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# The Collecting Culture: An Exploration of the Collector Mentality and Archaeology's Response

Tamie Sawaged

*The collecting of cultural remains and the looting of sites have serious repercussions for the preservation of the archaeological record. The scientific community has long bemoaned this situation but has developed few effective, proactive measures to stem the activities of collectors and looters. This lack of success can be attributed partially to a failure in researching and understanding the driving forces behind the collecting phenomenon. Thus, this paper has several main goals: to provide the archaeologist with some basic understanding of the collecting culture from the collector's perspective; to encourage the use of an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to address this issue; and to offer suggestions for the creation of new initiatives.*

## The Collecting Phenomenon

Over the last decade, the attention directed by the archaeological community toward the collecting phenomenon and its impact on the archaeological record has increased dramatically. Many archaeologists fervently condemn the actions of collectors and their "collaborators," the looters, but few have taken active steps to reduce this damage to the archaeological record. In particular, archaeologists may be criticized on several accounts. Literature condemning the practices of collecting and looting is circulated primarily among professionals, and thus access to such information by lay people is limited. Further, much of this literature simply provides a laundry list of the adverse effects that collecting has on the archaeological record, with practical suggestions for dealing with these activities glaringly absent. In print, archaeologists have encouraged public outreach and education directed toward current and potential collectors but have failed to implement such programs on a wide-scale level. Finally, archaeologists have failed to fully understand why people collect and to target those motivations, instead preferring

to escape the problem by labeling any endeavor to check these practices as futile (Fagan 1996).

This mentality of the archaeologist speaks to a problem that undermines efforts to combat the collecting of artifacts. Archaeologists place the local collector who collects as a hobby on his/her own land or with the permission of landowners in the same category as the major collector who may hire looters to procure items of value. However, a great disparity exists between the two, the former often has no knowledge of the legal and ethical ramifications of his/her actions; the latter is fully aware of them and may engage in the illicit smuggling and/or purchase of antiquities. To treat the amateur collector as a hardened criminal incapable of reform is ludicrous and unproductive. In fact, it is entirely plausible that the same energy expended by the average person in collecting artifacts can be redirected with the help of the archaeologist to aid the preservation effort. To use the same methods to combat the collecting by amateurs and professionals would be ineffective as well. The majority of amateur collectors do not violate any legal restrictions, whereas the professional

collector may violate federal statutes, international law, and import/export regulations.

No strategy aimed at dissuading antiquities collecting can be successful without an understanding of the motivations for collecting from the collector's point of view. Thus, this paper presents information on the culture of collecting and provides some suggestions to archaeologists to more effectively deal with this phenomenon. Understanding why people feel impelled to "transform their fascination with the past into a lust to own it" may enable researchers to devise strategies to combat looting and collecting (Fagan 1996:241). It is also important to remember that not all private collections stem from the activities of looters or artifact hunters. Indeed, many collections remain within the same family for generations after initial purchase from the manufacturer and may be sold at auction or donated to a museum once interest in them wanes.

### **The Collector Mentality: an Emic Perspective**

Like many archaeologists, collectors often first become entranced by material objects and collecting after visiting a museum. Thus, museum administrators must become more aware of the messages presented to their patrons through displays and institutional policies. In many museum catalogues, artifacts are not distinguished from art. Displays of ethnographic and archaeological materials generally focus on the physical attributes of the objects themselves, providing little or no information on the importance of context. Items considered to be "fine art" (portable art) by art historians possess pertinent information in a self-contained package; generally, the objects themselves are prized. Context is useful to the extent that a pedigree of ownership may be established and fakes or forgeries detected. For example, a Renoir painting in-and-of-itself provides answers to most of the questions

posed by art historians (i.e. composition, color schemes, technique, symbolism, and content). Thus, objects of fine art may be collected, sold, relocated, and recollected without damage to their intrinsic values (including monetary values). The same cannot be said for artifacts, as context is vital when addressing archaeological questions. Furthermore, collecting is a museum's primary activity, and a person entering into this collector's paradise witnesses the awe and approval of patrons and hence may be inspired to collect. In the *Guide to the Arts of Americas*, the author succinctly presents the attitude of the major, wealthy collector:

To a large extent the argument against collecting is influential because its proponents often promote it very aggressively. They also tend to express themselves intemperately, customarily referring to those in favor of collecting as 'looters,' 'grave robbers,' and 'criminals,' since many objects in museums and private collections were originally found in tomb sites by excavators who sold the articles in the art market, often flouting local law.... (It may be argued that archaeologists also are 'grave robbers' who take objects from tombs for their own professional purposes.)... Illegal digging has been going on all over the world for thousands of years, and it is foolish to think that anything will stop it.... Indeed, because of the relatively small number of archaeologists and the limited time and money available to them, a very large number of ancient works would remain buried, perhaps forever (yielding neither art nor information), were it not for the economic incentive that collecting provides nonscientific excavators.... For the most part, the knowledge acquired in archaeological digging, if any, is only marginally interesting to the scientists and of such small value to others as to be negligible. The question is, then, is the possible loss of some information of small interest to the world at large, or even the occasional loss of some information of somewhat greater interest, worth depriving

the world of the millions of aesthetically and spiritually enriching experiences provided by many fine works of art? Even if a work *is* brought out, it remains effectively lost to the world if it is kept in the cellar of a university archaeology department. There is no reason why, once the information it can yield has been scientifically recorded, it should not be sold...in practice the works they [the collector] acquire tend eventually to be bought by or donated to museums... without these collectors these works might never become available (Johnson 1992:7-8).

The small-time collector may not take such a philosophical approach, instead preferring to speak plainly about the joy of collecting “art” or “antiques,”<sup>6</sup> often referred to as “treasures.” Again, museums often are responsible for stimulating the interest of a would-be collector (Salter 1971:ii-iii). For some, it is the enjoyment of seeing and owning beautiful, creative work molded by human ancestors that encourages the collecting of such items (Salter 1971:iii). Correspondingly, many people collect objects to satisfy some nostalgic sentiment or to continue the legacy of their familial predecessors (Salter 1971). Many collectors, particularly the wealthy, engage in connoisseurship, recognizing and collecting only the best and rejecting forgeries or fakes (Lanmon 1999:13-14). Connoisseurs are discerning in their selection and extremely knowledgeable about their purchases, rating the value of objects based on appearance, condition, and authenticity, with a history of ownership and provenience important in weeding out fakes (Lanmon 1999:14-15, 18-20). As a result, collections generally are not procured in their entirety, thus making comparisons with like items and other artifacts discovered *in*

*situ* impossible and seriously reducing the scientific potential of collected artifacts.

Fred Reinfeld, a coin collector, attributes his fascination with acquiring coins to several factors that correspond to collecting in general: coins are miniature works of art; possessing rare coins increases a collector’s pleasure; the durability of such objects increases their attractiveness; and perhaps most importantly, coins are witnesses to the past—“every coin tells us something about the history of the period when it was minted” (1969:5-7). Additionally, collecting as a hobby serves to “take his [her] mind off of the trials and tribulations of everyday life,” and thus has a therapeutic effect (Bricker 1951:15).

Although many collectors purchase antiquities from dealers and auctions, an equal number of collectors actively search out artifacts from prehistoric and historic archaeological sites. This type of collecting is extremely damaging to the scientific reconstruction of the past. Treasure hunting magazines, handbooks, and source books provide artifact hunters with general locations, background information, and prices for archaeological materials. In the *Artifact Hunter’s Handbook*, the author reiterates those factors that make collecting such an enjoyable activity: “to find something unexpected – a small surprise to interrupt the routine of an otherwise ordinary day”; to find a “palpable link to the exciting story of a civilization’s past” (Hudoba 1979:v); and “perhaps it is because of our disenchantment with the sameness of machine-made items produced for our daily use that there is such keen interest in handmade artifacts from the not too distant past, particularly artifacts that reflect the individuality of the producer” (16). Labeling himself and other artifact collectors as amateur archaeologists, Hudoba encourages the artifact hunter to gain information on possible site locations and on the culture histories of the artifacts. To this end, the collector must become immersed in the literature on the desired

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<sup>6</sup> The author recognizes the differences between “antiques,” “antiquities,” and “art.” However, as similar factors motivate the collecting of each of these categories of objects and as many collectors do not distinguish between these categories, all three labels are used in this paper.

artifacts, visit local museums and attend meetings of local history and antiquities societies, and contact others (including museum curators and professional archaeologists) for information (5-6). Furthermore, the author offers suggestions of possible locations for finds, including river banks and bluffs, county dirt roads, caves, farmers' fields, areas of ground disturbance, urban renewal areas, and along water or land trails used by voyageurs and pioneers. It is interesting that these areas are precisely the same locations that are attractive to archaeologists. The use of historical records, maps, metal detectors, and digging instruments is recommended. Interestingly enough, the author distinguishes himself from the "swarms of battlefield memento hunters wantonly digging and scarring the landscape," claiming that the discovery of artifacts on areas not protected by state and federal lands aids the archaeologist in identifying potential sites (9, 40). He also reassures the reader that although the National Park Service protects some thirty million acres of national parks, monuments, battlefield, and historic sites, millions of acres of land owned by corporations and private individuals are still available for survey after permission is granted (9-10). Without a doubt, it is with these scores of people, the artifact hunters, that archaeologists must develop a discourse if public opinion regarding the collecting of archaeological material is ever to change.

### **Current Trends in the North American Antiquities Market**

The international market for European, African, and Asian art and artifacts has remained strong as evident by the growing volume of legal sanctions and cooperative ventures between international agencies designed to stem illicit trade (see Koczka 1989 for a compilation of domestic and international laws protecting cultural property; also Eyo 1986 and Greenfield 1989). Over the last several decades, North and South American antiquities have entered

both the domestic and international markets as major contenders. Pre-Columbian shell and stone carvings, ceramic figures and animals, stone sculpture, terracotta miniatures, Moche ceramic vessels, and ancient jewelry are in high demand – a demand maintained by the relatively inexpensive price tags associated with such items (Johnson 1992:17-22). American Indian "art" is equally popular, although the costs of these objects are considerably higher than their southern counterparts. Objects most attractive to major domestic and international collectors are: materials made prior to 1850 (general time of synthesis with European materials and styles); Southwest prehistoric pottery, animal effigies, and Mimbres vessels (prices have increased steadily); Indian textile weavings, particularly those of the Navajo and Northwest Coast Chilkat (command prices up to \$500,000); Navajo, Hopi, and Zuni silver and turquoise jewelry; basketry from the Southwest, California, and Northwest Coast (\$250,000-\$350,000 each); Hopi kachinas; and stone tools (particularly popular among collectors in the Midwest) (Johnson 1992:23-27). In addition, eighteenth and nineteenth century Eskimo ivory carvings and Indian contemporary arts and crafts have become more appealing to collectors. Materials associated with the Ghost Dance and other spiritual rites and objects depicting American flags and eagles are also popular items on the antiquities market (Johnson 1992:27-28). Regionalism in the purchasing patterns of North American antiquities appears to be dissipating as international buyers are paying more attention to these works (Johnson 1992:31).

The average local collector obviously cannot afford such exorbitant prices. Therefore, he or she is more likely to attend county auctions and to patronize antique shops and "mom- and-pop" dealer establishments. Furthermore, they are equally likely to assemble their collections firsthand by scouring the backwoods of America with metal detectors. Prehistoric

stone tools (every local collector seems to have a collection of arrowheads) are favored by the artifact collector as is pottery, albeit to a lesser extent since potsherds are more difficult to see and identify compared to shiny, multi-colored stone tools. Unlike the wealthy collector that tends to purchase items of a particular style or time period (i.e. Clovis projectile points or effigy figures), the artifact hunter is generally more eclectic in taste and collects a wider variety of historic and prehistoric objects. Furthermore, colonial and pioneer artifacts including homestead, battlefield, and fort paraphernalia are of great interest to the local collector for several reasons: such items are generally more visible to the naked eye since they are not as likely to be covered by several meters of dirt as are prehistoric artifacts; such items often are readily detected by metal detectors unlike stone artifacts; and finally, these historic artifacts cater to nostalgic sentiment and bespeak to a heritage more familiar to many Americans than do 3,000 year old scrapers, for example. In terms of monetary value, Euroamerican period pieces range from five dollars to several hundred, with antique furniture bringing in the highest prices at several thousand dollars (Kovel 1987). Examples of the market value of Native American objects according to 1987 figures are as follows: Pima basket (early 1800s) - \$550, small Osage basket - \$30, Navajo basket (coil construction) - \$100, Navajo blanket (geometric border) - \$525, Navajo ceremonial bracelet - \$475, Effigy lizard flute - \$100, Hopi kachina - \$135, Pipe ax (hard dark stone) - \$95, Chippewa sash - \$20; Tomahawk - \$490 (Kovel 1987:278-280).

Understanding the purchasing and/or collecting patterns of the consumer is vital to developing strategies specifically designed to reach each sector of the collecting culture. To address the large-scale art collector, the antique shopper, and the artifact hunter as a homogenous entity is a potentially disastrous, futile endeavor. Archaeologists must be aware of the

collecting habits of the groups they hope to target in order to make their appeal directly relevant to collectors. Furthermore, to label all collecting and all collectors as criminal and unethical is fanatical and unproductive. Archaeologists will never be able to eradicate collecting entirely, for it appears to be a part of human nature; therefore, professionals must decide which battle is worth fighting and which will provide the most positive outcome. Archaeologists tend to focus on the actions of major collectors, and undoubtedly it is this group that is the primary driving force behind large-scale, intensive looting activities; however, it has been illustrated that the activities of the local collector or artifact hunter may be just as damaging to the preservation of the archaeological record.

### **The Collecting Mentality: an Etic Perspective**

The above discourse represents an attempt to understand the collecting mentality from the perspective of the collector and to shed light on the differences and similarities between groups of collectors. It is also important to examine the literature on the collecting culture presented by the scientific community, particularly the psychologist. What underlying, psychological motivations or needs fuel the passion to collect? Is collecting an innate part of human behavior and hence unchangeable? In *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, psychologist Werner Muensterberger explains the collecting impulse as a repressed need to substitute for a "not immediately discernible sense of deprivation or loss of vulnerability... closely allied with moodiness and depressive leanings" (3). As puzzling to the observer, collectors themselves often cannot explain or understand the all-consuming drive to collect or the intense emotion involved in acquiring new objects. It is apparent that collecting is more than just a matter of experiencing pleasure in the object itself; if this was the case, one object would be enough, hence negating the need for

repetitive acquisition (Muensterberger 1994:11). Collecting fulfills an innate longing to assuage feelings of guilt and dread, anxiety and loneliness that may stem from childhood experiences. Dedicated collectors become attached to objects and use them to represent self-identity and self-definition (Muensterberger 1994:4, 8-9). Muensterberger clarifies, using the story of the great collector of love, Don Juan, as a metaphor:

The lustful escapades of Don Juan were not just an unusual young man's unusual adventures.... He is not truly loving but in need of reassurance that he is wanted and lovable. In essence he is lonely and forever trying to gain assurance from what our young Don Juan described as *objects*. Against this backdrop, it can be seen that much of what has been said about the Don Juan also applies to many devoted and passionate collectors. The intricacies of the find; its discovery or attainment; the sometimes clever ploys utilized to effect an acquisition; the fortuitous circumstances of the lucky strike; the energy expended in obtaining the object, and occasionally the waste of time; the preoccupation with the challenge, with rivalry and jealousy... An old and often well-disguised urge, an emotional hunger, seems to lay the foundation for this needfulness. It is frequently accompanied by a vivid and even imaginative fantasy that embodies the inner drama the satisfaction-seeking collector can experience... The true significance lies in the, as it were, momentary undoing of frustrating neediness but is felt as an experience of omnipotence. Like hunger, which must be sated, the obtainment of one more object does not bring an end to the longing. Instead it is the *recurrence* of the experience that explains the collector's mental attitude.... every new addition...bears the stamp of promise and magical compensation... momentary symbolic *experiment* in self-healing of an ever-present sense of frustration. The successful *experiment* is usually followed by a short-lived sense of elation, of triumph and

mastery.... these possessions...are but stand-ins for themselves. And while they use their objects for inner security and outer applause, their deep inner function is to screen off self-doubt and unassimilated memories.... we see how collecting has become an almost magical means for undoing the strains and stresses of early life and achieving the promise of goodness (12-13).

Jean Baudrillard expands upon this psychological interpretation of the collecting phenomenon by analyzing the collecting culture as a system, with the object fulfilling various desires of the owner. Objects that are collectible are those that are divested of their primary functions and made relative to the subject; that is, a freezer is not a collectible item since its primary purpose is as an implement and, as such, will always direct the collector back to the real world (1994:7). The goal of the collector, then, is to piece together a world or a "microcosm" with him or herself at the center and objects radiating to him or her (Baudrillard 1994:7). The possession of one object is never enough since that object invariably belongs to a set and thus extends itself beyond the sphere controlled by the collector (Baudrillard 1994:8). Ultimately, the collector is able to recognize him or herself as an absolutely singular being, unique from other beings and independent from the world, since the object he or she possesses is also singular (Baudrillard 1994:9-10). It must be reasserted that, although many archaeologists undoubtedly will scorn these rationalizations provided by the psychology community, the value of these studies is tangible. Archaeologists will never be able to halt the activities of collectors, for this impulse appears to fulfill driving, fundamental needs of the individual. Hence, scientists must adopt a practical and realistic approach by specifying those types of collecting most damaging to the archaeological record and, subsequently, engaging in an active discourse with those who involved in these pursuits. More importantly, this literature suggests that it is

not the object itself that captivates the collector, thus it is highly likely that many collectors may be persuaded to refocus their energies on preserving cultural remains.

### **Suggestions to Establishing a Discourse with Collectors**

Archaeologists are continually devising new strategies aimed at decreasing and ideally halting the destruction of archaeological sites by looters and vandals. Reactive in nature, such measures have included lobbying for new state and federal legislation, increasing site security, and implementing undercover sting operations to arrest looters and collectors or dealers that purchase illegal artifacts (Neary 1993a, 1993b). However, professionals have failed to design effective proactive measures to dissuade collectors from acquiring antiquities and destroying contextual information important to archaeological reconstructions. Part of this failure is due to the attitude of hopelessness and cynicism displayed by many archaeologists who view collectors as a homogenous group – the enemy, hardened criminals incapable of reform.

Archaeologists forget that many collectors experience the same emotion and are driven by the same motivations as the scientist but possess different agendas. Understanding the driving force, the "unruly passions" underlying the collecting mentality is vital to the development of strategies that redirect people's energy for collecting into an energy for conservation and protection. To tap into and channel this potential requires a concerted effort on the part of the archaeological community to offer the collector an alternative source of pleasure and fulfillment and to replace that which is lost in the abandonment of collecting artifacts with some motivation of equal value. To this end, engaging the public as volunteers in museums and on digs and providing these volunteers with valuable, important work; encouraging the initiatives of townspeople in establishing

local history museums staffed by volunteers; and giving credit to landowners and people who report site locations, all constitute proactive means of garnering public support for the preservation directive. Local collecting societies can become local preservation societies, and their members can aid in the safeguarding of archaeological sites from looters hired by major investors, thereby changing the social climate from one of acceptance of private collections to one of disapproval. It is vital that, in the literature produced and in verbal discourse, the archaeologist not condemn all types of collecting but rather specifies those activities that are the most damaging to the study and conservation of the archaeological record. Swaying public opinion from one of tolerance and protection of the private property right with regard to artifacts to one of condemnation will have dramatic effects on the major collector of antiquities.

*To establish a discourse with local collectors and artifact hunters in particular, archaeologists must actively disseminate their message. To accomplish this, the archaeologist might attend local town and collectors' meetings, dissuade local farmers and townspeople from granting access to their lands to nonprofessional excavators, deliver seminars and lectures at schools and local civic centers, and publish articles that address artifact collecting in popular magazines and local newspapers. Another proactive strategy with great potential for success is the allocation of funds in each state and/or region for the hiring of archaeologists trained in and exclusively devoted to public outreach or for the establishment of separate regional public outreach offices. Furthermore, museums must emphasize context of discovery as one of the most important elements to an artifact's value (for further information on the role of*



*museums as collectors of North American artifacts, see Cole 1985).*

The goal of this paper is two-fold: to provide the archaeologist with a basic understanding of the collecting culture from the collector's perspective and to encourage the creation of new initiatives that address

these problems. In addition, the use of an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to deal with this issue is highly beneficial and allows for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

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