

Susan Jaffe Tane: From Collector to Curator

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy collection of Susan Jaffe Tane



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



Tane's first edition of *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. By a Bostonian. Published in Boston in 1827, 40 pages, original printed wrappers, 6 1/4" x 4 3/4". Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.

"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 more than held 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-mile 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, "There is 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,

"I never went into that show to buy a book, but when I saw it, I just had to have it."

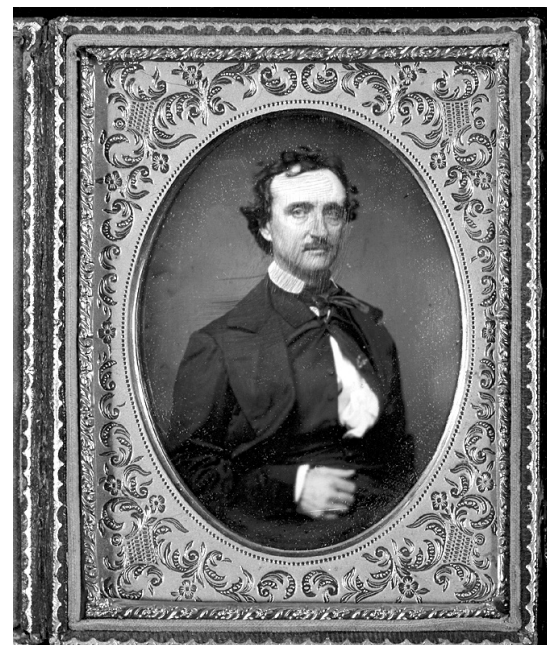
after you add the labels, it may be too crowded. You pull out some things and put in others."

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.

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 read copy to make sure it would be understood by the general public and not just aficionados. Grolier Club volunteers, experienced with the process of putting on exhibits, gave their expertise. Jennifer K. Sheehan, the Grolier's exhibitions manager, was the coordinator of everyone.

In addition, Tane's collector-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 quality, Fawn's 30,000-item collection tops hers in terms of quantity, Tane said. 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



A copy quarter-plate (4 1/4" x 3 3/4") daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe by William Abbott Pratt. The original was made by Pratt in September 1849, a month before Poe's death. Pratt made the copy in 1854 or 1855 for journalist Thomas Dimmock, who gifted it to The Players Club's Hampden-Booth Theatre Library. Sometime after 1981, the portrait disappeared from the library. It was discovered in an antiques shop in Walnut, Iowa, by one Sally Guest, who bought it for \$96. Guest brought it to a filming of *Antiques Roadshow* in 2004 in Omaha, where C. Wesley Cowan gave it an auction estimate of \$30,000/50,000. It was returned to the Hampden-Booth Theatre Library in 2005. It is now part of the Tane collection. Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.

also some institutional lending. Most notably, the Edgar Allan Poe Museum of Richmond, Virginia, made available a silk vest worn by Poe and his walking stick.

Yet it was Tane, only Tane, who shouldered "the responsibility" of what she called "the largest and probably the most important show I've ever been involved with."

None of this could possibly have been envisioned by Tane when she became a Poe collector quite by accident in 1987 while strolling around a Wendy show at the Seventh Regiment Armory on 66th Street and Park Avenue. There she encountered dealer Stephan Loewentheil, who had a first edition of *The Raven and Other Poems* among his wares. Loewentheil is proprietor of The 19th Century Rare Book & Photograph Shop, based in Stevenson, Maryland, just outside Baltimore, where, as it happens, Poe lived, died, and is buried. Tane has always been a serious reader and collected things like swizzle sticks as a child. But reflecting on her serendipitous introduction to the world of collecting literary rarities, she said, "Trust me, I never went into that show to buy a book, but when I saw it, I just had to have it." Never mind the \$10,000 price tag. "I had to have it."

Having begun with a plum such as *The Raven*, Tane went on to buy something even more remarkably rare at Sotheby's. With Loewentheil acting as her agent, she acquired a first edition of Poe's first book. Self-published in Boston, Poe's birthplace, in 1827, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* is the only book known to have been issued by its printer, Calvin F.S. Thomas, when he and Poe were both just 18 years old. The size of the edition can only be guessed at. Only 12 copies are known. The institutions that own a *Tamerlane* include London's British Library; the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California; the library at the University of Texas, Austin; the New York Public Library; Indiana University; Free Library of Philadelphia; and the University of Chicago. The University of Virginia had one, but it was stolen circa 1974. Besides Tane's, only one other is owned privately.

Tane's copy, the most recent to come to light, was discovered by a Massachusetts-based collector in 1988 among vintage farming pamphlets at H.G. Webber Antiques in Hampton, New Hampshire, a business that continues to operate in the Granite State. The collector paid \$15 for it. The book went on to Sotheby's, where bibliophile Richard Manney bought it for \$198,000 (including buyer's premium). When it returned to the auction house in 1991, it sold to Loewentheil for \$143,000.



One half of the Grolier Club's ground-floor gallery as it appeared during the run of *Evermore*. 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. "They used it for a coaster." That afternoon at her apartment, the coaster Tane gave me to put under my teacup was a facsimile of that abused cover—from a set given to her as a gift by Loewentheil.

With both *The Raven* and *Tamerlane* in her possession, Tane had to make a decision. She could go on to collect other high spots of 19th-century literature or she could concentrate on Poe. Icon-buying is the style of collecting preferred by many new collectors, perhaps because, although it takes more money, it takes less time. Nonetheless, while Tane does now have notable works by other 19th-century masters, she decided at that turning point to dive deeply into Poe, collecting not only first editions and manuscripts but also letters, periodicals, newspapers and other ephemera, Poe artifacts, Poe-inspired artworks, books about Poe, illustrated Poe titles, and all sorts of other Poeana. What is Poeana? Here's one example from the Tane collection: a copy of *Register of the Army and Navy of the United States* for 1830, where Poe is listed on page 84 as a student at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. (He was there for seven months, dismissed for deliberately bad behavior in January 1831.)

"I often give talks on collecting, and I tell people that, rather than getting high spots, you can develop a much more important collection if you specialize in one area," Tane told me. "It wasn't that I was so smart. 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 Arnold and copies of plays in which Poe's parents performed. Tane has, from Poe's adoptive family, a seven-piece decanter set, each piece etched with 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 *Tamerlane*, which has been called "the black tulip of American literature." She also has such things as a copy of the periodical in which his prize-winning tale of 1833, "MS. Found in a Bottle," was published. An autograph manuscript of Poe's early tale "Epimanes," is another of her treasures. A single folded leaf of four pages, it is the only Poe tale, early or late, in private hands. I was shown "Epimanes" in Tane's library on the afternoon of my visit and marveled at Poe's tiny handwriting that resembles lacework. I marveled again at the perfectly formed rows of inked words when I saw "Epimanes" and other manuscripts in the 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 *The Raven* as "a parcel of current trash." He had numerous literary feuds over what critics said about him and what he said as a critic about others. That's par for many a writer, but when he got himself involved with two married women (an image of one, Frances Sargent Osgood, is owned by Tane), the scandal led to his banishment from the New York branch of the literary world.

Poe's famous tale "The Cask of Amontillado," whose protagonist's plot of revenge is ignited by an insult, reflects some of the anger Poe felt toward his banishers, Tane speculates in her catalog. More overtly autobiographical is his poem "Ulalume," which first appeared in *The American Review: A Whig Journal* in 1847, a copy of which Tane has in original wrappers. 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 sober skies"—a "ghoul-haunted woodland"—until he comes upon the tomb of his beloved on the anniversary of her death.

When Poe married Virginia, she was 13 and he was 27. Poe's first cousin, Virginia died at age 24. Poe himself died two years later at age 40. "There was a terrible obituary of Poe written by Rufus Griswold that starts with something like, 'He'll be missed by nobody,'" Tane said. Actually, the wording was "He had few or no friends," and it is true that only eight people attended his funeral. His write-up in the *New-York Organ*, a weekly journal devoted to the cause of temperance, was no better than Griswold's. It called Poe an "unhappy, self ruined man." Poe's cause of death, however, has never been determined.

A traditional biography would end there. Not this one. Poe's afterlife, as Tane calls it, is the subject of the second half of her Poe story. In that afterlife, Poe's literary greatness was gradually understood; his reputation underwent repair; and even his bodily remains were exhumed and dealt with more reverently than they had been upon his demise. Buried in Baltimore in the Poe family plot, he was relocated in 1875 to a new marble monument in the city's Westminster Hall and Burial Ground. At the time of the exhumation, artifacts were "collected," including coffin fragments. Tane owns one.

In 1909, the centenary of Poe's birth, there were celebrations and publications. The Grolier Club itself issued a bronze memorial medallion, sculpted by Edith Woodman Burroughs, in an edition of 277. Tane has one of them. On September 26, 1930, the first meeting of the Edgar Allan Poe Club was held at 530 North 7th Street, Philadelphia, where Poe, Virginia, and Virginia's mother, Maria Clemm, lived in 1843. (Today it is a National Historic Site.)

A certificate commemorating the event was signed by a participant

who was an early collector of Poeana, as well as the then owner of the house, Richard Gimbel. Tane owns that certificate. She got it on eBay.

Tane has not neglected artists' renderings of Poe-inspired images. They constituted a rich part of the show, and many were reproduced in the catalog. One of them is from a series of woodcuts by Antonio Frasconi (1919-2013), published in 1959 in *The Face of Edgar Allan Poe* with a text by Charles Baudelaire. Another is a lithograph of a raven's head by Édouard Manet for his illustrated book of *The Raven*, titled in French *Le Corbeau*. Published in 1875, the book, with a translated text by Stéphane Mallarmé, is signed by both men.

On the afternoon I visited Tane in her apartment, she told me the show would be called "From Poe to Pop." In the end, the Grolier Club thought that 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 kitschy 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 asked to choose my favorite item in the show,



Belgian poster for Roger Corman's 1965 film of *The Raven* (*Le Corbeau*). The poster measures 21¼" x 14". Corman's popular series of Poe adaptations "take great liberties with their source materials," the *Evermore* catalog states. Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.

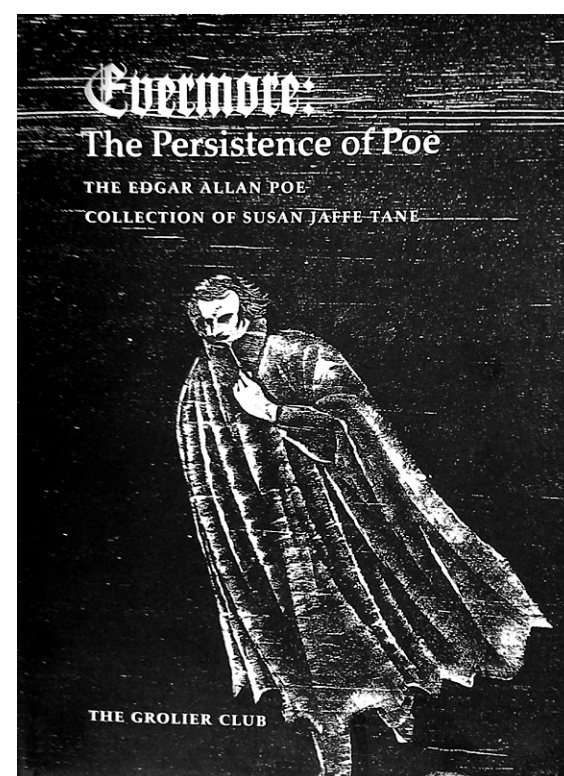
I would say Tane's photograph of the place where Poe is thought to have composed *The Raven*. It is an image of a farmhouse in a rural setting. In fact, it is present-day West 84th Street. Poe lived there in 1844 (*The Raven* was published in 1845) when what is now the Upper West Side was far from the 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 another 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).



This gold engagement ring was given by Poe to Sarah Elmira Royster in 1849, shortly before he was struck with whatever ailment killed him. It is engraved "Edgar." The ring was sold along with other items and accompanying documents to Tane for \$96,000 at a Profiles in History sale in December 2012. The cache came directly from Poe descendants. As a teenager, Royster became Poe's first love, but her father's disapproval ended the relationship while Poe was at the University of Virginia, where he did no better than he had at West Point. She married, had children, and was widowed in 1844. Poe came back into her life four years later; they were engaged but never married. Photo credit: Robert Lorenzson.



Dust jacket of *Evermore: The Persistence of Poe: The Edgar Allan Poe Collection of Susan Jaffe Tane*. It was published in hardcover by the Grolier Club in conjunction with the exhibit of the same name, on view at the club from September 17 through November 22, 2014. The book is 208 pages and fully illustrated. Its price is \$60 plus shipping and handling from Oak Knoll Books (www.oakknoll.com), exclusive distributors of Grolier Club publications. The portrait of Poe on the cover is a woodcut by Antonio Frasconi.