people beyond the seas. It is quite evident that humanism, the many discoveries and inventions of the time, and the gradual disintegration of the late medieval social structure all cross-fertilized one another; that the ever-expanding spheres of knowledge and exploration gravitated toward each other. It is within this ambiance of search, of discovery, of engineering and navigational advances that the newly awakened curiosity must be placed.

Petarch’s mentorship had a strong influence on later generations, not only on the Salutatis and Bracciolinis. The appeal of Greek and Roman coins, which had become “modern” collectors’ items, grew and grew. And it was more than a matter of just owning various kinds of coins. Iconographically, these coins also contributed greatly to the enrichment of historical information.

By putting the accent on information, I want to draw attention to the increasing secular approach of this period to learning and factual knowledge. The humanists’ interest in and admiration for the classical past and concern with the laws of nature were only some of the indications that the doctrinaire demands of the Church were falling by the wayside. Realism was in the ascent even if the humanists’ idealization of antiquity was here and there befogged by sentimentality and the ambivalence with respect to the teachings of Rome.

One of those dogmatic papal dictates was the Bull of 1300 by which Boniface VIII explicitly prohibited the disemboweling of corpses. The Bull was aimed mainly at the thriving trade in holy relics. It had become a habit to return from the Holy Land with the bones of Crusaders who had died during their pilgrimage. By boiling their bodies, the bones could be brought back to Europe after the flesh had been removed. It had grown into a habit that was, after all, not so very different from the customs of many of the native tribes of Oceania. The papal edict tried to call a halt to it.

Even more important, this interdiction also applied to dissections and autopsies carried out by students of anatomy. In other words, the Church was trying to discourage the study of anatomy. Early accomplishments in this field are rather obscure. Physicians tended to rely on Galen, although this Greek doctor’s work (he died in Rome at the beginning of the third century) was unfamiliar to anatomists until a translation appeared in 1322. Despite the Church’s position, Mondino de’ Luzzi (1275?–1326) performed dissections of cadavers at the University of Bologna, and published his results in 1316—yet another example of how factual knowledge was deemed more important than conformity with Church-imposed prohibitions. Mondino’s Anatomy quickly became standard reading for students of medicine.

The trend toward rational observation and discovery was neither uniform nor undeviating. It coexisted with traditional or even regressive pursuits. Medicine was still a mélange of magical procedures and gradually advancing physiological and anatomical knowledge. Chemistry was still intertwined with alchemy. Astronomy encroached upon astrology. Superstition and reason made heterodox partners but managed to reconcile their divergent leanings.

“The difficulty was not that there was no difference between natural philosophy and mystic science,” Boas explains, “but
rather that men saw that each rational science had its magical, occult or supernatural counterpart.\footnote{180}

The overall motivation was a new consciousness accompanied by a still simple but genuine and diverse curiosity that extended in many directions: digging and measuring in Rome; traveling to hitherto unknown countries; learning about strange peoples, their customs and their goods; and challenging the traditional pieties by making discoveries about the basic principles of anatomical structure. All of this indicated a gradual shift in outlook stimulating a different worldview. Fifty years after Mondino, for example, a French surgeon from the University at Montpellier, Guy de Chauliac, published a \textit{Cyrenegia Magna}.

In our effort to understand the gradually unfolding drift of collectors’ interests or, rather, the mode of expression of their preference, one must be aware of the potent effect of the mood and temperament of the time. The process of seeing and demystifying as part of the early Renaissance mentality extended its influence on most enterprises and concerns in many ways. The Church sent missionaries to the Far East. Merchants and travelers such as the Polo brothers expressed in action, if not in thought, the critical shift in values and expectations.

The emerging pattern shows a simultaneity of changes. The great interest in the Latin past is but one example. The increasing influence of Hispano-Arabic mathematics and its effect on navigation expanded the itineraries of tradesmen and led to new shipping facilities and enterprises.

Travelers returned with new goods and astonishing tales. True, the earlier accounts by Crusaders and pilgrims to the Holy Land had told of the journey through Asia Minor, and some traders and missionaries had even pushed further, to India, to the Malay Archipelago, and to Cathay, as China was called at the time. One of these was Odorico de Pordonone, who came back to Europe with much surprising information about East Asia.

Throughout the second half of the thirteenth century and during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, more and more unexpected and startling goods filtered into Europe and could not fail to tempt and inspire scientists, artists, and collectors alike. In the inventory of Jean de Berry, for example, there appears “porcelaine,” counted among the rarities. He also had narwhal horns, ostrich eggs, and Oriental perfumes.

Travel books played a major role in whetting the appetites of collectors. One such book was Sir John Mandeville’s \textit{Travels}, dating to the second half of the fourteenth century.\footnote{181} It is an articulate, lively concoction of factual data mixed with the quasi-utopian fantasies of the author. It is doubtless meant to be entertaining, and it did have a conspicuously wide appeal. By the end of the fifteenth century the work had appeared in at least seven languages. Highly successful because of the enthusiastic curiosity of the time, the book consists of a series of far-fetched and garbled tales that Mandeville had distilled in Gulliver-like fashion from Pliny and other early travelers such as that zealous missionary to Asia, Odorico de Pordonone.

It is quite obvious that spellbinding tales about distant lands and hitherto unknown goods and customs were welcomed by the early humanists’ less erudite contemporaries. Curiosity and inquisitiveness went hand in hand with the increasingly impressive mercantile ventures, originally led by Venetian and Genoese traders, although rather soon followed by the Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch, and English.

This gradually enlarging mise en scène of discoveries, of experimentation and inventions, was nothing less than an attempt to substitute empirical observation and knowledge for long-standing beliefs in magical powers and practices. Theological debates were enlisted to marshal arguments conveying the latent conflict between traditional Christian teachings and enlightenment, between faith in magic and empirical truth.

The spirit attending this ambiguity is an eloquent expression of what Heer has described as the “two-tiered theological structure” relating to the supernatural world as it is impinged on by concrete data and tangible objects of reality.\footnote{182} The change from magico-religious speculation to the excitement of learning and exploration—in other words, the advance of a secular movement and the effective investigation of the perceivable world—was very exciting to collectors. Moreover, this development was soon to be helped by another major cultural achievement, the invention of the printing press.

Even though emphasis was first placed on the scriptures and religious texts, soon books with wood-block prints began to appear which featured naturalistically depicted animals, plants, flowers, birds, and insects, sometimes incorrect in proportion and symmetry but informative and inspiring nonetheless. New
books on anatomy, botany, physiology, and stereometry indicate which way the wind was blowing. There was, for example, a Fasciculo di Medicinae of 1493 which showed a female body with the reproductive organs, and a Herbal by the Greek physician and botanist Dioscorides. The illustrations in the various new books and translations differed as to accuracy and verisimilitude. The same was true for the depictions of animals, although there was conspicuously less interest in zoological illustrations than in plants and flowers because of their medicinal properties, the implication being that man’s well-being was no longer entirely left to fate and prayer.

It all demonstrates an overall trend of putting more emphasis on the study of human nature and a deliberate awareness of the real world. Along with the experience of commercial travel, new discoveries, and of factual information, there is a corresponding burgeoning of curiosity and inquisitiveness. In its initial concern this development is only relevant as it is clearly echoed in the increasing impetus for further research and for more than hearsay evidence, as in Mandeville’s wild tales. However, it contains within it typical elements that are to become of all-absorbing moment in later years, and even among today’s collectors, in that the ever richer sources of supply support greater differentiation and specialization among collectors’ interests as a mark of individual expression. I shall come back to this at a later point.

The rapidly expanding trade and travel routes over land, and more and more by sea, brought radical changes in the international exchange of goods. There had been effectively two combined sea-and-land routes to the Far East, one through the Red Sea via Cairo and Alexandria, and a second northern route through the Persian Gulf, Aleppo, and Constantinople. Venice was the European trade center until Vasco da Gama discovered the new sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, which would soon revolutionize the transoceanic exchange of goods and eventually shift both commerce and cultural activities to the north—to Antwerp, to Amsterdam, and also by land to Augsburg and Nuremberg.

The lively attention directed more and more toward strange objects and hitherto unknown or very rare products, and not only antiquities or old manuscripts, soon developed in collec-

tors new tastes for things like silks, gemstones, and exotic jewelry. It also inspired new trends in luxurious extravagance and promoted opportunities for changing patterns in visual discrimination.

It must, of course, be stressed that this development was not really conscious nor uniform, as the examples of Cosimo de’ Medici III or of Luther’s protector, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, with his 17,433 (by actual count) holy bones and a corpse of one of the Innocents, prove. Frederick was, after all, a contemporary of men like Albrecht Dürer, Verrochio, and Verrochio’s pupil, Leonardo da Vinci, all of whom, along with many other artists, had pursued anatomical studies. They had been under the influence of humanist anatomical and medical texts, again as part of the broad process of ideological transformation and the expanding frontier of knowledge.

The scenario then, within wide variations, is the potent and in some ways quite novel attitude toward knowledge, but not knowledge per se. It was knowledge correlated with method and an intellectual delight in classification and order. No longer did the aficionados talk of miracula and mirabilia. Instead they divided objects into antiquitas, artificialia, and naturalia. Such initial attempts at organizing categories were probably meant to assist the early collectors of all kinds of specimens to divide their possessions into different sections.

The comparatively sudden wave of collecting in the encyclopedic manner that became prominent toward the close of the sixteenth century was no doubt stimulated by the discovery of hitherto unknown objects from other continents. The curio cabinet, or Wunderkammer, was supposed to represent the miracles of the world. The paintings and cabinets of the period provide fine documentary evidence of this sometimes bewilderling display of all kinds of examples, of naturalia as well as specimens of the material culture of recently discovered civilizations. It marked an attempt to create an allegorical cosmos that would permit the viewers to take pleasure in a fanciful, and much condensed, view of a good part of the entire universe. If the collections of Petrarch and his followers tried to evoke the traditions of the past, the curio collectors and their followers, the virtuosi, attempted to compose a metaphorical representation of facets of the world at large.
There is at least one other clue as to what must have moved people to gather all sorts of rare or unknown things, or drawn their attention to shells, plants, butterflies, and antiques and paintings alike. It was a fascination with the discoveries of new territories. Indeed, many of the paintings of curio-cabinets show a globe, as a symbolic representative or a substitute for the real earth.

This fascination with the observable world was not entirely anchored in the domain of discoveries and the new developments in anatomy, astronomy, and scientific cartography. Much of the force behind these various activities resulted from a decline in religious censorship. The fact that Mondino de’ Luzzi did not hesitate to dissect cadavers in order to study anatomy, quite contrary to the papal edict of 1300, not only demonstrates the spirit of scientific inquiry but also is an illuminating example of receding church authority, preceding the Reformation. In this connection, works such as Leonardo’s anatomical treatises or Berengario da Carpi’s (c. 1460–c.1530) enchantingly titled *A Short but Very Clear and Fruitful Introduction to the Anatomy of the Human Body, Published by Request of his Students* represent a convincing link between the gradual abandonment of what Tawney called “the spiritual blindness” of the church and the increasingly strong appetite for new knowledge.

It should be noted at this point that even encyclopedic collections are representative of their owner’s individual approach and slant. One of the most telling contemporary descriptions of the curio-cabinet refers to it as the *Vernunft-Kammer*, or the Room (or Cabinet) of Reason. Such a designation clearly reveals an owner’s ideological bent, seeming to imply that occultism, fantasy, and allegory were to be replaced by visible and tangible records and reality. Other collectors have preferred a title like *theatrum mundi*, or World Theater, to explain their particular outlook. The title of one of the earliest publications on collecting, Samuel Quickeberg’s *Theatrum sapientiae* of 1565, draws direct attention to the need for knowledge since every object in the book is carefully documented as to time and place by the author.

A good number of the objects commonly found in these early curio-cabinets could also have been found in Jean de Berry’s vast collection. While he may have enjoyed their beauty and sig-

ificance, the sixteenth-century collector was as interested in their classification as in their aesthetic value.

This shift in concept and outlook is well articulated by two men of almost megalomaniacal ambition, Archduke Ferdinand II (1520–1595), younger brother of the Emperor Maximilian II, and his nephew, Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612). Ferdinand had married a wealthy commoner and established himself in his castle in Ambras, in Tyrol. His collection was, according to von Schlosser, “much better and more judiciously” organized than that of most of his contemporary fellow collectors. This passionate dedication was demonstrated in a most impressive volume describing part of his holdings and containing 125 etchings, which appeared six years after his death.

The collection ranged from the most exquisite bronze sculpture by Giovanni da Bologna and perhaps the most sensitive of all of Cellini’s works, the famous saltcellar (now in the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna), to stuffed birds, sharks’ teeth, elephant tusks, a piece of the rope Judas used to hang himself, and an enormous assortment of armor, weapons, and harnesses, especially equipment that had once belonged to famous contemporaries. (Did the archduke feel that this last group had part of their “soul” attached to them, just as other collectors value a pedigree?) In addition, Ferdinand had a passion for musical instruments, clocks, and intricate locks, and also owned a collection of ethnographic specimens now in the Vienna Völkerkunde-Museum.

It should be noted that such a large collection did not have to be a matter of cupidity or a wealthy hoarder’s demonstration of possessiveness, particularly in the sixteenth century, when new trade routes helped to speed everything up, and bigger was usually considered better. It may simply have assuaged the curiosity of an eminent and dedicated collector in search of a kind of panoramic view of the intelligible universe—an inclination certainly in step with the spirit of the times.

Ferdinand’s ambitions were shared, perhaps imitated, and eventually doubtless outdone by his nephew Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor, although possibly contrary to his own inclination. Whether Rudolf saw in Ferdinand, his father’s younger brother, a model for himself is difficult to say, particularly since Rudolf had spent seven very significant years of his adoles-
ence, from the age of twelve to nineteen, under the tutelage and guidance of another relative, Philip II of Spain. Philip, one of the most discerning collectors among the Hapsburgs, had many works by Titian, Veronese, Hieronymus Bosch, and many other outstanding artists in his collection. Without doubt Rudolf must have been affected by both the quality and quantity of Philip's collection.

Whether or not he was in need of any particular inspiration, however, is another question. Collecting had long been a family tradition among the Hapsburgs, although Ferdinand and Rudolf II certainly were the most avid collectors, at least in the northern branch of the family. Collecting on a large scale became a huge source of delight to both men, although somewhat more, perhaps, for the elder of the two, since Rudolf's interests became increasingly eccentric with advancing age.

Of the two, Rudolf was the more intriguing and possibly the more manifestly obsessed collector. Over the years he surrounded himself with some of the leading scientists, painters, sculptors, and instrument makers of his time. They were joined by alchemists, astrologers, even Kabbalists. His court reflected not only his own complex personality but also the ideological turmoil of the late Renaissance. Educated as a devout Roman Catholic, with all the vestiges of the past, Rudolf was nevertheless open to new and searching concepts, and he was not unsympathetic to the modifying arguments of the Reformation. At the same time, the presence of alchemists and Kabbalists at his court demonstrates a certain ambivalence in the emperor's character.

But then he brought one of the most outstanding astronomers of his time to the Hradchin, his court in Prague. The Dane Tycho de Brahe (1546–1601) became the Imperial Mathematicus, with a castle at his disposal and the appropriate staff. Shortly thereafter another famous astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), also joined the Imperial Court, taking Tycho's position after his death in 1601. In addition, well-known clock and instrument makers built intricate gadgets for the emperor while war was threatening and their minds and energy could have been focused on military equipment instead. There was already a rebellion in Hungary, and the first signs of the turmoil that would arise out of the Thirty Years' War were clearly visible.

This was the same war that would eventually bring to Prague Swedish troops who would carry off with them a major part of Rudolf's treasures.

The emperor's quest for all kinds of objects took up most of his time and almost all his attention. He used numerous agents to acquire paintings, clocks, fossils, animals, minerals, and, in his own words, "res quasdam nobis curiosas," or anything that would arouse his curiosity. It is not easy to determine the initial basis for his collecting mania. It is a well-known fact that he gradually retreated more and more from the world, cloistering himself in the private apartments of his castle. His emotional commitment to his collection is evident in many anecdotes about him. When, after extended negotiations with the ducal court at Modena for a relief by Giovanni da Bologna, he finally received the much-longed-for work and carried it to his rooms with a kind of victorious expression, saying "Now it is mine!" And while he quickly dismissed his advisers and ministers who came with urgent messages and requests, he spent a good deal of time with his instrument makers at the turning-lathe. Meanwhile, his coffers ran empty.

These are not accidents. Such behavior has all the earmarks of typical anal-obsessive character traits. In the emperor's case they seem to have been an attempt to ward off feelings of depression, a condition that is not too unusual among manic collectors. We cannot call them addicts. Their compulsion does seem to be triggered by an ever-threatening dread of not having or not getting, and the objects acquired—in Rudolf's case, it didn't seem to matter much, as witness his order for anything that would arouse his curiosity—work like a protective or reassuring device, as if they incorporated some form of magic.

Rudolf's records attest to his complex personality, which was possibly of a progressive paranoid type that clearly affected his actions, or, rather, lack of action (as in his refusal to function as the head of the Holy Roman Empire and instead hide behind the walls of his Prague citadel). Nevertheless, the course he pursued in terms of his interests and his vast collection was strongly colored by the spiritual movements that existed at the threshold of the seventeenth century. While Rudolf had his educational roots in the militantly Catholic culture of Spain, his
emotional leanings were clearly sprinkled with Protestant ideas. Moreover, there was the apparent ambiguity that existed between factual scientific research and thaumaturgic entrance. But he was far from alone in this. Even his Imperial Mathematician Tycho de Brahe, the most prominent astronomer of his time, had not cut himself off from a belief in astrology and alchemy as approaches to finding the truth.

In this ambiguous ideological climate, the Hradischin was a highly desirable retreat not only for outstanding artists, scientists, and instrument makers but also for swindlers and quacks. However, at least it may have been in cultural terms, Prague was more the seat of a willful, capricious, and arbitrary head of state than the vibrant international center of Northern Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century.

As Rudolf’s collection grew, his statesmanship waned. While his ministers waited in vain for an urgent audience, the emperor remained absorbed in alchemical experiments and Kabbalistic rites, or became entranced with a new object just added to his collection. In this regard, he asked one of his official envoys to acquire for him “treasures, metals, precious stones, and all hidden secrets in the whole of nature,” rather than assume his obligations as head of the Empire. He, his aunt, the Archduchess Maria of Styria, knew of his all-consuming and uncontrollable mania. “Anything the Emperor learns about, he believes he has to have,” she commented.

Regardless of the financial burden involved, Rudolf patronized some of the leading artists of the day, whom he virtually tied to his Court. Bartholomeus Spranger and Arcimboldo were among the Court painters, with Spranger also acting as Rudolf’s emissary and bringing the sculptor Adriaan de Vries, a pupil of Giovanni da Bologna, to Prague. One might ask whether Spranger’s painting nude women in the most lascivious poses (a quite prevalent theme at that time) pleased his imperial patron. If this was so—and it seems conceivable because the pictures of a contemporary, Hans van Aachen, use closely related themes—it may provide a clue to Rudolf’s undoubtedly complex psychological makeup. Such paintings, or rather their themes, would no doubt have been of interest to a man tormented by recurrent depression and, one might venture to add, pronounced psychosexual conflicts.

Regardless of his position as emperor, and what one might call his obligation to produce an heir to the throne, he never submitted to the political pressure and married. It has been reported that he had various ladies far beneath his status whom he liked to tease, to pinch, and perhaps to abuse. However, he spent most of his time with his chosen companions, with his animals, with his collection, or with his artists, instrument makers, and craftsmen.

Was Rudolf a melancholic voyeur? Was it a coincidence that a man, searching and open-minded, yet withdrawn and in need of reassurance of all kinds, wore a bezooz stone on his body? One of his physicians had suggested he wear such a stone, which is actually a rocklike material found in the stomach of certain animals. Bezoar stones were supposed to possess magical properties and, implicitly, medicinal powers.

One can perhaps conclude that the emperor employed a strategy not infrequently found among obsessional collectors, who in their essential loneliness need a daily “fix” or feel a pressing demand for constant replenishment. Rudolf was looking for help in all directions. He sought magical answers but also liked to share in the activities of the clockmakers, whose work was precise and concrete. He wanted “the whole of nature” in his collection, a logical request for a man living on the threshold between rational thought and mysticism.

As he isolated himself more and more in his Prague retreat, there is reason to suppose that his intermittent depression turned into a state of chronic melancholia. His self-centered concerns finally became more than his Empire could endure, and he was finally deposed by his younger brother Matthias. But in spite of his evidently progressive seclusion, his achievement as a collector on a grand scale is documentary evidence of the cultural transformation of the sixteenth century. The shift in style from Renaissance to Baroque belonged on a wider stage than the arts alone.

There are no stated criteria for collecting, but Rudolf II’s encyclopedic **Wunderkammer** or curio-cabinet was probably one of the most ambitious ever put together. While in many respects he had cut himself off from the outside world, this did little to slow down his activities as an ever-ready gatherer of anything collectable.
By and large, the sixteenth century was a time of ever-expanding dimensions. Goods and people traveled farther, although not faster, than two centuries earlier. While the Mediterranean civilizations dominated the previous centuries, economic and cultural expansion shifted the main centers of activity to the Holy Roman Empire, and more specifically to the Netherlands and Austria-Hungary, and Rudolf profited from these sociocultural realities in his collecting.

The emperor may have helped in providing the standard for the type of collecting that captured the fancy of his own time and the next few generations. Rarity cabinets, curio-cabinets, and Wunderkammern all reflect and emphasize the remarkable cultural diffusion of the post-Renaissance era. When Dondi spoke of the marvels to be found locally, the people of the Baroque period were infatuated with Oriental and American artifacts, as well as with antiquities, coins, and medals. But they were equally interested in what has been described as *naturalia*.

For example, the well-known Basle patrician Felix Platter (1536-1614), rector of the university and a noted physician, had a large collection of herbs, aquatic plants, and shells, in addition to the musical instruments and antiquities he had purchased about 1556, at the time of his medical studies at Montpellier, in southern France. He also collected drawings relating to his interest in plants and flowers and had acquired a number of his countryman Conrad Gesner’s (1516-1566) famous botanical sketches, considered to be the basis of up-to-date horticulture, after the latter’s death in 1565.

While Renaissance collectors, especially those of the humanist group, had shown their profound interest in Roman and pre-Roman antiquities, sixteenth-century collectors broadened their areas of curiosity. The collection of antiquities, of works of art, of curios and *naturalia*, it must be repeated, was in its infancy during the fifteenth century, but got much more creative and illuminating, and certainly more systematic, attention during the next two centuries.

Before coming back to this matter, I should call attention to a parallel and intellectually closely related movement, that of diligent and ambitious anatomical studies. These had started with Mondino’s work in Bologna, but found their culmination, tellingly enough, during the sixteenth century with Andreas Vesalius’s *De Humani corporis fabrica*, published in Platter’s hometown of Basle in 1543. Basle had become the center of printing and book publishing. While Mondino had prepared the ground in Italy, Vesalius taught in Paris and at the University of Louvain, in the Netherlands. It was yet another indication of the rising importance of the north as a cultural, as well as an economic, center.

Man was in search of himself and the mystery of the human body, or, in Vesalius’s term, the *fabrica* of the body, and on a larger scale in search of documentary evidence of everything that existed in nature. What for a longer such as Rudolf had become the main focus, if not the solution, of an undoubtedly affective disorder was soon to be a trend.

This tendency to search for “things” and the resonance coupled with intense inquisitiveness and the possession of collections began to draw attention in many different quarters. Barely two decades after Rudolf’s death, etiquette books made mention of the increasing interest in tangible examples of antiquity, of gems, coins, medals, and other specimens of archaeological artifacts. Then there were the *naturalia* and *artificialia*, in addition to items from what until then had been totally unknown cultures, from the Far East, from the Americas, from sub-Saharan Africa.

I shall come back later to this “trendy” perspective, which magnified in some respect an attempt to find concrete answers to an increasingly more complex world, especially in times of the rapid progress that had started during the sixteenth century.

It was men like Rudolf II who must have persuaded such a perceptive observer as the Oxford scholar Robert Burton (1577-1640), librarian of the college of Christ Church, to gain some understanding of the function of collecting. He wrote: “There be those so much taken with Michael Angelo’s, Raphael de Urbino’s, Francesco Francia’s pieces, and many of those Italian and Dutch painters, which were excellent in their ages; and esteem of it as a most pleasing sight to view those neat architectures, devices, escutcheons, coats of arms, read such books, to peruse old coins of several sorts in a fair gallery; artificial works, perspective glasses, old relics, roman antiquities, variety of colours.” Burton made these observations in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which originally appeared in 1621 but was reissued four more
times before the author’s death nineteen years later. Steeped in classical literature, Burton continued:

When Achilles was tormented and sad for the loss of his dear friend Patroclus, his mother Thetis brought him a most elaborate and curious buckler made by Vulcan, in which were engraven sun, moon, stars, planets, sea, land, men fighting, running, riding, women scolding, hills, dales, towns, castles, brooks, rivers, trees etc., with many pretty landskips and perspective pieces: with sight of which he was infinitely delighted, and much eased of grief. Who will not be affected so in like case, to see those well-furnished cloisters and galleries of the Roman cardinals, so richly stored with all modern pictures, old statues and antiquities? ... Or in some prince’s cabinets, like that of the great duke’s in Florence, of Felix Platerus in Basil, or noblemen’s houses, to see such variety of attires, faces, so many, so rare, and such exquisite pieces, of men, burds, beasts, etc. to see those excellent landskips ... pleasant pieces of perspective, Indian pictures made of feathers, China works, frames, thaumaturgical motions, exotic toys, etc. who is he that is now wholly overcome with idleness, or otherwise involved in a labyrinth of worldly cares, troubles, and discontents, that will not be much lightened in his mind.260

Burton understood that the obsessional motivation of collectors was not just a matter of leisure and luxury, but that its connection with depression, lack of affection, scotophilic tendencies, and escape from “worldly cares” signified splits and conflicts in their personalities.

On the other hand, the authors of the etiquette books were conspicuously less sensible than the Oxford scholar. While Burton recognized some of the etiological factors involved in collecting, the authors of the current descriptions of curio-cabinets or, for that matter, of etiquette books were only vaguely aware of collecting as a substitute device. It is fascinating to realize that the fame of some collectors must have traveled all over Western Europe and even across the Channel, since Burton was quite aware of the interests of the Medicis and also knew of the collection of men such as Doctor Platter in Basle, among others. To be sure, this lively concern with Greek and Roman sculpture, and with old books or botanical specimens, was very inspiring and undoubtedly came to the attention of a good many people, possibly arousing feelings of envy and rivalry among them. Trends always involve competition and imitation because they become a vehicle for self-definition. There is both a desire for some form of expression of an individual kind and at the same time there is a propensity for sharing in a current drift and identification with others. Such movements are always part of fashion and trendiness. One of the leading and to today’s generation most entertaining seventeenth-century publications, Henry Peacham’s etiquette book of 1634, entitled The Compleat Gentleman, takes note of this.261

Thus Peacham tells his readers of “the pleasure of statues, inscriptions and cognes [which] is best knowne to such as have beeene abroad in France, Spaine, and Italy, where the Gardens and Galleries of great men are beautified and set forth admiration with these kinds of ornaments. ... Such as are skilled in them, are by the Italians termed Virtuosi.”262 Peacham seems to refer here to the popularization of collecting and the spreading recognition of aesthetic pleasure, which is not the same thing as the often escapist zeal of the monomaniacal collector. However, it is equally different from the sixteenth century’s more enquiring mind, which tended to focus on method and order and “On the Hidden Causes of Things,” according to the telling title of the French physiologist Jean Fernel’s sixteenth-century publication.

While only a few generations earlier collecting had been the concern of a comparatively small fraternity of noblemen, intellectuals, and artists, as Peacham indicates, it had gradually become a trend and a leisure activity that should be familiar to, if not practiced by, any gentleman. The concept of a virtuoso or amateur or dilettante conveys the profound change that had taken place since the humanists’ enthusiastic discovery of old inscriptions, old manuscripts, and all sorts of artifacts from ancient Rome and Greece.

One may reasonably agree that such shifts from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century represent reactions to, rather than causes of, an elementary process. When behavior books begin to elaborate on the social value of collecting as such, we can regard this as a reliable indication of a change in intellectual tone, as well as a change in cultural climate.

It may be a bit more than speculation that the relic collectors at the time of the Crusades, as well as the latter-day hoarders of
holy bones, were motivated by a struggle to achieve peace of mind. The humanist collectors then turned to another sort of relic. Antiquities should be regarded as a kind of token, since to the humanists they were an indication of the revival of pre-Christian ideals. Turning to these mementos of classical Rome was thus an indirect indictment of the Roman Catholic church. To the humanists such antiquities and ancient manuscripts they collected answered an emotional need that was not fulfilled by the Church at the time of the early Renaissance.

The seventeenth century, however, presents a conspicuously more complex and perhaps more advanced spectacle. The social, political, economic, and, last but not least, religious forces had undergone considerable change. Spain had lost her predominance. Protestantism had made its striking impact. Europe’s northern region, predominantly the Low Countries and England, were now of key importance, not only in a world trade but also as major cultural centers.

Much of the mood of the time emanates from the lively and often engaging annotations of John Evelyn (1620–1706), the famous English diarist who spent several years of his early adulthood on the Continent. In Paris as well as elsewhere he paid visits to various collectors, something that he obviously delighted in. For example, Evelyn made notes on a visit he made to a Monsieur Perishot. He was quite impressed. He describes Perishot as one of the greatest Vertuosas in France for his Collection of Pictures, Achates, Medaills, & Flowers, especially Tulips & Anemones: the Chief of his Paintings were a Sebastian of Titian: from him we went to a Monsieur Fenes, who shewed us also many rare drawings, a rape of Helius in black Chalke; many excellent things of Sneiders, all naked; some Julios, & Mich. Angelo: a Madona of Passegna, somethings of Parmenis and other Masters [1 March 1644].

Evelyn’s notes reflect what kind of things his well-to-do bourgeois contemporaries were collecting. Seven years after his first stay in the French capital, he comments on his visit to the “Collection of one Monsieur Poignant, which for a variety of Achilles, Chrysalis, Onyxes, Porcullin, Medaills, Statues, Reliegos, Paintings, Relles douces and Antiquities might compare with the Italian Vir-
ositas)."298 It is noteworthy that a collection of this kind stressing naturalia reflects a Protestant-scientific outlook concentrating on tangible reality. Essentially, the aesthetic feature was minimized, if not excluded, in favor of scientific verifiability and observation.

"It is my aim to establish a universal inventory of the most curious natural rarities," stated the German collector Johann Daniel Major.299 Indeed, in retrospect there seems to be little romance left in descriptions such as "rerum tam artificiosarum, quam naturalium, tam antiquarum, quam recentium, tam exoticae."300 This sounds like a defensive veneer of reason compared with the acquisitive enthusiasm of a Poggio Bracciolini or the craving for constant replenishment of a Jean de Berry or Rudolf II. But this does not mean that collectors in the Netherlands, in England, and in Germany lacked enthusiasm or didn't exhibit a narcissistic pride in their collections (as the next chapter will demonstrate). In fact, they couldn't escape envy and criticism.

In 1696 Mary Astell wrote in quite a censorious manner how this sort of collector trafficks to all places, and has his Correspondents in every part of the World; yet his Merchandizes serve not to promote our Luxury, nor increase our Trade, and neither enrich the Nation, nor himself. A Box or two of Pebbles or Shells, and a dozen of Wasps, Spiders and Caterpillars are his Cargo. He values a Camelion, or a Salamander’s Egg, above all the sugars and Spices of the West and East Indies. . . . He visits Mines, Coal pits, and Quarries frequently, but not for that sordid end that other Men usually, do, vis. gain; but for the sake of the fossil Shells and Teeth that are sometimes found there. . . .

To what purpose is it, that these Gentlemen ransack all parts both of Earth and Sea to procure these Trifles?301

Today, we would try to convince Mrs. Astell of the lofty motives of these gentlemen. We would point out that, whether their rationale was study or curiosity or merely possessiveness, they followed a trend that began in Petrarch’s time and continued with artists, scholars, and patrons such as the Medicis before it became the concern of any gentleman.

Once Western Europe reached the Reformation, some of the romantic dedication of the early collectors was curtailed. Intellectual individualism seemed to contain affective fascination. More strength was drawn from orderly observation and knowledge than borrowing support from magico-religious sources. Everyone fell under the spell of an attempt at a "civilized compromise." But then one ought to ask where the difference lies between the gentlemen who ransacked "all parts of both earth and sea," as Mrs. Astell put it, and the generals of the Roman army who ransacked Greece, Sicily, and Asia Minor?

These are variations embedded in the cultural mold and in the prevailing spirit of the era. The purpose of collecting, we would try to explain to Mrs. Astell today, is to cope with a deep sense of uneasiness, if not self-doubt, and a need for orientation. Certain people—collectors—can find no better answer than the notion of being special by demonstrating what they possess or have found or, in the religious believer’s experience, of being blessed.

A greater sophistication and more widespread and better organized communication system helped change taste and perspectives. The early Renaissance marked the initial step in the modern approach to collecting; the Baroque era and the Age of Enlightenment speeded things up, provided new and different viewpoints to the habit and a vast array of different specimens to collect, and new aspirations for the committed collector.

As time passed, the focus shifted and expanded. Less inhibited curiosity allowed for greater discernment and widened criteria allowing, perhaps, for a greater differentiation in aim and the experiential process of acquisition. It made the collecting habit both more complex and possibly more dynamic, of course, but what remained constant is the fact that it is inextricably bound up with an inner need for ever new supplies for the enhancement of the self.
In Praise of Plenty:
Collecting During Holland’s
Golden Age

There is no record of exactly how many people in the young Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century collected. Some chronicles seem to indicate that nearly everybody became a prospective collector. The recently won freedom from decades of oppression and insecurity thanks to the ruthless rule of Spanish despots had ushered in a period of zest and feverish animation. Along with the prosperity due to their bold seafaring undertakings and the ever-increasing competitiveness in international mercantile trade provided a successful base for these burghers to express their enthusiasm for life and their forward-looking enjoyment of worldly pursuits. One way of expressing this enthusiasm, regardless of their Calvinist piety, was demonstrated by the Dutch people’s out-and-out love for earthly goods.

Officially peace had come only after a treaty was signed in 1648, known as the Peace of Westphalia. But the foundations of a nation were laid earlier, during the 1580s, when the core of the Dutch Republic and the inception of both the economic expansion and a growing awareness of a distinct cultural selfhood can be traced to the time of William of Orange and the Union of Utrecht in 1579. It was then that political forces split the Low Countries into a southern Catholic domain consisting of Flanders and most of Brabant and the largely urbanized northern region, the so-called Seven Provinces, which leaned essentially toward Protestantism.

This was the time when, with much emphasis on predominantly Protestant ethics, Dutch civilization started to blossom. Commercial, maritime, and agricultural successes were joined by the new political identity, and the overall effect began to threaten and eventually diminish the preeminence of the neighboring trading centers to the south, Antwerp, Bruges, and

Ghent. Amsterdam became the heart of the northern province and its cultural and economic activities, quite openly and successfully competing with Venice.

Townspeople and peasants alike became patrons of the arts, mainly of painters and craftsmen while there seemed to be less passion for sculptural works, as Huizinga already found. Still, these people’s exhilaration after many decades of brutal tyranny and ever-present insecurity continued for the better part of the seventeenth century. The courage and moral character they showed during the decades of Spanish rule and occupancy carried the seeds for an unrestrained cultural and intellectual transformation. The entire country seemed to feel revitalized and ready to participate in genuinely relishing the new freedom.

For example, so many of Dutch seventeenth-century paintings give us a blissful, even euphoric description of a sense of well-being, thematically and psychologically. Jan Steen’s peasants are merry and truly relaxed, at times even lustful and frivolous; Piet van Oostade’s paintings provide us with a lively idea of rural everyday life; many still-life pictures reflect opulence and often the visible enjoyment of culinary plentitude; the paintings of buildings—solemn churches by Saenredam; or townscapes by Berckheyde—echo the indispensable Calvinist restraint, while the numerous portrait paintings seem to have been part at least of the prosperous people’s house decoration and interiors. As Schama remarks: “It was common for burgher families to own works of art.” But then Huizinga reminds us that even when people collected they had a different approach from ours:

The collector was not a collector in the modern sense of the word. He was far more concerned to own works of every genre than of every great master. The average buyer greatly preferred possessing a country scene, a landscape, a seascape, an allegory and above all his own portrait to owning a Van Goyen, Steen, Hals or Porcellis. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule.

Acquiring decorative objects of all sorts seems to have been part of the recently emerging way of life among Holland’s burghers of the seventeenth century, after the collective trauma of the Spanish reign of terror.

This was, I suspect, a phenomenon under the influence of the young nation’s newly found prosperity and commercial prominence, and quite possibly as a result of it, part of shifting values.
And along with the changing fashionable trend there was much emphasis on comfort and good living.

The oft-quoted British diarist John Evelyn, in the course of his Grand Tour, was an eyewitness to it. He paid a visit to the Low Countries, stopping off in Rotterdam, Delft, Amsterdam, and several other towns in the Netherlands. Evelyn was twenty at the time and ready to be surprised. He left a lively account of his journey which gives us a colorful description of the burghe's everyday life during the middle of the seventeenth century, the height of the Golden Age. One gets the impression of solid prosperity and the genuine contentment of the people with their simple bourgeois wants. No sooner had Evelyn arrived in Rotterdam in mid-August 1641, he was moved by the entire atmosphere of what he saw. He was taken with the evident abundance he found and the overall uplifting tenor of everything he came across. While in Rotterdam, he notes, that he paid a visit to an annual mart or faire, so furnished with pictures (especially Landskips and Drolleries, as they call these clownish representations) that I was amaz'd. Some of these I bought and sent to England. The reason of this store of pictures and their cheapness proceeds from their want of land to employ their stock, so as tis an ordinary thing to find a common Farmer lay out two or three thousand pounds in this commodiy. Their houses are full of them, and they vend them at their faires to very great gains. Here I first saw an Elephant, who was extremely well disciplined and obedient. It was a beast of a monstrous size, yet as flexible and nimble in the joints, contrary to the vulgar tradition, as could be imagined from so prodigious a bulk. . . . I was also shown a Pelican, or onocrotalus of Pliny.25

A few days later, we find the young traveler in Amsterdam, where he takes special notice of the impressive streets and patrician buildings. Moreover he admires “the multitude of vessels which continually ride before this Citty, which is certainly the most busie concourse of mortalls now upon the whole earth.”216

Evelyn’s remarks touch upon Holland’s phenomenal economic expansion emerging as a world power within the first forty years of independence from the yoke of Spain’s despotic regime of religious and political terror. It had caused intermit-
tent unrest among the Dutch people. Exorbitant taxation, religious persecution, and a series of poor harvests led to a popular revolt and bloody riots all through the Netherlands. By the summer of 1556, the unrest had spread from Brabant to the Northern Provinces, and a raging mob swept through the streets of Antwerp and Ghent, and soon reached Haarlem and Amsterdam.

In order to understand what had sparked this frenzied passion, we must extend our perspective and examine the Dutch people’s reaction to the decades of Spanish suppression. Philip II of Spain, who had become king upon the death of his father Charles V, had sent the Duke of Alba to the Low Countries to crush the revolt. Vested with the king’s authority, the duke instituted a rule of terror and demoralization in order to put down the rebellion. There were no concessions, whether political or religious. But neither the duke nor his successor, Don Luis de Requesens, could maintain order. The rebellion, with Prince William of Orange (better known as William the Silent) as the head of the uprising, continued to spread. Soon the Dutch, always systematic and well-organized, were attacking their oppressors from both within the country and without, from the sea.

By 1579 five of the Northern Provinces had separated themselves from Spanish rule and established the Union of Utrecht under the leadership of Prince William, thus consolidating the northern part of the Netherlands and making this territory the focal point of the fight for freedom. But other tests awaited these people, not the least of which was the assassination of their leader, in 1584. Again the Dutch were exposed to the ravages of war and destruction. Finally, four years later, the supposedly invincible Spanish Armada was defeated, luckily with the aid of a tempest in the North Sea. And now, at long last, after much intrigue, suffering, and bloodshed, the Dutch were free. The country had dearly paid for sovereignty and stability.

There can be little question that the decades of foreign rule and suppression, of war and famine, had taught the strongly-willed burghe's the value of visible and tangible earthly possessions. And possessions have, as we have seen in earlier chapters, a reparative, even healing, capacity. The hard-won sense of security and stability, now linked to the Calvinist- and Mennon-
ite-Puritan ethic of industry and thrift, soon ushered in a century of incomparable achievements, of extraordinarily fertile artistic creativity, of aesthetic perspectives and a broad cultural and scientific advance. In just a few years, a nation of peasants and fishermen was transformed into a thriving community of urbanized merchants and enterprising seafarers. This state of well-being offered the Dutch the opportunity to ameliorate the trauma of the decades of strain and distress. From this point of view the vogue of obtaining paintings, all kinds of works of art, and decorative objects, to which Evelyn refers, appears to be a reactive response after the many years of suffering. His sketches of the bustling activity and affluence he found in Amsterdam, in Rotterdam, in Delft communicate the ambience of this unique period in Holland's history.

It does not require much insight to recognize in such an emotional expression a compensatory need. Lewis Mumford saw "a tendency to seek relief from remembered horror in unbridled drinking and fornicating, and to swing from a harsh facing of reality into an over-indulgent escapism," after people had been exposed to death and destruction.227

After such traumatic experiences, rational pursuits are often put aside, although one cannot say that irrationality is the inevitable consequence. On the contrary, the Dutch gravitated to exploration and that dynamic activity which so impressed the twenty-year-old Evelyn. The emotional effects of the newfound liberation spread like wildfire. It is conceivable that after the defeat of their oppressors they were now looking themselves for mastery, which they found in their various enterprises in the physical world. The diminished external pressure led to an ever-increasing sophistication in the spheres of thought, of cultural pursuits and learning. The transformation of the Zeitgeist encouraged new aims and new intellectual perspectives, and brought about a new scale of values. The universe promised more and more surprises. The curious that now began to flood the country offered evidence of the existence of what hitherto had belonged to the universe of fiction and fairy tale, and much of the earlier world of miracles began to crumble. The new discoveries opened new avenues for changing beliefs and ideologies.

At such moments in history, the promise of transformation elicits new and different signifiers, and new and different objectives. Together with prosperity and a growing commitment to individual liberties, there appeared a distinct shift in values, and collecting soon became one of the phenomena of change in terms of inner and outer reality. In historical reconstruction, I believe, the widespread inclination to collect all kinds of objects as well as works of art constituted a continuing attempt at re-integrating contentment with tangible, concrete "things" after decades of deprivation and frustrated longing for security and "the good life." One only has to take a careful look at the so-called Vanitas pictures, allegorical paintings of the era, in order to appreciate the rich imagery and sign language, which the people understood. One of the frequently appearing objects is, for example, the hourglass, a reminder of the limit of earthly existence, like the pipe and tobacco that were supposed to remind us of earthly airiness, of worldly irretrievability calling attention to the limits of life and the ultimate truth. We also find shells from foreign seas, strange weapons, and previously unknown fruits and vegetables like the coconut. Then there are specimens from Asia, Africa, the Americas, glasses and chinaware, maps and instruments. I must draw attention to the fact that many of these and other objects depicted in these paintings come right out of the curio-cabinet.

As I have shown in the two previous chapters, we can trace the fascination with this aspect of collecting back to the Renaissance, which started to provide man with a different and broader perspective of the human condition. In a more basic sense, it gave permission to look and explore, rather than to simply believe and put one's faith in the preachings of the Church. Men like Petrarch and Jean de Berry were, because of their social prestige as well as their temperament, representatives of a vanguard that soon attracted disciples, followers, and imitators, the usual course in the dissemination of cultural innovations. What had started among the aristocrats, first in Italy and to some degree in France, soon became something to be copied and imitated by the “patricians lately waxed rich, who sometimes also derived fine-sounding titles from a manor they had purchased."228 Collecting, then, took a markedly significant position in the pursuits and envy of the burghers who followed in the footsteps of their paragons.

Certainly not everybody became a collector, especially in the strict sense of the concept. Dedicated collectors are always a
small minority of the population. Others, often in doubt of their identity, may simply follow their example. Dutch collectors found their model in the southern Netherlands, which at the time was effectively a separate country.

Flanders and Brabant had had a well-to-do middle class when Antwerp, Bruges, and Ghent were the trade centers of northwestern Europe. Moreover, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, these towns were the hub of northern European cultural activity, under the guidance of their governor, one of the most outstanding female collectors of all time, Margaret of Savoy, daughter of Emperor Maximilian I and Mary of Burgundy.211

Margaret, married three times and finally widowed at the age of twenty-four, had been installed as her father’s representative in the Netherlands. A very competent and able woman, she was also highly literate and a discriminate collector of works of art and artifacts of the first rank. She had a superb library of illuminated books and manuscripts, and paintings by the then leading artists in her domain, among them Rogier van der Weyden, Mabuse (Jan Gossaert), Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch, and Dirk Bouts.

No wonder, then, that her subjects were so impressed by her example that we soon hear of extensive private collections among the Flemish and Brabant high bourgeoisie, among them the painter Peter Paul Rubens and his in-laws, the Brants and Fourments, both families of great wealth and respectability.212 However, it was not the respect for the Court and other dignitaries which sparked the collecting craze. It was essentially an affirmation of mastery after so many years of foreign rule.

There were already coin and medal collectors. For instance, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, Barent ten Broeke, a physician in the town of Enkhuizen, had a reputation for his encyclopedic collection of artefacta and natura facta, along with ethnographic objects from Africa and the Far East, “Chinese porcelain, Italian majolica, Spanish and Portuguese earthenware, French ceramics (probably the so-called ‘Palissy’) and even Dutch porcelain dishes and cups.”213

Another collection not too different from that of ten Broeke (better known under his Latinized name of Bernardus Paladinus) belonged to none other than Rembrandt. Again, we possess an inventory of his entire collection, made up at the time the painter had to declare bankruptcy in 1656, when Amsterdam authorities directed that one be made for the sale of his belongings. “The Trustee of the insolvent estate of Rembrandt van Rijn, art painter . . .,” begins the announcement.

I question whether an artist’s collection offers an indication of the habitual collector’s cause or basic incentive. No artist, particularly so gifted a painter as Rembrandt, needs or seeks fulfillment in what he collects since that fulfillment is implicit in his own creations. But we know from contemporary artists’ collections that they provide animation and inspiration, or may even sway his barely conscious susceptibilities, long before the artist himself is fully aware of the source. Rembrandt, like other artists, frequently sought inspiration in the past. We know, for example, that he owned a group of antique sculptures, among them the busts of Homer, Aristotle, and Socrates, which are shown in his well-known painting in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Other Rembrandt paintings depict weapons and armor of which, according to his own inventory list, he had some two thousand examples of such objects. He also collected feathers of various exotic birds, as well as stuffed birds and ethnographic specimens from Asia and the Americas. And then there were fossils, minerals, and coins, besides porcelain from China and Japan and a vast collection of prints and Italian, German, and Dutch paintings.

Not every Dutch collection of the seventeenth century showed such a vivid inquisitive mind as revealed in Rembrandt’s diverse possessions. But as an Amsterdam citizen, he was well situated right in the middle of the cultural and commercial activities in the Low Countries. Amsterdam had gradually taken over the role of international trading center previously overshadowed by the Flemish port of Antwerp. The emotional overtones in Protestant Holland after the defeat of the Spaniards were marked by elation and a taste for a carefree, comfortable existence. There was a distinct public-spirited, I suspect even frantic, spark of optimism.

The Dutch expressed their optimism and forward-looking mood by redesigning and developing their towns, not without obvious pride and pleasure. They improved the canals and their transport system. One only has to take a walk along the canals
IN PRAISE OF PLENTY

in order to recognize the lasting impact of seventeenth-century city planning and architecture on Dutch towns. But this atmosphere did not stop outside of their houses. The many interiors Dutch painters left us are a testimony to even the unassuming burghers’ delight in decorating their houses. There was a constant demand for paintings, and I agree with Huizinga that it was in this ambience that “many a mere owner was transformed into a collector with a gallery of his own—not only among the very rich. In this way, the emphasis gradually shifted from enjoyment of good likenesses towards the sheer love of art and beauty.”

Historical events followed each other in rapid succession. After so many years of occupation and enslavement, the peoples’ prospects changed dramatically. Evelyn visited the university at Leiden and “the famous printer, Elzevir’s printing house [Elzevier—still in existence at the end of the twentieth century] and shop, renowned for the politeness of the character and editions for what he has published through Europe. Hence to the physics-garden, well stored with exotic plants,” and later to the anatomy school. The young traveler convinced himself of Holland’s rapid scientific advances, of new technical skills, of the merchants’ exploratory journeys, and the attendant reports about new lands beyond the seas. Evelyn noticed the “extraordinary industrie” in Amsterdam overtaking Antwerp in all respects. Only half a century earlier the Flemish town had been northwestern Europe’s cultural center. The Florentine historian Guicciardini counted then about three hundred painters and etchers in Antwerp, an impressive proportion of the entire population. One must keep in mind that there were only a hundred seventy-nine bakers and seventy-eight butchers in the city.

Now Antwerp, as the result of the political struggle and the determination of the Northerners, had ceded her cultural as well as mercantile predominance to Amsterdam. Antwerp had been a truly international center, especially between southern Europe and Germany and the Baltics, and many merchants who visited the town bought not only paintings and sculptures but also books, maps, and curiosata during their sojourn in Flanders. And besides Antwerp there were Bruges and Ghent, towns that were hardly less lively and creative than Antwerp as far as the production of works of art was concerned. In fact, they were to

Antwerp what Haarlem and Leiden were to Amsterdam at the time of young Evelyn’s visit.

Thus, what had been hatched in the South quickly came to maturity in the North. We must keep in mind that the psychosocial dynamics which these environmental conditions of zest, of advance and prosperity bring to the fore, help stimulate mental climates which further encourage new intellectual endeavors. As I said already, visitors to Antwerp acquired not only paintings and books but also curiosata, items sailors had brought back from their travels to other lands.

We hear quite similar accounts about the hustle and bustle in Amsterdam. The inventory of Rembrandt’s collection is a manifestation of the rich and varied supply of “collectibles” at that time.

The mode in relating to the new tangible changes and achievements is also well reflected in the activities of a man such as Jacob Swammerdam, whom I mentioned in the previous chapter. We don’t know whether his initial incentive was that of an obsessed collector or, rather, of a detached and scientifically oriented man, a systematizer. In any case he adapted his inclination to the prevailing opportunities and left us a rather characteristic example of an alert and perceptive burgher of his time. He earned his keep as an Amsterdam apothecary.

Ailing sailors returning from their voyages to strange lands came to Swammerdam for medication and advice. In exchange for providing them with his pharmacological knowledge and medicines he used to ask not for remuneration but for obscure objects and strange specimens these voyagers had brought from all corners of the globe. In this manner he built a famous collection of curiosata which he had well organized and catalogued according to the then customary divisions.

Swammerdam’s Konst-Kamer (curio-cabinet) and rarity collection in many ways reflected the brisk activity in and around Amsterdam’s harbor. The catalogue of his collection, a kind of private museum, was compiled by his son Jan, a to-this-day famous entomologist. It suggests something of the alertness and intellectual opportunities under the exhilarating atmosphere of the era. After his death in 1679, the collection was offered for sale. In all, it contained twenty-six curio-cabinets which had been divided into four categories: “Items from mines” (berg-
werken), "growing things" (groeide zaken), "animals," and "works of art," the latter including a considerable number of ethnographic objects.225

The same year another collector, the famous marine painter Jan van de Capelle, also died. Although only an amateur, van de Capelle was one of Holland's outstanding marine painters. But his actual profession was that of an astute and highly successful merchant. On his death, he left seven town-houses in Amsterdam to his children, in addition to forty-four bags of gold ducats, several barrels full of gold and silver, and a substantial amount of cash—13,000 florins, to be exact. Unlike Rembrandt and Swammerdam, he did not collect in an encyclopedic manner. Rather, he had what one might assume, a collection that reflected a solidly established taste and the preferences of a comfortable burgher of his time. His inventory listed 197 paintings, among them a Dürer, a Holbein, several works by Rubens, a Poussin, and no less than 7,210 drawings, of which 891 were his own and 516 were by Rembrandt. Both the painter and his father had their portrait painted by Rembrandt, quite a common practice among well-to-do burghers of the period.226 In fact, I agree with Schama that the "most grandiose high-life interiors as we see them in the paintings by Metsu and de Hooch" are placed in the shade by the opulence of furnishings and decorations of the Dutch patricians.227 We hear for example of the bedroom of the wealthy Amsterdam widow van Erp, decorated with twelve paintings, or one of her side chambers with gold-stamped leather hangings and fifteen paintings or a reception room with a large landscape and yet another twelve paintings besides numerous embellishments such as oriental carpets and mirrors.228 Even the servants' room had seven paintings.

To be sure, Swammerdam's collection was conspicuously different. The emphasis was hardly on aesthetics nor on taste. Nevertheless, people with an inclination to learn about the unknown and find an opportunity to gather rare or exceptional specimens of any sort take pride in procuring examples of special interest. Irrespective of their scholarly or scientific aims, they bring into focus the plain enjoyment of possessions as well as a sense of mastery by exploring opportunities to add to their assets.

People such as Swammerdam, no doubt, had different ideas than overdecorating their houses with paintings and ornaments. What seems worthwhile mentioning is that the fact of finding gradually quite divergent themes and outlooks among collectors demonstrates an increasingly greater differentiation of individuals, of attitudes, and tastes. It also gives evidence that about the time of the late sixteenth century collections became more focused, and the more distinct environmental stimulus is clearly reflected in the collections that were characteristically personal.

A collection such as the curio-cabinet of a seventeenth-century Dutch apothecary is indicative of the effect of the new cultural and socioeconomic circumstances in the northern Netherlands. As the result of the new freedom people soon learned to enjoy a new vitality. Swammerdam serves but as one example of the kind of thought, of new values and action that people started to relish.

We do not know why the apothecary began to look for curiosa, ultimately building up one of the most representative collections of this kind. But we can assume that internal and external circumstances allowed him to respond to his inclinations and use his collecting of strange and unknown objects as a desirable vehicle to express his individual, possibly obsessive, inclinations. In other words, collections of curiosas revealed personality traits with a preoccupation for organization, orderliness, even exactitude. It tells us more about the collector's need for mastery. That is to say that the setting of curio-cabinets is evidence for a growing secular perspective dividing his holdings into fossilia and metallica, vegetabilia, animalia, and artefacta, and a large group of what he labeled cortica. As private museums of this kind were already fashionable enough, there appeared guides and handbooks in print advising collectors how to arrange their possessions.

There is a hint here of what later became a major pursuit of collectors—a categorizing and organizing tendency of making subdivisions of their holdings. Divisions such as Naturalia and Artificialia are very frequent in early catalogues. And we start to encounter such terms as Repositorium Naturae et Artis (Repository of Nature and Art) and Mundus Sensibilis and Mundus Intellegibilis (World of the Senses and of Knowledge).
Categories as such have a realistic as well as psychological function. They aid the owner's efficiency but at the same time tell us about a person's attempt to envisage his or her life in a codified or ritualized fashion by using this technique in order to be in charge if not in control or to dominate. These are examples of symbolic action still observable to this day and especially frequent among collectors who tend obsessively to collect series or limit their holdings scrupulously to particular periods or areas or themes; for example, certain coin or stamp collectors get intense pleasure from finding the one coin or the one stamp that will complete a series in their possession. Or I met a young Dutch collector of eggcups determined to limit his holdings to this particular theme. But then he took pride in showing me the greatest variety of eggcups from all parts of the world imaginable.

I am emphasizing this tendency here because it preoccupied many a collector at the time of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance. As we have seen, the popularity of the curio-cabinet or Wunderkammer during this period of cultural development in Europe relates to greater emancipation from devout belief in a world ordained and intoxicated by the Church. With their newfound freedom of thought and action, people were looking for evidence of a tangible and real, rather than mysterious, universe. Just as a child arrives at a stage when he or she has an urge to find out where babies come from, so did people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with much inquisitiveness seek to expand their intellectual horizon. This liberalization of thought and advance in scholarly and scientific pursuits lay behind the impressive determination for enlightenment, not only in the Netherlands but much of Europe (even though the Low Countries were in the forefront of this development, possibly resulting from so many decades of experiencing acute personal fears and persecution besides the overall political suppression and control).

These factors deserve some emphasis here because they cannot but affect a peoples' worldview and behavioral responses. There is a distinct correlation between the emotional states evoked by threats and insecurity, and clinging to factual data and knowledge and collecting objects. Nor was it coincidental that, at the same time, Dutch physicians studied and taught anatomy, exploring as it were the tangible inner world.

The Dutch now represented the nouveaux riches of Europe. There was no question as to the country's social and economic stability at a time when their former oppressor, Spain, was in decline, and the Dutch people's commercial and expansionist activities, and the concomitant prosperity, triggered a fervor and an overall intensity that could not help but lead to certain excesses. The portrayal of the markets, of the activities in the harbors, of some houses foreign visitors described, extended further. One of such excesses was the tulipomania, which shall be discussed shortly.

In their search for a new self-definition and direction, and lacking inspiring forebears or a court, or an aristocracy that would set the prevailing style, some people sought inspiration beyond the country's boundaries. As an example I may refer to two young Amsterdam collectors, the Reijnst brothers. Their father had died when they were still in their adolescence. At the time he had been governor-general of the recently colonized Dutch territories in the East Indies. His two sons, Gerrit and Jan, while still in their early twenties, became involved in the family business, an import and trading company of impressive proportions. Jan, the younger of the two, settled in Venice as the representative of the firm, directing its affairs with particular astuteness. Although Venice was no longer Europe's economic capital, to many it stood for elegance and classic taste, perhaps not dissimilar to the shift in Paris's current position after having been seen for several centuries as the cultural center of the Western world.

Jan quickly turned into an Italophile and became infatuated with the Italian, or more correctly the Venetian, way of life. As a great admirer of Italian culture, he had an outspoken predilection for Roman and Greek antiquities, and unquestionably preferred them to contemporary Dutch art. And when the Venetian Doge Andrea Vendramin died in 1629 and his famous collection became available, the Reijnst brothers bought (presumably with the assistance of an adviser to Louis XIV of France, the well-known painter Nicolas Regnier) a large part of the Museo Andreae Vendrameno en bloc.
Two years before the doge’s death, a seventeen-volume catalogue had been printed which described the contents of his museum. It was a considerable part of this collection, which consisted of hundreds of paintings, sculptures, and antiquities, that the Reijnst brothers now brought to their recently acquired mansion at the distinguished address of 209 Keizersgracht in Amsterdam. The house quickly became a kind of cultural gathering place, well-known to European connoisseurs. Visitors to Amsterdam considered it an honor to be invited to see the collection, and some of them described it in the most laudatory terms.

A German visitor, Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, found the house palatial and the collection encyclopedic, since the Reijnsts had by this time added to their original purchase art objects, coins, gems, shells, and other naturalia, as they were called. A Dutchman, Melchior Fokkens, compared the house to “a King’s Palace . . . [with] Roman and Indian decorations and rarities.” Among the many works of art in the collection were paintings by Bassano, Titian, Andrea del Sarto, and Veronese, and at least ninety-eight antique sculptures. Interestingly enough, the brothers had bought only a few works by Dutch masters, and even these belonged to the Italianizing School of Utrecht.

Jan seems to have been the more active collector of the two brothers, spending a good part of his time in Venice where he belonged to the most fashionable circles of the local smart set. He also represented the Dutch Republic at the Court of Louis XIV, who eventually knighted him. He died in Venice at the early age of forty-four.

One wonders if Gerrit and Jan Reijnst, influenced as they were by their commercial connection with Venice, were inclined to display the social graces of the Venetian patricians in their hometown. Their preference for Italianate taste is beyond question. Italian paintings, with their often greater flair for color and complex movement, as well as their different subject matter, obviously had more appeal for them than Dutch works, which were thematically sometimes more sensual but less flamboyant.

What motivated these two urbane young merchants to acquire an art collection of such high repute? As the sons of a former governor-general of the East India Company, their social status was impeccable, and they certainly had no reason for seeking to establish a new public image. They were enterprising, cosmopolitan, “enlightened amateurs, gifted, with flair, and not afraid of big prices,” in Lugt’s succinct description of them to F. H. Taylor. Acquiring a large part of the ready-made collection and bringing it lock, stock, and barrel from Venice to the Netherlands almost seems like a bravura act designed to impress the Amsterdam burgerij.

While they must have had a reason to distinguish themselves from the mainstream, it is difficult to trace their immediate aim in buying a collection in this fashion. Whatever their motivation, there is little question of their preeminence in the international art circuit. Only a month before Jan Reijnst died in Venice in 1646, Carlo Ridolfi had dedicated the first volume of his Marvels of Art to the “Illustrissimi Signori Fratelli Reins.” Regardless of whether the author intended to express his admiration for the brothers or just wanted to retain their goodwill, the dedication clearly offers an indication of their prominence in the international art world.

As an example of a way of collecting, the wholesale acquisition made by the Reijnst brothers may have some kind of special meaning, though one does not want to speculate on their intent. Clearly, the Vendramin collection had proven its distinction. It was famous because of its quality as well as because of the name of its previous owner. Did it represent a solution to a dilemma? Did it confirm a feeling of superiority the brothers had about their compatriots? Or did Andrea Vendramin provide them with a father image, since they had lost their own father during puberty and had been orphaned at the ages of sixteen and fourteen, respectively? And finally, did the brothers perhaps feel that, by owning many of the Vendramin treasures, they were only following in the footsteps of the historical and economic development of Europe? We know that by this time Venice had lost much of its position and prestige to Amsterdam, sometimes called the “Venice of the North” because of its closeness to the sea and the fact that both cities have canals. It is possible that to the brothers the Vendramin treasures could have seemed much like laurels brought home from battle, like the Greek works of art which had been carried back to Rome in triumph.

The Reijnst collection shared the fate of so many others. For twelve years after Jan’s death, Gerrit carried on the fraternal
pursuit until he was drowned in the Keizersgracht in 1658. Two years later, his widow sold twenty-four Italian paintings and twelve antique statues for the price of 80,000 guilders to the Dutch government. The government then offered them as a gift to Charles II of England. Gerrit’s son Joan seems to have sold various other objects in the collection, and in 1673 the well-
known Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uyleburgh arranged for an auction sale of Italian paintings, among them probably several from the Reijnst collection. Today, many of their holdings have disappeared, while others have found their way to England, Germany, and the United States. Some have remained in the Netherlands and now belong to the Museum van Oudheden (Museum of Antiquities) in Leiden.

The vogue of collecting something or other soon had affected almost the entire country. The Reijnst got their immediate incentive from the Italians, quite conceivably identifying more specifically with the established Venetian aristocracy, perhaps thereby borrowing the illusion of being of different and possibly better status than their Dutch compatriots.

Others like Swammerdam were under the spell of the new enlightenment, especially in cities such as Amsterdam, a major port that offered all sorts of opportunities for discovering curiosa and choosing a collecting field.28 Still, all the different kinds of collecting during this period can be seen as living examples with the reassuring function of having and holding something, and as proof of power and control. To the Dutch of the era, the world was full of novelties. Rembrandt’s occasional use of feathers, strange birds, chinoiseries, and antiquities in his paintings and drawings reveals the interest in and stimulation of hitherto unknown items. We must remember that using items of this kind was distinctly modern, and that, for example, Chinese pottery, especially of the Wan-Li and Kang-H’si period, was highly en vogue. Works by Breughel de Velour, Jan van Kessel, Frans Francken II or Willem van Haecht, to mention only a few artists, also reveal a fascination with gathering such and with the opulence of uncommon and often perplexing things.287

In this sociocultural setting, it may be instructive to examine what might be considered a peculiar sideshow of the era. Many of the new goods were brought north via the Mediterranean and the Middle East. First they were exhibited rarities, like the ele-
phant John Evelyn found so impressive in Rotterdam, or shown in collections, which often contained “shell creatures” or “outlandish fruits” or strange flowers. Among those flowers was the tulip, which was destined to play a particular role in Dutch socioeconomic history. Here, as so often happens, curiosity and the scientific exploration of observable phenomena overlapped.

As far as is known, the tulip was first introduced into Holland from Persia or Turkey at about the middle of the sixteenth century. It was originally brought to the court of Emperor Ferdinand I in Vienna by the Imperial Ambassador to the Turkish court of Suleiman the Magnificent. The diplomat, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, was of Dutch origin. At about the same time, the flower came to the attention of the ever-alert Venetians, who began marketing it in Western Europe. As early as 1565, and thus remarkably soon after its introduction considering thepace of communication in those days, the Swiss botanist Conrad Gesner gave an informative description of the flower, which he had seen growing in two Augsburg gardens, one of them belonging to the Fugger family and the other to the Hewarts, both international merchant bankers. While the information we have is quite scanty, it seems evident that, as so often happens, the Imperial Court and some aristocratic families had been instrumental in setting a trend. Gradually, the tulip, partly because of its shape, partly because of its fascinating variations in colors and stripes, became the most sought-after flower in Western Europe.

Along with the systematic study of plants and flowers there came a growing interest in botanical gardens and herbariums. One of the outstanding men involved in the scientific study of plants and herbal remedies was Carolus Clusius, or Charles de l’Ecluse, who had been in the employ of the Emperor Rudolf II in Vienna and Prague. He was the overseer of the Imperial medicinal herb gardens and had for a while joined Rudolf II’s entourage in Prague. Clusius devised a detailed classification of plants in his Rariorum Plantarum Historia of 1601 and later accepted an invitation to join the faculty at the new University of Leiden, where he was attached to the medical school as a professor.

One anecdote about Clusius sheds some light on the tenor of the times. He began to develop new and beautiful variations of
pursuit until he was drowned in the Keizersgracht in 1658. Two years later, his widow sold twenty-four Italian paintings and twelve antique statues for the price of 80,000 guilders to the Dutch government. The government then offered them as a gift to Charles II of England. Gerrit's son Joan seems to have sold various other objects in the collection, and in 1673 the well-known Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh arranged for an auction sale of Italian paintings, among them probably several from the Reijnst collection. Today, many of their holdings have disappeared, while others have found their way to England, Germany, and the United States. Some have remained in the Netherlands and now belong to the Museum van Oudheden (Museum of Antiquities) in Leiden.

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One anecdote about Clusius sheds some light on the tenor of the times. He began to develop new and beautiful variations of
the tulip, but his enthusiasm for this project soon waned because his bulbs were being stolen during the night. Whether this thievery was due to some amateur’s zeal or to the steadily increasing commercial value of the bulbs is impossible to say at this time, but such thefts are obviously reminiscent of cattle rustling or pilfering works or art.

As the bulbs grew more and more valuable, many people became horticulturists and began to raise them, and many more became collectors of, or speculators in, the bulbs. Tulips quickly became a national pastime on a truly immense scale, and no account of collecting in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century can afford to neglect the apparently irresistible spell of the tulip.286

Anyone who studies collecting and collectors soon learns that economic factors usually have an enormous influence on fads and fashions of the day. The economist N. W. Posthumus credits the tulip craze to the proximity of Amsterdam as a world trading center to the tulip fields, the so-called Bollenstreek, around nearby Haarlem and Alkmaar.287 Another influence was the fact that the price was not always paid in cash, as we shall see shortly.288

The craze reached its height about a year after a devastating plague epidemic resulted in the death of thousands of people in the Netherlands, especially in the area around Haarlem. History tells us of the anarchic effect of the Black Death during the early Renaissance. A recurrent threat for more than three centuries, the plague carried with it the potential to cause enormous anxiety among the population, always followed by a search for, and clinging to, some form of magic relief. While the Dutch infatuation with the tulip began before this particular epidemic, there was now no protection against the breakdown of inner checks, resulting in an almost manic frenzy, and in no time at all the upper classes, ordinary city dwellers, and peasants alike engaged in a mad competition for tulips.

Readers may not agree that the *tulipomania* was somehow a form of collecting. But, in a stricter sense, much of what pertains to the infatuation with collecting bears on the behavior and overenthusiasm that involved the attitudes during the tulip craze. There was, for example, a very rare and according to some reports most beautiful specimen of the *Semper Augustus*, with fire-red and white stripes on a blue base. A tulip collector,

Nicolaas van Wassenaer, bought one in 1623 for 1,000 florins, an enormous amount in terms of buying power at the time. However, after the transaction had been finalized, the previous owner noticed that there were two tiny bulbs just developing on the stalk, and felt that he had cheated himself out of another 200 florins. The next year the same tulip fetched 200 florins more, and by 1625 a bid of 3,000 florins for the flower was turned down.

This brief account serves to illustrate how a fashionable fad quickly developed into a passionate affective mania. By this time tulips were being treated like rare treasures and had turned into showy status symbols. Here is another concrete instance of what can occur because of changing psychosocial conditions. There is little question that the material success achieved by the Dutch during this dynamic period had placed an undue emphasis on both possessions and possessiveness. After years of deprivation and chronic anxiety, a new mood had arisen out of the echoes of the past and the empirical evidence of plenty.

There is no question about the manic overtones of the tulip craze. Clearly the newly won freedom of the Dutch had affected their traditional moderation. Many tulip collectors turned into speculators as prices skyrocketed, and the exercise of thrift seemed suspended. Tulips of the rarer sort were weighted and sold exactly like gold, and the transactions were frequently validated by public notaries.291

We can get a glimpse of the spirit of the times in the case of the famous landscape painter Jan van Goyen. He had originally dealt in real estate but then became a tulip enthusiast. In January 1637 he bought ten bulbs from the burgomaster of the Hague, Albert Claesz. van Ravensteijn, another tulip collector, and a week later he bought another forty bulbs as well as a group of cheaper ones by the pound for a total of 900 florins. However, two paintings were also included in the transaction, one by himself and the other by [Salomon?] Ruijsdael. To put this deal in the proper perspective, it should be noted that the price for an average-sized ox at the time was approximately 120 florins.292

The extent of the commitment van Goyen had made in buying the bulbs is indicated by the fact that four years later he still had not paid off the debt. In fact, he lived for another fifteen years
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without ever getting out of debt. And this was by no means an exceptional case.

The *tulipomania* eventually subsided. It seems to have been an outgrowth of a period of undreamed-of material well-being, which led to irrational actions, of which the boiler-shop atmosphere of collecting and speculating is a striking manifestation. In such times, material success adds to the dynamic interplay of a strong desire to give proof of one’s prosperity and comfort, and to use “collectibles” for those purposes.

It is apparent that the admiration for the object not only gives reassurance to the owner. It enhances his self-image. It also provides protection against the insecurities of the past. It is easy to see how quickly the collecting “bug” could spread in a period when the whole country felt the quickened pulse of life and everyone tried to partake in the frenzied activity. In such times people are almost destined to seek some tangible evidence of reassurance against renewed vulnerability. And after the many difficult decades it was now collecting and the embellishment of their towns and their houses, not their churches, that became the rage in the course of Holland’s Golden Age.