Susan Jaffe Tane: From Collector to Curator

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy collection of Susan Jaffe Tane

“Collectors who haven’t curated a show have no idea of the pressure,” Susan Jaffe Tane said one afternoon as we sat together drinking tea in the library of her apartment on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Tane’s collection of Edgar Allan Poe books, manuscripts, and artifacts is unquestionably the foremost in the world. She has lent items from it to museums and other institutions here and abroad for nearly two decades. In 2013-14, the Morgan Library & Museum borrowed a host of them for its show Edgar Allan Poe: Terror of the Soul. In fact, a third of what was on display at the august venue in midtown Manhattan came from Tane, and her pieces were displayed with their own against holdings from the New York Public Library and the Morgan itself. When she agreed to curate her own show at the Grolier Club, however, she took on a task far more formidable than merely being a lender.

The oldest ongoing literary society in the United States, the Grolier Club, founded in 1884, expects its members to share their collections by mounting exhibits at its clubhouse. Located at 47 East 60th Street and Park Avenue, it happens to be about a half-block walk from where Tane lives. But the society isn’t interested in show-and-tell displays, Tane told me. With the objects you choose and the way you arrange them, you have to create a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. “You have to tell a story. And it’s hard. It’s very hard,” and time-consuming. On the day of my visit, Tane had already been working for three and a half years on what would become Evermore: The Persistence of Poe. And the show of the choicest items from her collection, with a few complementary pieces lent by others, was still six months away from the opening of its nine-and-a-half-week run on September 17, 2014.

Besides selecting and organizing the materials into a coherent, compelling whole, Tane said, “I have to have a catalog to be written with footnotes. Everything must be photographed. There are labels to be composed for the cases. There are deadlines and more deadlines. The designing of the exhibit is another onerous job.” You “arrange the items on the dining-room table, you put them on the floor, you walk around them for months. Then when they go into the cases, they may look very different. Or, you pull out some things and put in others.”

Tane’s first edition of Tamerlane and Other Poems. By a Bostonian. Published in Boston in 1827, 40 pages, original printed wrappers, 6¼” x 4½”. Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.

The proximity of the Grolier to her apartment was a help when she hand-carried some of the most important and most fragile items to the venue. She had to find the right mover for the larger pieces, such as a framed poster for a movie version of Poe tales that usually hangs in her foyer. Curating a show at the Grolier Club entails substantial expenses. Tane had to underwrite the catalog, for example. She also hired an assistant, Gabriel Mckee, an author and librarian, who worked with her part-time for all four years of the project. Tane described him informally as “my right hand and my left hand too.” More formally, as she noted in the catalog, he was her co-editor and co-curator.

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Besides Mckee, Tane cited numerous others who joined her effort. Johan Kugelberg of Boo-Hooray, an archives business dedicated to the organization, stabilization, and preservation of 20th- and 21st-century cultural movements, specializing in ephemera, photography, and book arts, provided some of his interns. Numerous Poe scholar-friends helped check facts. Some of Tane’s other friends made a copy to make sure it would be understandable by the general public and not just aficionados. Grolier Club volunteers, experienced with the process of putting on exhibits, gave their expertise. Jennifer K. Sheenan, the Grolier’s exhibitions manager, was the coordinator of everyone.

In addition, Tane’s good friend Peter Fawn of Great Britain lent graphics, music, and some Poe-influenced popular items—a skateboard was one—that Tane didn’t have. While Tane’s Poe collection is the world’s foremost in terms of quantity, Fawn’s 30,000-item collection tops hers in terms of quantity, said Ted. From John Reznikoff, widely recognized as the preeminent collector of “celebrity hair,” Tane borrowed a locket that contains the hair of both Poe and his wife, Virginia. There was also some institutional lending. Most notably, the Edgar Allan Poe Museum of Richmond, Virginia, loaned pieces like swizzle sticks as a child. But also a business that continues to operate in the Gran-

Susan Jaffe Tane, pictured in her library. The bibliophile and philan-

thropist earned a B.S. from Boston University’s School of Education and later pursued postgraduate courses at Hofstra University and C.W. Post University. She began her career as a schoolteacher and later launched Fashions by Appointment, a small business dedicated to dressing local businesswomen. She served for 15 years as vice president of marketing for a manufacturing company where she was the co-inventor of a patented plastic container and handling assembly. Widowed, she has two children, four stepchildren, and a number of grandchildren. Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.
The cover has a circular mark on it obviously made by the bottom of a wet drinking glass. “That’s how much they thought of it,” Tane said of whatever previous owner had been so careless. “It was just more interesting to me to do that.”

Tane’s story of Poe begins with his forebears, a complicated family tree. Numerous pieces of ephemera represent the theater backgrounds of some of his biological relatives. These include two playbill broadsides advertising performances by Poe’s grandmother Elizabeth Aurora Allen (1783–1852), in which Poe’s parents performed. Tane has, from Poe’s adoptive family, a seven-piece decanter set, each piece of which originally owned an “A” monogram. The set was originally owned by Poe’s foster father, John Allan. It came to Tane from “a man who was selling some of his things down south,” said Tane. “People who have things find me. They want me to have them. They know I’ll take good care of them and that I’ll share them.”

Items that relate to Poe’s early successes include not just Tane’s rarer than rare Tamerlanes, which has been called the “black tulp of American literature.” She also has such things as a copy of the program for a Writers’ Rights-winning tale of 1833, “MS. Found in a Bottle,” was published. An autograph manuscript of Poe’s early tale “Epiphanes,” is another. A single folded leaf of four pages, it is the only Poe tale, early or late, in private hands. I was shown “Epiphanes” in Tane’s library on the roof of my visit and marveled at Poe’s tiny handwriting that resembles lacework. I marvelled again at the perfectly formed rows of inked words when I saw “Epiphanes” and other manuscripts in Poe’s handwriting, and exhibit. This evidence of his steady hand is particularly notable considering the notoriously unstable nature of his mental life.

As Poe’s literary stature grew, he began to attract fans. A book (not one of Poe’s own) that he inscribed to a young admirer is part of Tane’s collection. He also acquired unimpressed critics, one of whom described Poe’s famous tale “The Cask of Amontillado,” whose cover has a woodcut by Antonio Frasconi. The poem was inspired by the death of Virginia Poe within the same year. The poem’s narrator wanders through a landscape with “ashen and empty” trees. Poe was inspired by the death of Virginia Poe within the same year. The poem’s title didn’t reflect the importance of this nearly 500-object show or its full depth and breadth. “So we had a brainstorming session,” Tane recalled, “and ‘Evermore’ came out.”

The original “From Poe to Pop” phrase was retained as the title of one of the show’s final chapters. That was all about knitty Poe. A T-shirt with an image of Poe captioned “Dropout” says everything we need to know about how Poe’s popularity has made him a hero in circles other than literary ones. The same goes for the skateboard of Tane’s fellow collector Peter Fawn. On the board’s deck is an illustration of a raven pecking the top of Poe’s head, which is opened like a lid to reveal the pink squiggles of his brain. If I asked to choose my favorite item in the show, I would say Tane’s photograph of the place where Poe is thought to have composed The Raven. It is an image of a farmhouse in a rural setting. In fact, it is present-day West 84th Street. Poe lived there in 1844 (The Raven was published in 1845) when what is now the Upper West Side was far from the heart of the city. It’s not a particularly rare image, but it provides the kind of context that makes this collection unique. That quality is also what made Tane’s telling of Poe’s story in an exhibit so appealing. Now that the show is over, the same quality is, likewise, the reason why the catalog makes such a satisfying permanent record.

Of collecting Poe over these last nearly 30 years, Tane told another interviewer, “I love doing this. I love putting all the pieces together, and there’s still so much more to learn.” She has, however, moved on a bit to Walt Whitman. The bicentennial of his birth is May 31, 2019, and she hints that she is gearing up for it. “I had the opportunity to buy some major Whitman pieces from someone. I have the good pieces. I need some fillers,” she said.

In the more immediate future, Tane is undertaking new Grolier Club exhibit of items from her collection, this time one that is not Poe-centric. Scheduled for September to November 2016, the as-yet-untitled show will explore 19th-century American authors’ relationships with each other and with their publishers. For more information, contact the Grolier Club through its Web site (www.grolierclub.org).