

Collected—a Sampler of Books on Collectors and Collecting

by Jeanne Schinto

A review copy of yet another book on collectors and collecting, *Possession: The Curious History of Private Collectors from Antiquity to the Present* by Erin L. Thompson, has recently come through my mail slot. Its arrival has prompted me to take a look at the previously published books on this subject on my shelves and to think about which of them have added to my knowledge and which have obscured it—the better to assess this new volume by an assistant professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. (See my review of *Possession* in a future issue of *M.A.D.*) I counted 27 titles in my library. I made a list of nearly 30 others that I do not own but have read—a virtual collection.

As Richard Wendorf pointed out in *The Literature of Collecting & Other Essays* (2008), “The scholarly literature on collecting has become a growth industry within both England and the United States.” Academics of all sorts, in museum studies, decorative arts programs, and art history departments just to name a few, have begun to mine the rich materials that collecting and collectors offer researchers. The trend began over 30 years ago, when Susan Stewart, a poet and professor of English, published her highly original work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1984). At the beginning of this century, *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* (2003) was edited by Leah Dilworth. For her anthology, Dilworth chose essays on such likely subjects as Monticello, children’s cabinets of curiosity, and Civil War-era photo albums. But she also chose one called “The Serial Killer as Collector” by Sara Knox. This subject apparently knows no bounds, especially when it includes ideas about the psychology of collectors.

In 1994, Werner Muensterberger (1913-2011) published his now classic study, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, a view of the collector impulse as seen by a psychiatrist. The German-born doctor presented the theory that collecting is “an almost magical means for undoing the strains and stresses of early life and achieving the promise of goodness.” For collectors, “no matter what or how they collect, one issue is paramount,” he wrote. “The objects in their possession are all ultimate, even unconscious assurances against despair and loneliness.”

Many people who believe they collect purely for love of, say, form or color found his theory galling. Others, however, had a radically different reaction. They were relieved to learn what they perceived to be the answer to the riddle of their collecting selves.

I myself am not a collector, but for the past 25 years I have done a great deal of writing about collectors and collecting for this and other magazines, interviewing people with a passion for a wide range of objects: from folk art to faux food; from rare books to vintage Barbies; from menus to model trains; from Oziana to snow globes. I have tried to treat them all with respect, reminding myself when necessary that it’s always a privilege to be invited into someone’s intimate world of desire. And it’s always an education about the subject of the collection and about the endlessly fascinating nature of humanity.

A Barbie collector, for example, recounted that when the Ken doll came along in 1961, two years after Barbie’s own debut, Ken was first sold wearing red bathing trunks with a white stripe and cork sandals. A little yellow towel was included as a prop. The Ken outfit called “Dream Boat,” circa 1963, was olive-green slacks, a patterned shirt, mustard-colored jacket, and red-banded hat. “Rally Day” came with a set of tiny keys and a road map. I asked the collector what the map showed. “I’ve never unfolded mine,” she said. “With these things, considering their age, you sort of use the white gloves.”

A collector of snow globes who is a young artist told me, “As an adult you appreciate things about them that you don’t when you’re a child. Nostalgia is part of it.” But her feelings about these items, the earliest of which were made and sold in the late 19th century as world’s fair souvenirs, are complex. “When you’re a child, your world is like the globes are—small, protected, where the snow falls gently; everything is always the same; and nothing comes in and changes it,” she explained. But there’s something unsettling about them, too, she noted. “You’ll see the little human figures inside and think,

‘There’s no escape! They’re stuck in there forever.’ So the domes are both utopian and dystopian, both perfect and flawed.”

A collector of model trains I spoke with started his collection in 1947, when he was five. A retired railroad engineer, he coordinates a regular swap meet yet was emphatic when asked about his own willingness to part with items, “I don’t sell nothing.” He estimated that his collection was worth \$100,000 and named as his most valuable pieces four brass steam locomotives worth about \$2500 each. (With collector-investor pride, he boasted that he had bought them new in the 1960s for \$100 apiece.) Later, with a reporter’s skepticism, I asked the question about his lack of selling anything again.

He has hung onto everything he’s had since he was five? “Yeah.” He laughed. That begged my follow-up, tongue-in-cheek question. Had anybody ever tried to tell him he was crazy? “My wife tells me all the time,” he replied.

Ah, the Wife Acceptance Factor (WAF). This term came up when I interviewed a series of audiophiles who, almost invariably, are record

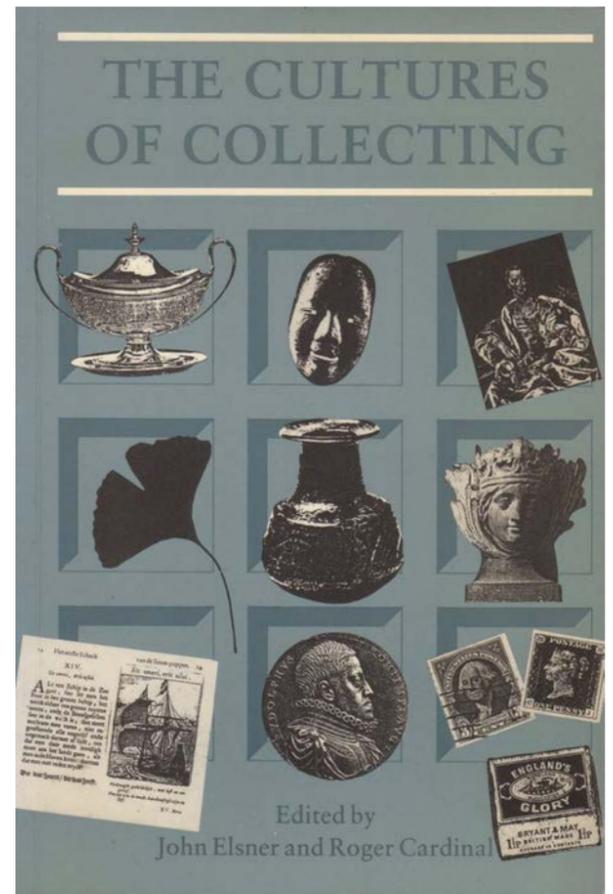
collectors. The records aren’t the problem, however. It’s the listening room. Every fortunate audiophile has one. He (invariably audiophiles are men) needs it because the system needs it. He also needs it because of the WAF, a well-known acronym among the brethren. It colors a man’s purchasing of audio gear, because the system goes into the home, and the home is very often the wife’s domain. “Things gotta look good for the wife” is how one audiophile said it in shorthand for me. But the system may not look good, and there it is, in the living room with its cables and huge speakers, which for best results are positioned away from the walls, out toward the room’s center. In one listening room I visited, the cables were held up off the floor by empty toilet paper rolls. “Carpeting is a bad dielectric material” is how their presence and function was explained to me. Also, “When we bought this house, we agreed that the living room would be mine, for listening, and she could have the whole rest of the house.”

Readers of either gender, especially those who collect large items, will surely identify with the dilemma. Lucky ones are those whose spouse also collects—no kettle calls the pot black in those households. Ideal is the couple both of whose halves collect the same thing. They’re compatriots, colleagues, commiserators.

Of course, even disapprovers will come around when a collection turns out to be worth a fortune. This is the situation depicted in Honoré de Balzac’s fictional *Cousin Pons* (1847). Sylvain Pons, an elderly bachelor who loves fine dining he can ill afford, collects bric-a-brac in mid-19th-century Paris with a mania that makes him the subject of ridicule among his rich relations. As his death nears and the relatives learn that his collection is valued at approximately one million francs, a veritable riot erupts among them as they go for the grab. Pons’s devoted roommate, a German named Wilhelm Schmucke, does not share Pons’s enthusiasm for china, snuffboxes, miniatures, fans, pastels, bronzes, wood carvings, stained glass, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. As Balzac writes, Schmucke “gazed at all his friend’s baubles as a fish supplied with a complimentary ticket would at a flower-show in the Luxembourg gardens.” And yet he never belittles Pons’s collection, because that would be the same as belittling Pons himself.

Kudos to noncollector Schmucke for understanding (and to Balzac [1799-1850], himself a compulsive collector, for portraying) a basic truth: collectors identify with their collections almost as much as parents identify with their progeny. As the widowed Mrs. Adela Gereth in Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) explains to her son: “The best things here, as you know, are the things your father and I collected, things all that we worked for and waited for and suffered for. Yes...there are things in the house that we almost starved for! They were our religion, they were our life, they were us!” Kudos again to Schmucke for not giving a fig for the collection’s worth, even when Pons bequeaths it to him. But any readers coming to *Cousin Pons* for the first time will find out for themselves where that lack of care gets him. The novel is part of Balzac’s grand opus, *The Human Comedy*, but comedic it is not.

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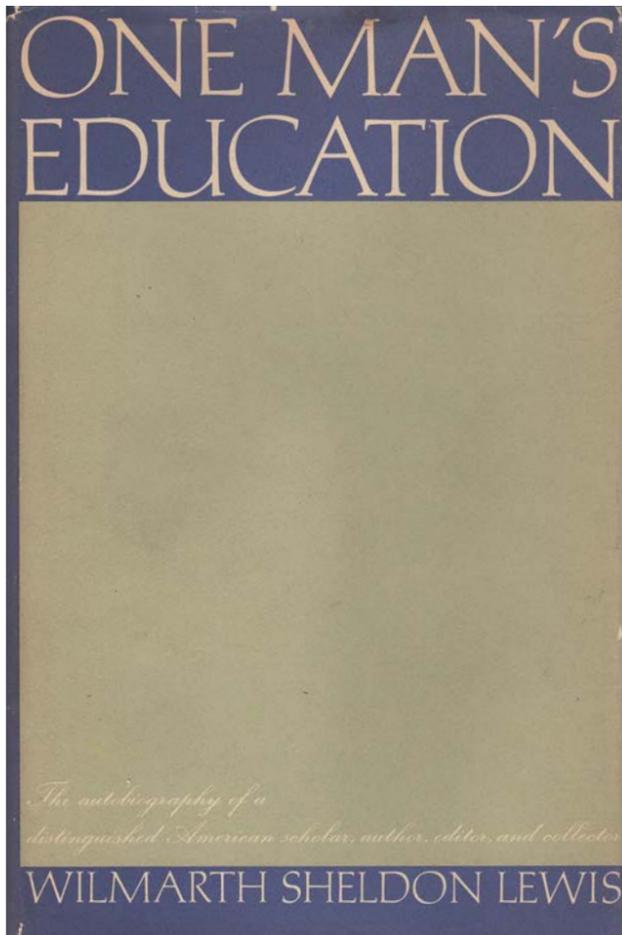


The Cultures of Collecting, edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, London: Reaktion Books (1994).

Lady Charlotte Schreiber: Extracts from Her Journal 1853-1891 (1952), edited by her grandson, the Earl of Bessborough, is an account of an actual collector-maniac. Most collectors start young. Lady Schreiber (1812-1895), formerly Lady Guest, didn’t discover her passion for china until she was a 57-year-old widow ten years into her second marriage. The mania led her and her second husband, Charles Schreiber, all over Europe to buy it. For 14 years she kept a record of those travels in her so-called *Notes Ceramic*. They are said to be an account of every purchase that she made, with a record of where and of whom she made it, and how much she paid for each piece. These complete *Notes* were published in two volumes in 1911 by one of her sons, Montague, under the title *Lady Charlotte Schreiber’s Journals: Confidences of a Collector of Ceramics*. I have dipped into the full monty in awe, but the grandson’s book of excerpts should be quite enough for anyone.

Like life itself, much of it is fairly routine, but, again as in life, exciting moments come along now and again. Here’s one of the routine bits: Bristol, September 17, 1869: “...During our stay we called at Thornton’s, at Edkins, and at the house of another dealer in the Matcham Marshall line, by name Hodder, who, being a chemist and vendor of quack medicines, has bethought him that in the present rage for the fine arts he shall make his fortune, by buying and selling china. His house contained a most miscellaneous assortment, almost all very bad...” And here’s one of the excitements: Versailles, June 1-3, 1871. After the Commune had been overthrown, people were beginning to head for Paris “to see the state in which it was left.” She did the same. “It was a city of the dead, no life or animation.... We went to some of the dealers we had been used to buy of. Mme. Caillot and Mme. Oppenheim had both died of fright or anxiety. Poor old Fournier had lost his reason....” The situation doesn’t stop a true collector from shopping, however, and one dealer is grateful. “We found at Mme. Flaudin’s some dishes matching our maroon Chelsea set, which we bought of her, and she was overjoyed, saying we were the first customers she had seen for many months, dating from the beginning of the siege.”

Lady Schreiber’s journal includes a memorable portrait of “an American lady,” a Mrs. Moore, who was buying for an unnamed museum to which her husband had bequeathed money for that purpose. Considering her antics, I can only imagine the bad impression of an American collector she must have given wherever she went. And yet she isn’t a true collector. She is only



One Man's Education, Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1968).

a shopper as well as a kind of harmless stalker.

The Schreibers first encountered her in the early fall of 1880 in Hamburg, where she was spending vast amounts without much knowledge. When the Schreibers reached Amsterdam, they found Mrs. Moore had followed them. "She seemed to be very forlorn and unprotected and so clung to them, strangers though they were," Lady Schreiber's grandson writes in his summary of this part of the journal. "She accompanied them for the rest of their travels in Holland, and continued to buy extensively.... Meanwhile, Mrs. Moore's purchases were not proving a very happy choice. A scene between her and a dealer from whom she had bought largely caused a rather unpleasant diversion. Lady Charlotte hardly thought the lady's purchases were worth taking across the Atlantic." The Schreibers spent the month of November 1880 in Paris "with Mrs. Moore still in attendance." Then while visiting in Stockholm about ten months later, they were surprised to hear that Mrs. Moore "was in the country and knew of their coming.... When they left Stockholm Mrs. Moore accompanied them to Copenhagen, and from there to Hamburg, where there was once again a scene with a dealer in connection with her purchases from him.... On arrival in Paris in November 1881 the Schreibers found Mrs. Moore awaiting them at the Hôtel Meurice. A few days visiting the dealers' shops with her led to another scene with one of them."

We don't meet Kaspar Utz, the collector at the heart of Bruce Chatwin's final novel, *Utz* (1988), until his collection of Meissen porcelain is more or less complete. The problem he faces is keeping it in his possession in Prague after the Communist coup d'état in February 1948. Utz has chances to leave the country but doesn't take them. He cannot leave behind his collection, which the state has allowed him to keep after every piece was photographed and numbered and, although it was never put in writing, after he agreed it would go to the state for its museums upon his death—or upon his desertion of it. "The collection held him prisoner," Chatwin's narrator tells us. Utz says, "And, of course, it has ruined my life!"

Chatwin, best known as a traveler and travel writer, was the celebrated author of *In Patagonia* and *The Songlines*, but he knew the collecting world well. He began working at Sotheby's in London in 1958, when he was 18. Among his first jobs was that of porter in the antiquities department. He wore a gray uniform and stood behind the glass vitrines, "making sure that prospective buyers didn't sticky the objects with their fingers," he wrote in an essay collected in his last book, *What Am I Doing Here* (1989). By the time he left what he referred to as "Smootherboys" at age 26 in 1966, he had been made a director of the firm and had run two departments,

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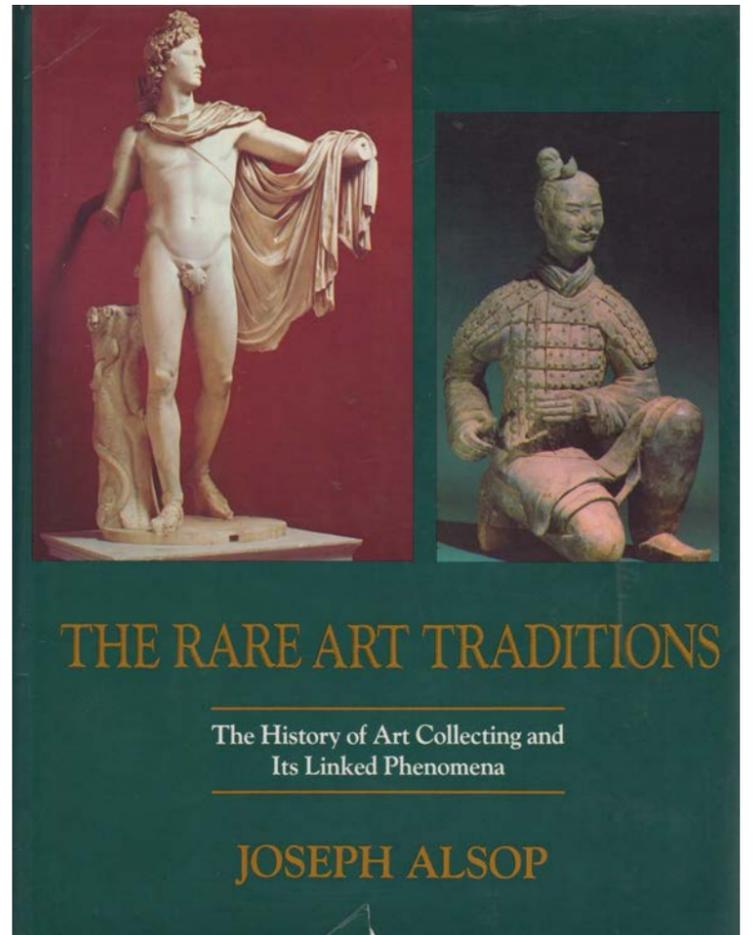
antiquities and Impressionism.

Chatwin's biographer Susannah Clapp, author of *With Chatwin: Portrait of a Writer* (1997), traces the genesis of *Utz* to an actual collector that a Sotheby's colleague told Chatwin about in great detail. But it was more than 20 years after he'd left the auction house that he undertook the writing of *Utz*. In light of some comments the *Utz* narrator makes, I find it significant that Chatwin (1940-1989) knew by then that he was dying—an early victim of the AIDS epidemic (although he denied it). To wit: "Things, I reflected, are tougher than people. Things are the changeless mirror in which we watch ourselves disintegrate. Nothing is more age-ing than a collection of works of art."

So what happens to Utz's collection after his death? It doesn't spoil anything to tell you that the narrator imagines a couple of different scenarios, then presents the (romantic) one he prefers. He leaves it up to his readers to decide how satisfying they find those final pages. This noncollector gives it high marks. Among collectors, I imagine, it must depend on your own plans for your collection and on the philosophy you have developed to manage your collecting life.

That presumes the collector has developed a good sense of self-awareness. I have found the best source of information about collectors and what they're thinking is almost never the collectors themselves. Despite its excellence, Wilmarth Sheldon "Lefty" Lewis's memoir *A Collector's Progress* (1951) is no exception. Nor is its equally enjoyable sequel, *One Man's Education*, subtitled *The Autobiography of a Distinguished American Scholar, Author, Editor, and Collector* (1968), which Lewis, who collected Horace Walpole, wrote in the third person. The narrator of the latter title asks rhetorically, "What, I have often wondered, gives collecting its motive power? Seymour de Ricco, a great authority on the subject, says 'vanity'; others say 'aggression,' 'escape,' 'infantilism.'" The passage, whose author founded the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut, continues: "Collectors like to think that nobler motives are involved in their own case, such as love of learning and salvaging civilization, but when the instinct to collect is as strong as it was in Lefty it is nourished by surges from the unconscious"—an unconscious that is by definition inaccessible to conscious thought.

This essay has necessarily presented only a sampler of books on the subject of collectors and collecting. I'll close with two that, like the hefty *Lady Charlotte Schreiber's Journals*, I couldn't find the will to read all the way through. Still, I recommend them to you for at least a cursory perusal. The first is John Elsner's and Roger Cardinal's anthology, *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994).



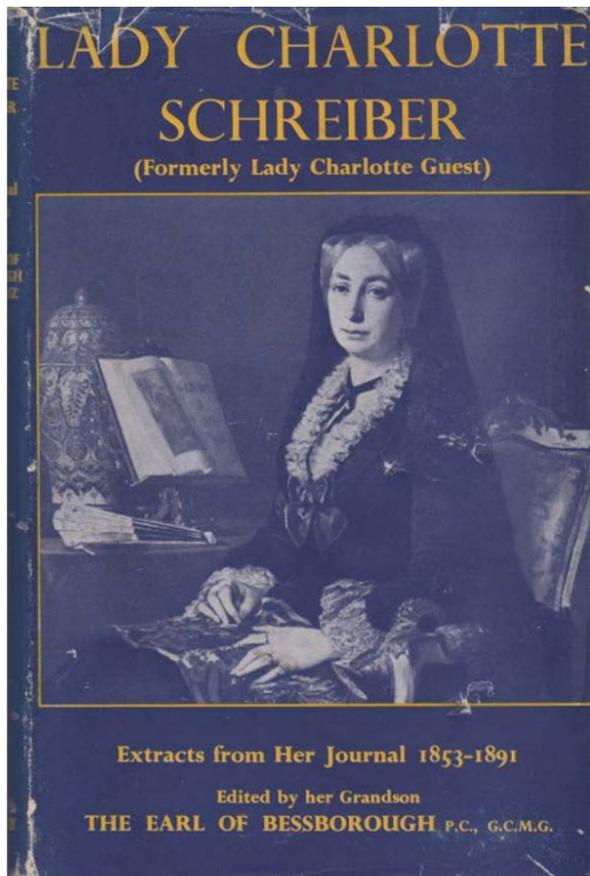
The Rare Art Traditions, Joseph Alsop, New York and Princeton: Harper & Row and Princeton University Press (1982).

Contributors include the anthologists themselves, both of whom are professors in London; the aforementioned Susan Stewart, a MacArthur Fellow who teaches at Princeton University; and the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, author of "The System of Collecting," who remarks of accumulating, as opposed to collecting, that it is "an inferior stage" of the impulse, lying "midway between oral introjection and anal retention." The other contributors are all academics too, except for Robert Opie, who founded the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising in London in 1984.

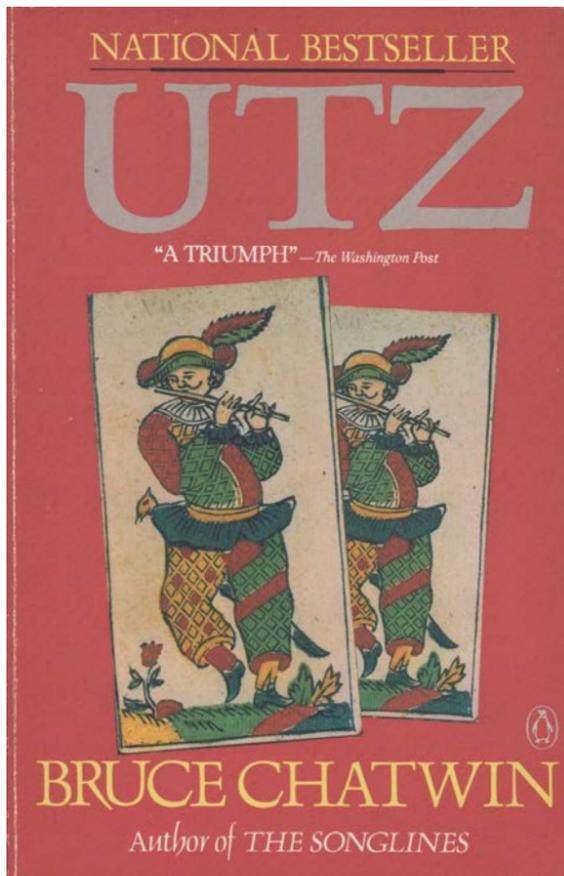
The Opie essay, a transcribed Q&A interview, is the most accessible contribution to the volume. In it he is asked to comment on the fact that he eventually became not just a collector but a curator. "There are those who just want to collect, and there are those who want to think about it all," he said. Touching on the sanity theme, he continued "If one is sane, one doesn't need to collect everything, but one does need to understand how everything relates to each other."

The other volume I have never gotten all the way through is Joseph Alsop's *The Rare Art Traditions*, subtitled *The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared* (1982). A massive book—nearly 700 pages, 235 of them footnotes—it was claimed by its collaborating publishers, Princeton University Press and Harper & Row, to be "the first comprehensive, serious history of art collecting ever compiled." (As if to reinforce its comprehensive nature, the publishers prominently displayed a blurb on the dust jacket from H.W. Janson, whose similarly massive tome of a survey-course text, *History of Art*, is familiar to every student who took art history from the mid-1960s onward.) Alsop's theory is that only under certain circumstances has art making given rise to an "integrated cultural-behavior system" that has produced so-called by-products. These main by-products are art collecting, the writing of art history, and the marketing of art. Alsop also identifies five other, secondary by-products. These are art museums, art fakers, appraisers ("a kind of stock market of taste"), the antiques market ("old-for-old's sake"), and the phenomenon of "super-prices." This last by-product is indeed the last in his view. "The payment of super-prices for works of art always announces the last and more luxuriant phase of development of the by-products of art," posits Alsop (1910-1989), a journalist not an academic, who spent nearly 20 years on this undertaking and employed "a series of younger scholars" to help him research it.

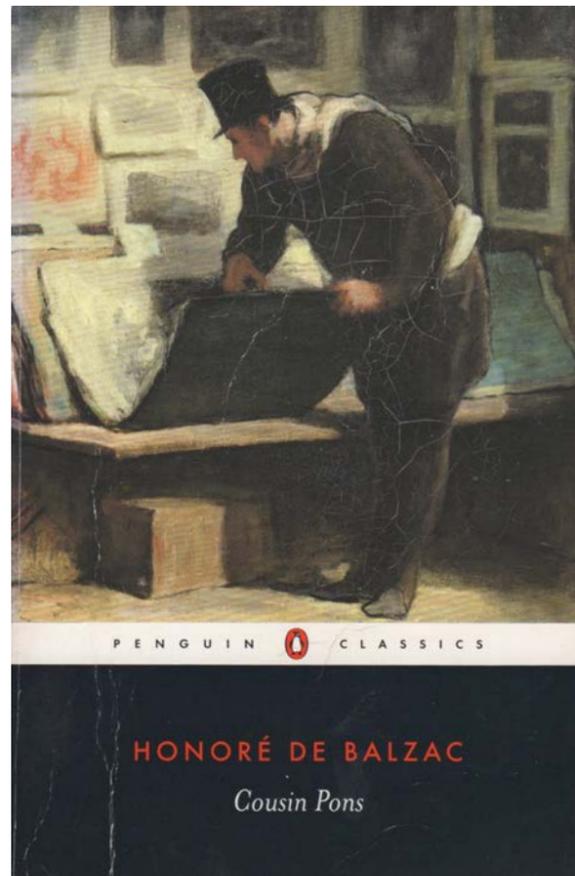
Alsop's idea that art collecting is not a universal activity known in every age is a controversial one. His argument that the absence of art collecting activity is the



Lady Charlotte Schreiber: Extracts from Her Journal 1853-1891, London: John Murray (1952).



Utz, Bruce Chatwin, London: Jonathan Cape (1988). This is the cover of the Penguin paperback.



Cousin Pons, Honoré de Balzac, Paris: Pétion (1847). This is the cover of the Penguin paperback. The 1968 translation was by Herbert J. Hunt.

“more normal” situation is difficult to accept. And yet while revisiting Alsop’s theories in preparing to write this piece, I realized that I have seen the remnants of an ancient noncollector society.

It happened when I visited the Haida Gwaii (formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands) in British Columbia last summer. Our group was taken to see some of the Haida people’s magnificent, monumental, painted cedar totem poles on the remote islands of the archipelago. There they were, in various states of decay,

exactly as the Haida designed them to be, dissolving back into the earth, replenishing it. The Haida did not expect them to last forever. In fact, some of them are mortuary poles, containing the remains of the dead. In the last few decades, however, many of the poles have gone into museum collections. (Others have gone into private collections—an entirely different phenomenon.) At the beginning of my ten-day trip, I was emphatically in favor of the museumification of the poles. By the end of it, after meeting numerous Haida and learning directly

from them about the poles’ meanings and purposes, I made a complete about-face. I’ll be writing about this experience in the future.

Jeanne Schinto has been an independent writer since 1973. She has written for *M.A.D.* since 2003. For more information, see her website (www.jeanneschinto.com).



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