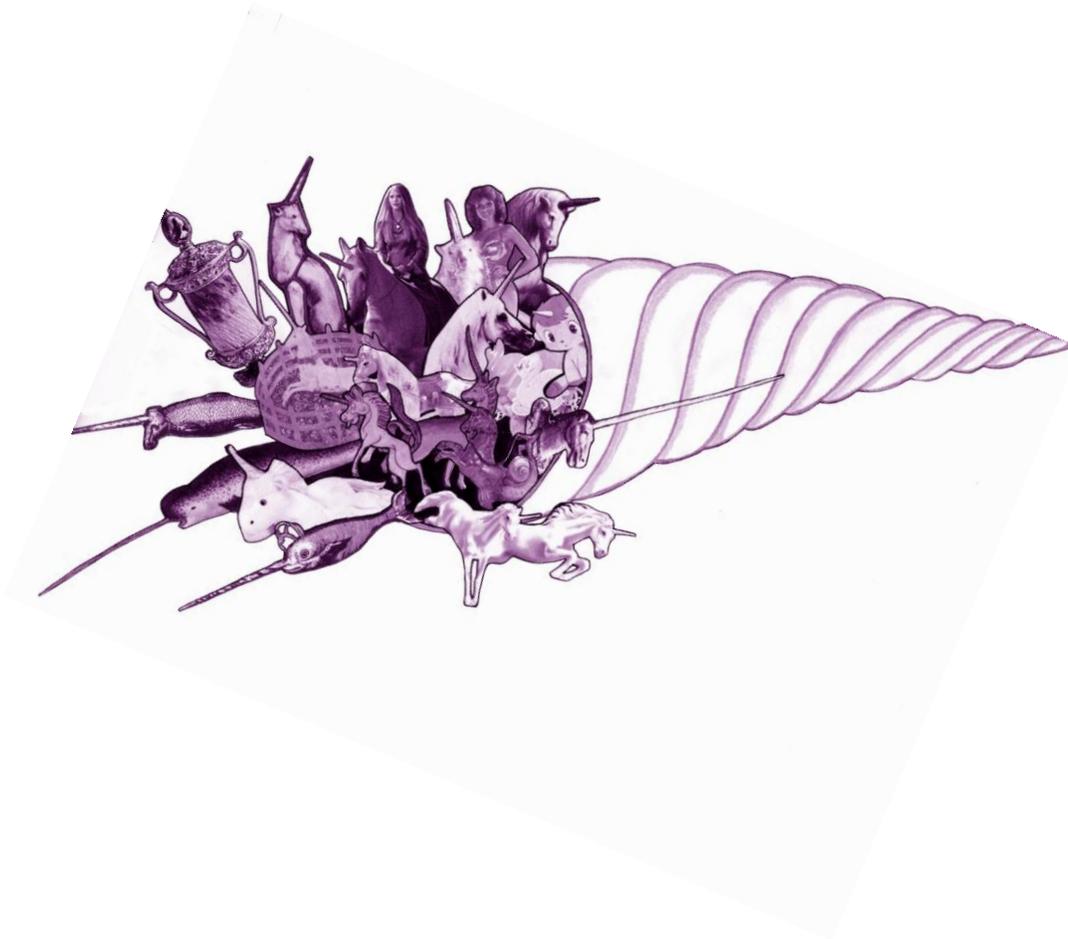


Unicornuopia:

The Unicorn
as Collected Object

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Introduction

The word “unicorn” brings to mind a white four-legged creature resembling an elegant and powerful horse. Although a few details of its appearance are ambiguous and debatable (Is it more the size of a goat? Are its hooves cloven? Does it have the tail of a lion?), the most singular characteristic of a unicorn is the spiraled horn emerging from the middle of its forehead. And, once upon a time, just about everyone believed in unicorns. Faith in the creature arose around 400 B.C.E. when a Greek physician wrote of an animal who had a single horn imbued with antidotal properties that dwelled in the uncharted lands far east of Europe.¹ From that point on, the legend of the unicorn grew to fantastical proportions, incorporating everything from medicinal superstition to innocent virgins and Jesus Christ.

Although no one had ever seen the creature, belief in the unicorn was reinforced, even confirmed, by an enigmatic horn that appeared on the European market around the twelfth century. This long and spiraled horn was sought out and collected as a rare and precious commodity by the wealthy and powerful. Vast sums were exchanged for a single horn, which once procured was either left in its natural state or crafted into elaborate objects featuring gemstones or precious metals. These variations became a ubiquitous presence in the emerging collections of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

The actual origin of these horns long remained a closely guarded trade secret, but the closing stages of the Age of Exploration in the seventeenth century led Europeans to discover a curiously tusked whale in the cold waters of the Arctic Ocean. It was the

¹ Odell Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn* (New York: Avenel Books, 1982), 27.

distinctive tusk of the narwhal that had both corroborated and augmented the complex myth of the unicorn, prompting the European elite to fervently seek out this mysterious object. By the time the unicorn was deemed to be imaginary, the age-old legend of the creature had been perpetuated across the realms of literature, religion, medicine, and the fine and decorative arts. The image of the unicorn was cemented within western consciousness.

Although the creature has never existed in a tangible manner, the visual interpretation of the unicorn brought forth centuries ago is still recognizable today as a horse-like quadruped typified by a single, spiraled horn. Now established as fictional, the modern unicorn is isolated within the realms of the fantastical or the kitsch, a paradigm for parody. Previously considered to be a rare and awe-inspiring source of wonder, unicorns have become not only the make-believe stuff of little girls' bedrooms but also satirical fodder for social critics. Author Paul Fussell confirms this philistine view of the unicorn in his social commentary *Class* (1983), claiming the creature only "stimulates the prole fancy."² Unicorns are also included as one example in Jane and Michael Stern's *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* (1990), both a criticism and celebration of all things vulgar or lowbrow in America.³ Yet in spite of (or perhaps because of) these predominant views, the unicorn has continued to be popular as a collected object.

In the spring of 2006, during my first year in the Master of Arts program for the History of Decorative Arts and Design, offered jointly by the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum and Parsons The New School for Design, I took a course called

² Paul Fussell, *Class* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 141. "Prole" is a shortened version of the word "proletariat" and is Fussell's catch phrase for people of the lower middle class.

³ Jane Stern and Michael Stern, *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 304-05.

“Seminar on the History of Collecting.” The course provided an overview of the history of collecting, from the private study and princely *Kunstammer* of the Renaissance to the modern museum.⁴ The course examined both public and private collections, the motivations of collectors, and how display shapes perceptions of the past, defines “taste,” and serves as a mode of self-representation. We were encouraged to write a final paper that reflected some of these ideas.

Many of the readings assigned to the class dealt with the princely collections and “cabinets of curiosities” of early modern Europe; I noticed that many of the selections, including Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature:1150-1750*, John Elsner and Roger Cardinal’s *The Cultures of Collecting*, Paula Findlen’s *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, and Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor’s *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* mentioned “unicorn horns” as objects found within these early collections.⁵ According to Daston and Park, unicorn horns “were practically inescapable and turn up in inventory after inventory.”⁶

My interest and curiosity about what these horns were, where they came from, and why they appeared in so many collections resulted in a paper titled “Horns of Plenty: The Collecting of Unicorn Horn in Early Modern Europe.” I explored the origin of the horn (in reality the tusk of a small Arctic whale known as the narwhal), the legend of the mythical unicorn (encompassing everything from Christianity to antidotal superstition),

⁴ *Kunstammer* translates from German to mean “art room.”

⁵ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature:1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), and Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁶ Daston, *Wonders*, 273.

and various objects made out of narwhal tusks (e.g. drinking vessels or scepters and swords). Although only briefly referred to in my paper, I was intrigued by the modern-day perception of the unicorn as opposed to its lofty pedigree within the context of collecting and the decorative arts: The fantastical creature's horn, after all, was once coveted by kings and worth more than its weight in gold, while the current impression of the unicorn is steeped in frivolity and kitsch.

Aware that objects representative of unicorns continue to be collected today in the form of figurines, wall art, and so forth, I was curious to discover how the creature had acquired the particular connotations of the mystical, the make-believe, and the inconsequential. The modern-day unicorn, and specifically its place within the history of collecting, had not been the subject of any substantial research in the decorative arts field. I believed that the fantastical unicorn, with its fabled history and its reputation in the popular imagination, merited an investigation. Something that encouraged me to pursue this topic was the genuine interest expressed by others. Whenever discussing my graduate studies, I inevitably brought up the topic of the unicorn and people seemed both pleasantly surprised and intrigued. Furthermore, almost everyone recalled a unicorn from some part or area of popular culture and that continually bolstered my research.

A broader attentiveness to the subject of unicorns also coincided with the proposal of this thesis in April of 2007. In the following month the American Museum of Natural History opened a special exhibition called "Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns, and Mermaids" that aimed to track the origins of these and other legendary creatures. The exhibit included a ten-foot long model of a unicorn (fig. 1).⁷ In a similar vein, another

⁷ Although there is no published catalogue for this exhibition, information is available at the American Museum of Natural History official Web site, <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/mythiccreatures/>.

museum opened its doors that same month—the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The museum endorses the religious belief of Young Earth creationism, which takes the Hebrew text of Genesis literally and hence rejects the theory of evolution.⁸ In a reaction against this religious-based institution, the science news radio show “This Week in Science” created a parody museum on the Internet called the Unicorn Museum, an allusion to the unicorns mentioned within the King James Version of the Bible (a topic explained in Chapter One). With the help of donations, the radio show hopes to erect a billboard near the Creation Museum depicting a large, white unicorn leaping from the signage (fig. 2).⁹ These events, coupled with various Internet searches on the unicorn that yielded innumerable websites as well as a brief look around gift and toy stores, both confirmed the current interest and popularity of the unicorn and provided validation for this project.

As I undertook my research and writing, I felt further justified as references to unicorns continued to materialize in ways that particularly related to my thesis; a book on the subject of the meanings of things by Joshua Glenn and Carol Hayes, *Taking Things Seriously: 75 Objects with Unexpected Significance*, was recently published in October of 2007. One of the myriad of objects chosen for discussion was, of all things, the unicorn horn. In this case the horn served as part of a performance piece that tried to bring alive a herd of unicorns.¹⁰ On February 23, 2008, a leading segment on MSN.com highlighted a brief video from the cable television channel History titled “What Were They Thinking?” The link showed historical footage from 1936 of the “unicorn” created by a Maine

⁸ Creation Museum official Web site, <http://creationmuseum.org/>.

⁹ Unicorn Museum official Web site, <http://www.unicornmuseum.org/>.

¹⁰ Michael Smith, “Unicorn Horn,” Joshua Glenn and Carol Hayes, *Taking Things Seriously: 75 Objects with Unexpected Significance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 140.

biologist two years earlier when he had surgically transplanted the horn buds of a young calf so that they grew together as a single horn (further discussed in Chapter Two).¹¹ Even more recently, two episodes of the NBC comedy series *30 Rock* (aired May 2008) featured a unicorn-themed office belonging to the character Kathy Geiss, a temporary CEO. In addition to surrounding herself with unicorns, troll dolls, and stuffed animals (figs. 3-5), the uncommunicative, middle-aged Kathy is also shown eating flowers at a florist, dancing around in a child-like manner, sucking on a toy car, and sending out a mass email to office personnel with a link to a website containing images of cats wearing bowties.¹² *30 Rock* not only situated the unicorn within the context of a collection but also aligned the creature with Kathy's peculiar personality and childish behavior, reconfirming the unicorn's parodied place within contemporary popular culture (a theme further discussed in Chapter Three).

The topic for this thesis, an exploration of the unicorn as a collectible object in the past and present, is in some ways unusually broad. It covers a generous time span (ca. 400 B.C.E. to the present) and geographical area (much of Europe and the United States). I have delineated certain time frames, such as dating early modern Europe between 1500 and 1700—a period that can arguably be defined both earlier and later. I also only consider the western version of the unicorn, and it should be noted that there are other kinds, including the Chinese *Qilin* and the Japanese *Kirin*. The unicorn is considered within numerous contexts: in *Wunderkammern*, literature, two- and three-dimensional

¹¹ MSN.com official Web site, <http://video.msn.com/?mkt=en-us&vid=7a1490d9-23ad-45a2-b7ac-ba96d680887e&playlist=videoByUuids:uuids:007180f3-672e-468e-a394-70ab7ef2a156%2C5eb6e8b9-78f0-4a93-8d85-60591b1dadfd%2Cd0494d9f-b6e3-4657-a898-c31621fc075c&from=MSNHP&tab=m1189615355928>1=10856>.

¹² Episodes "Sandwich Day" and "Cooter," NBC.com official Web site, http://www.nbc.com/30_Rock/video/episodes.shtml.

art, and in popular culture.¹³ I did not intend to find, compile, and discuss each and every account of a unicorn available within these frameworks; I strove to use examples that I found to be the most significant. I also have defined some of the broader themes, such as the Renaissance or consumerism, within the constraint of a few pages. While admittedly far-reaching, my objective has been twofold: it is in some part to explore how the unicorn as a single object has figured into western culture across time and space, but it is also to look at what the unicorn as a collected object illuminates about the act of collecting today. I realize that the unicorn horn as collected by those in early modern Europe was viewed as an authentic object and part of a larger myriad collection of *naturalia* and *artificialia* while the unicorn as collected today is recognized as inauthentic and is often part of a collection of analogous objects. It is an object that has shifted from one rather highly regarded to one simply expressive of a mythical fairy-tale kingdom, and a lowly one at that. My intention is to lay out where the unicorn fit within collecting in early modern Europe and then to explore the unicorn as a key to contemporary collecting—a genre of collecting and kitsch recognized as a specific twentieth-century or postmodern phenomenon.

French literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard defines the term postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹⁴ Simply put, a lack of tolerance towards the philosophical systems that had previously ordered life (e.g. Christianity, the Enlightenment, Marxism, Freudian theory) has created a postmodern world void of any rules that *everyone* accepts. In this light, postmodernism does not recognize that there are

¹³ *Wunderkammer* translates from German to mean “wonder room.”

¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

any considerable differences between elite forms of art and popular or mass-mediated forms of art.¹⁵ Lyotard writes:

By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the “taste” of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the “anything goes,” and the epoch is one of slackening. But this realism of the “anything goes” is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield. Such realism accommodates all tendencies, just as capitalism accommodates all “needs,” providing that all tendencies and needs have purchasing power. As for taste, there is no need to be delicate when one speculates or entertains oneself.¹⁶

Within this postmodern framework, the act of collecting and the breadth of what is deemed collectible is one more instance of this “anything goes” attitude.

This thesis will consider the unicorn as a case study within the larger realm of collecting in a postmodern context. Regardless of changes in historical and cultural circumstances, unicorns have long captured the fancy of collectors whether the collector was the Bohemian king Rudolf II (1552-1612), who counted a tankard made from “unicorn horn” among his treasures, or the present day consumer of the Bradford Exchange's "Enchanted Dreams Unicorn Collector Plate."¹⁷ In order to discover why objects relating to this imaginary beast still have resonance, I will look at two time periods in which collecting was a palpable practice—early modern Europe and the western world since the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ By examining collectors of objects relating specifically to unicorns within these frameworks, I will ascertain how the unicorn

¹⁵ Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society*. 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004). 30.

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 76.

¹⁷ Eliška Fučíková and others, *Rudolf II and Prague: The Court and the City* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 481, and CollectiblesToday.com official Web site, <http://bradfordexchange.collectiblestoday.com/ct/store/brad/unicorn/prod/14//6//Y>.

¹⁸ I chose early modern Europe and the western world since the late nineteenth century (and more specifically postmodern collecting) not only because collecting was a tangible activity during these periods but also because examples of collected unicorn objects were numerous; my research suggested that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries collecting unicorn objects fell out of favor.

as a collectible object has been transformed over time. In doing this I hope to answer some broader questions, such as: What does the unicorn symbolize, and what meanings and associations have unicorns carried for collectors? How has collecting changed? How have unicorns shifted from high to popular culture? What can unicorns tell us about the social status of the people who collect them? This thesis will look at the unicorn as a text and its collectors as an audience. It acknowledges the power of material culture and/or the power of the object. As professor and clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle writes, “Only recently have objects begun to receive the attention they deserve.”¹⁹ Similarly, psychologist Sam Gosling suggests in his 2008 book *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You* that the everyday objects found within people’s personal spaces can reveal surprising and unexpected truths about their personalities.²⁰ And Ian Woodward in *Understanding Material Culture* looks at the broader spectrum of material culture studies. He references the cultural theories of Jean Baudrillard and the “communicative capacities of objects,” writing:

...relationships between people and objects suggest people actively seek out—and require—these bonds with objects. Explaining the nature of these attachments and affiliations is why material culture studies is valuable for understanding the crux of the social: the balancing of individuals with society; of emotion, embodiment, meaning and action, with collective values, cultural discourses and solidarities.

Woodward also indicates that material culture interpretations can be “processual” in that they “emphasise the trajectories of objects through diverse spaces and times of human activity,” “transformative” in that they “show how objects are able to be continuously shaped and re-shaped by their human users through the interplay of physical and symbolic manipulation,” and “contextual” in that they “show how objects are situated

¹⁹ Sherry Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 6.

²⁰ Sam Gosling, *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

within broader discourses, narratives, myths and frames that assist in the construction of cultural meaning and its interpretation.”—all useful terms in considering the unicorn as a collected object.²¹

Chapter One is an overview of the distinctive collecting practices of early modern Europe in the form of cabinets of curiosities and princely collections. The chapter catalogues the multitude of unicorn horns and objects made from the material found within these collections, as well as the origins of both the enigmatic horn and the multifaceted unicorn legend. It explains the medicinal and religious aspects associated with the unicorn. Chapter Two summarizes the rise of consumerism and the democratization of collecting in the United States during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in order to define the practice of collecting today.²² To better grasp the connotations presently associated with the unicorn, Chapter Three traces the emergence of the creature within American culture through examples found in literature, movies, entertainment, toys, advertising, and so forth. The unicorn as a specific collectible object is considered within Chapter Four, utilizing the results of interviews of a small group of present-day collectors. Although a very small sampling, these interviews say something about the specific collecting habits and personal opinions relating to unicorn collecting. Chapter Five is an attempt to compare and contrast the motivations of collectors of unicorn objects in early modern Europe and today. It explores how collectible unicorn objects have changed and how depictions of unicorns

²¹ Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: Sage Publications Limited, 2007), 173-75. There is a wide literature concerning material culture, including work by Gosling, Turkle, Woodward, Glenn, Hayes, Daniel Miller, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Eugene Rochberg-Halton among others. Some of this literature is oriented towards the general public, some more academic, but all demonstrates a contemporary interest in objects.

²² Although most of my research centers on the United States, I will occasionally use examples from Europe.

have varied over time. To conclude, I consider the power of the unicorn as an object and the qualities associated with this imaginary creature as related to gender and human psychology that have ensured its continuity as a collectible object over a very long period of time.

Chapter One: Collecting in Early Modern Europe (1500-1700):

Wunderkammern and the Horn of the Unicorn

The development and rise in the collecting of various objects that have come to be recognized collectively as cabinets of curiosities, or *Wunderkammern*, emerged between the years 1500 to 1700, a historical period that can be debatably referred to as early modern Europe.²³ The range of objects found within these cabinets was far-reaching: paintings and decorative arts, scientific and musical instruments, antiquities, religious relics, gemstones and minerals, plant and animal specimens, and ethnographic and archeological artifacts (figs. 6-7). Objects made their way into these collections by means of marketplace transactions, artistic commissions, souvenirs brought back from distant travels, and exchanges or gifts between collectors. Composed of the beautiful, the exotic, and the marvelous, cabinets of curiosities formed microcosms “of all rare strange things,” inspiring awe in the viewer and functioning as a visual representation of their owner’s wealth and taste.²⁴ They were therefore primarily limited to those who could afford to create and sustain them, namely monarchs, aristocrats, and prosperous merchants. Many of the collections that materialized during this period can be viewed as precursors to the establishment of more formal and systematic museums.²⁵ Above all, there was an overarching emphasis on collecting things that provoked astonishment. This emotion could be elicited by an object’s splendor, costliness, rarity, or strangeness. As

²³ Collections like this are also variously known as *Kunstkammern* (“art rooms”), galleries, museums, *studioli*, theaters of nature. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 22, 49, 97. Such collections are also known as repositories, *thesauri*, and *Schatz-* and *Raritätenkammern* (“treasure” and “rarities rooms”). Daston, *Wonders*, 265.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁵ Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 394-98.

historians Daston and Park summarize, “princely and professional, large and small, institutional and individual, specialized and miscellaneous- all these kinds of *Wunderkammern* expressed most concretely and dramatically the early modern culture of wonders.”²⁶

The wave of collecting that incorporated the desire to possess such wonders has been set within the the context of the European Renaissance.²⁷ Curiosity about the surrounding world and a desire for new trade routes led to the exploration of previously uncharted lands and the importation of unfamiliar and unusual goods to the European market. A new emphasis on learning and scientific inquiry promoted the gathering of all types of *naturalia*. Simultaneously these movements incited and reflected a passionate trend of collecting that flourished across Europe and peaked during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Collecting became a major cultural force that created a complex network where nobility, academics, dealers, and craftsmen alike intersected.²⁸ The vogue for collecting was undeterred by national boundaries. It transpired in Amsterdam, Brussels, Genoa, London, Marseilles, or Prague, and became a common thread among the literature, arts, natural sciences, religion, and philosophy of Europe.²⁹

A brief glimpse into a specific *Wunderkammer*, that of the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612), can provide a clearer understanding of these concepts. Rudolf was born on July 18, 1552 in Vienna to Maximilian II, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Bohemia and Hungary (1527-1576), and Maria of Spain (1528-1603). Inheriting

²⁶ Ibid., 265.

²⁷ The European Renaissance in itself is a highly debatable concept.

²⁸ Mark A. Meadow, “Merchants and Marvels: Hans Jacob Fugger and the Origins of the Wunderkammer,” from Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, eds., *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 184.

²⁹ Joy Kenseth, ed., *Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College and Hood Museum of Art, 1991), 25.

his father's titles, Rudolf reigned from 1576 to 1611 and triumphed less as a sovereign and more as a notable collector and patron of the arts. Ruling from Prague, Rudolf amassed a collection so vast that it was virtually unrivaled in Europe and required an additional wing to be constructed onto Prague Castle in order to house and display all of the objects. According to an analysis by psychoanalyst and author on collecting Werner Muensterberger, Rudolf was introverted by nature and devoted much of his time to tinkering with his collection while seemingly disregarding his political duties.³⁰ "It was a kingdom that never failed or disappointed him," observes historian Eliška Fučíková.³¹

Rudolf's collection encapsulated the essence of a cabinet of curiosity. It included all the hallmarks of a princely collection, boasting thousands of historical and contemporary paintings by prominent artists such as Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Pieter Brueghel (c. 1525-1569), and Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) as well as countless sculptures, books, and decorative art objects such as silver and goldwork, enamels, glass, and majolica. Rudolf's interests in scientific instruments and complicated gadgetry led him to summon renowned artisans to his court for the purpose of producing objects like astrolabes, telescopes, clocks, automata, and musical instruments.³² Rudolf also possessed an extensive array of natural objects including gems, minerals, fossils, shells, ivory, bezoars, ostrich eggs, and even a menagerie of live animals.³³ In addition he acquired artifacts such as textiles, carpets, metalwork, and featherwork from exotic places like China, India, Persia, and the Americas. All of Rudolf's objects were displayed in a

³⁰ Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 192-94.

³¹ Eliška Fučíková, "The Collection of Rudolf II at Prague: Cabinet of Curiosities or Scientific Museum?," from Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 53.

³² Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 192.

³³ Meadow, "Merchants and Marvels," 182.

labyrinthine series of cupboards, tables, and chests where they were carefully arranged according to material.³⁴

The sheer size and exquisite quality of Rudolf's *Wunderkammer* undoubtedly invoked a sense of astonishment in all who witnessed it. As historians Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen note, collections of this type were multipurpose; they were "not only instruments of diplomacy and display, but also pragmatic tools of economic statescraft, repositories of ready funds for unexpected wars and disasters, sites of cultural and technological production, and active, functional, and practical laboratories for a variety of crafts and disciplines."³⁵ Rudolf's cosmic *Wunderkammer* served as a model for hundreds of similar, smaller collections that were accumulated by the princes, nobility, and prosperous men of Europe.³⁶ It was within these cabinets of curiosities that owners' identities were enhanced and reinforced, the foremost principles of the Renaissance were represented, and those from different economic and social worlds interacted.

One item of particular interest within Rudolf's vast collection was an elaborate tankard fashioned from a section of unicorn horn, now housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig. 8). The horn was mounted in enameled gold and decorated with diamonds, rubies, and an agate cameo by Rudolf's court jeweler Jan Vermeyen around 1600.³⁷ This kind of object was not unusual within early modern collections of the princely type. Certain natural objects, including unicorn horns, coconuts, coral, ostrich eggs, and nautilus shells were ubiquitous; these organic wonders were displayed either in their natural state or crafted into ornate objects, often in the form of cups that incorporated precious metals and jewels (figs. 9-11). Marvels in

³⁴ Fučíková, "The Collection of Rudolf II at Prague," 47, 49.

³⁵ Meadow, "Merchants and Marvels," 182.

³⁶ Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), 112.

³⁷ Fučíková, *Rudolf II and Prague*, 481.

themselves, man's exquisite workmanship was thought to further enhance the beauty created by nature.

In fact, Rudolf was not the only monarch to claim an elaborately worked unicorn horn (in addition to several horns in their natural state) among his possessions. Examples abound: the fifteenth-century Duke of Burgundy Charles the Bold (1433-1477) owned a sword that incorporated panels of unicorn horn set in gold and silver-gilt in the hilt and sheath, further embellished with pearls and a ruby (fig. 12).³⁸ Famed goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) recorded in his autobiography that Pope Clement VII requested a unicorn horn mounted in gold as a gift for King Francis I of France. There was a unicorn horn in an inventory of Windsor taken during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), recorded as worth £10,000 in 1558.³⁹ And around the same time, the Sultan of Turkey bestowed King Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) with twelve unicorn horns.⁴⁰ Albert V, Duke of Bavaria (1528-1579), possessed two unicorn horns declaring in 1565 that they were to be passed down to future generations and never sold off.⁴¹ Russia's Tsar Feodor I (1557-1598) employed a scepter made of unicorn horn during his coronation in 1584. In 1612 a scepter composed of a unicorn horn and adorned with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires was created for the Holy Roman Emperor Matthias (1557-1619) (fig. 13).⁴² King Frederick III of Denmark (1609-1670) commissioned an elaborate throne in the 1660s which was comprised almost entirely of

³⁸ Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of New York, 1983), 29, 31.

³⁹ Rüdiger Robert Beer, *Unicorn: Myth and Reality*, translated by Charles M. Stern (New York: James J. Kery, Inc., 1977), 117.

⁴⁰ Fred Bruemmer, *The Narwhal: Unicorn of the Sea* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993), 69.

⁴¹ Meadow, "Merchants and Marvels," 193.

⁴² Bruemmer, *The Narwhal*, 9, 12, 72.

pillars of unicorn horn (fig. 14).⁴³ Even the less majestic collections possessed by wealthy merchants, naturalists, and apothecaries invariably included an unadorned horn, or at least part of one. As pointed out earlier by Daston and Park, unicorn horns “were practically inescapable and turn up in inventory after inventory.”⁴⁴

The Horn of the Unicorn

So just what exactly were unicorn horns, and why did so many of the princely collections and cabinets of curiosities of early modern Europe (and the preceding medieval treasuries) include the horn of a mythical creature? The reality is that the prized unicorn horn was in fact the left tooth of a small Arctic whale known as the narwhal (fig. 15). The remote and icy water of the Arctic Ocean is the sole habitat of the migratory narwhal, or *Monodon monoceros*. Mottled black-and-white in color, an adult male can reach up to fifteen feet long and weigh approximately 3,500 pounds. From the rounded head of a young male, the left of two upper jaw teeth sprouts through the lip at two or three years of age and continues to grow (fig. 16). This can also occur very rarely in females, and occasionally a narwhal will grow two tusks, the other projecting from the right side instead of staying embedded within the jaw. The tusk can reach up to nine feet and weigh as much as twenty-two pounds.⁴⁵ Generally, the tusk forms a leftward spiral, and is mostly hollow on the inside (figs. 17-18). If broken off, the tooth does not

⁴³ Lise Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, translated by Anne Born (New York: Abbeville Press, 1999), 165-66. Some of these examples are only extant in textual sources and therefore are not illustrated.

⁴⁴ Daston, *Wonders*, 273.

⁴⁵ Randall R. Reeves, et al., *Guide to Marine Mammals of the World* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2002), 322-25.

regenerate. A sense of scale can be seen in two photographs of men standing next to narwhal tusks with their skulls still attached, one of which shows the rare occurrence of a double-tusk (figs. 19-20).

The specific function of a narwhal tusk has perplexed marine biologists for years.

As the Narwhal Tooth Expedition and Research Investigation team, an organization founded in 1990, asserts, the tusk is:

an evolutionary mystery that defies many of the known principles of mammalian teeth. The counterclockwise helix of the tooth, the degree of asymmetry to the left side, and the tusk appearing most often in males are all unique expressions of teeth in mammals. Modern narwhals have no known evolutionary clue to help identify the reasons for these exhibited traits.⁴⁶

Undoubtedly a wonder of nature, the elusive tusk continues to fascinate even today.

The tusk was previously believed to be used to attract females, spear fish for food, break through patches of ice, or as a jousting instrument to display dominance. It was not until 2005 that a dentist from Sharon, Connecticut may have discovered the true function of the tusk. Martin Nweeia, in addition to being a practicing dentist, is a dental anthropologist and a principal investigator for the Narwhal Tooth Expedition and Research Investigation team.

Several years of research in the Arctic have led him to conclude that the tusk is most likely a sensory device, used to perceive temperature, sound, or salinity. Speaking about the first time he saw a narwhal, Nweeia says, “It’s one of the few times when the reality is more incredible than the fable—I have more difficulty believing a whale has a tusk like this than I do a unicorn.”⁴⁷

How did the tusk of an Arctic whale become the distinguishing horn of an imaginary creature and end up as a treasured possession within so many *Wunderkammern*? The answer is as fantastical as the unicorn itself, in that the true origin

⁴⁶ Narwhal.org official Web site, <http://www.narwhal.org>.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Malkin, “Nothing but the Tooth,” *New Scientist* 185, no. 2485 (February 2005): 46-49.

of the tusk remained unknown for practically five hundred years. Beginning around the twelfth century, Vikings provided a trade link between isolated Inuit hunters in Greenland and Arabian traders based in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and Samarkand. These traders supplied narwhal tusks and other goods to the European market. Some tusks also trickled down into the trade route from Russian Siberia, whose oceans were once inhabited by the narwhal. This was a business where it did not pay to advertise; any of the middlemen who knew the true nature of these tusks that would soon be passed off as unicorn horns remained silent, forming what author Fred Bruemmer refers to as “one of the best-kept trade secrets of all time.”⁴⁸

The tusks, inherently worthless, only gained value through the continued mystery and rarity attached to their origins. As Smith and Findlen indicate:

In an era before the establishment of disciplines such as zoology or botany, ethnography or anthropology, the stories these objects told derived in no small part from the biographies they acquired moving from hand to hand. Their original contexts, uses, and narratives were filtered through the numerous people involved at each stage of their journey.⁴⁹

The Inuit hunters that harvested the tusks probably never knew under what name and pretext the tusks were eventually sold, and the dealers or merchants who handled the final transactions may not have been aware of the tusks’ physical or geographical origins. As narwhal tusks made their way from the remote Arctic to the marketplaces of Europe, they were transformed from a by-product of Inuit survival to an enigmatic marvel fervently sought out by collectors.

Muensterberger explains that “throughout the second half of the thirteenth century and during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, more and more unexpected goods

⁴⁸ Bruemmer, *The Narwhal*, 11, 99-100.

⁴⁹ Meadow, “Merchants and Marvels,” 183.

filtered into Europe and could not fail to tempt and inspire scientists, artists, and collectors alike.”⁵⁰ In these early centuries, narwhal tusks were an extremely expensive rarity. Although by the end of the sixteenth and during the course of the seventeenth century they became a more widely available commodity (no doubt attributable to the development of global trade), the tusks were still eagerly sought after. The main reason that the long, spiraled tusk of the narwhal proved so enchanting to the profusion of early modern collectors—always keen to possess the latest curiosity—was that it conveniently substantiated the already age-old legend of the unicorn.

The Legend of the Unicorn

By the time noble and prosperous Europeans began acquiring what they assumed to be the horn of the unicorn, belief in the animal had long been established. Many ancient Greek and Roman scholars had included the unicorn in their writings on animals. The earliest example comes from the Greek physician Ctesias, who in his *Indica* (ca. 400 B.C.E.), referred to “certain wild asses which are as large as horses...their bodies are white...they have a horn on the forehead which is about a foot and a half in length.”⁵¹ Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) also wrote about a “single-horned and single-hooved...Indian ass” in his *Historia Animalium* (ca. 343 B.C.E.).⁵² The Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23-79) did not dispute his Greek predecessors when he mentioned a unicorn in his

⁵⁰ Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 186.

⁵¹ Odell Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn* (New York: Avenel Books, 1982), 27.

⁵² Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 794.

Natural History (ca. 77).⁵³ His contemporary Aelian (ca. 175-235) concurred in *On Animals* (early third century), “India produces horses with one horn, they say, and the same country fosters asses with a single horn.”⁵⁴

These ambiguous accounts were almost certainly not firsthand: they were most likely amalgamations of word-of-mouth descriptions reported by those who had visited lands east of Europe. Early travelers to distant places had indeed observed a one-horned quadruped: the rhinoceros. Miscommunication, lost details, and exaggeration ensured that the rhinoceros would shape the initial perception of the unicorn.⁵⁵ Some explorers, such as Marco Polo (1254-ca. 1324), saw “unicorns” in India and described them in 1307 in a manner that very definitely bore the characteristics of rhinoceroses:

There are wild elephants in the country, and numerous Unicorns, which are very nearly as big. They have hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant, and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick... The head resembles that of the wild boar, and they carry it ever bent towards the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. ‘Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon... in fact, ‘tis altogether different from what we fancied.

However, in spite of his account, an illustrated version of Polo’s travel book published in 1375 still depicted the unicorn as an elegant four-legged white creature with a single, spiraled horn (fig. 21).⁵⁶

Despite centuries passing during which no one ever saw a unicorn meeting this stereotypical description, few questioned the authority of the ancient scholars, and the legitimacy of the animal was thus sealed. Subsequent authors substantiated this belief by citing ancient texts for information that they assumed to be accurate. “Who knew more

⁵³ Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder’s Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85.

⁵⁴ Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, Translated by A. F. Scholfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 201.

⁵⁵ Shepard, *The Lore*, 27-29.

⁵⁶ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 146, 148.

of Natural things than Pliny and Aristotle...Masters for many centuries?” wrote one scholar in 1683.⁵⁷ Besides, in the case of the unicorn, there was proof. The evidence was the tusk itself; it permeated the European market and provided validation for the animal’s existence. The tusk was merely a part that represented a larger whole. As historian Giuseppe Olmi explains, in discussing the presence of fragments or pieces of animals (e.g. claws, tails, or horns) in cabinets of curiosities, “the fragment acted simply as a token of an exotic animal, concerning which wider ideas were extremely vague. In view of this ignorance concerning the physical appearance of the animal, the only possible way of writing about it was to describe its habits in accordance with ancient tradition.”⁵⁸ This is indeed what happened with the unicorn. Furthermore, as Europeans began to see other equally strange creatures with their own eyes that were previously only known from two-dimensional sources or verbal communication (e.g. elephants and giraffes), the very *idea* of a unicorn would have seemed all the more plausible.⁵⁹

As in the illustrated version of Polo’s travel book, countless visual depictions of unicorns surfaced across Europe which reinforced both the belief in their existence and encouraged a uniform image of the animal. The earliest known illustration (fig. 22) is from an eleventh-century manuscript that is a copy of an original written by the Greek traveler Cosmas Indicopleustos (The India-farer) circa 546 about his travels in “Ethiopia,” a name most likely used to describe present-day Iran. Here the creature, sketched from bronze statues that Cosmas saw on the towers of the Emperor’s palace, is depicted with a muscular, horse-like neck and body and a single horn protruding from its

⁵⁷ Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 57-58.

⁵⁸ Giuseppe Olmi, “Science-Honour Metaphor: Italian Cabinets of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” Impey, *The Origins of Museums*, 10.

⁵⁹ Daston, *Wonders*, 60, 64.

forehead. This formed the prototype for the modern representation of a unicorn.⁶⁰ Critic John Berger observes that images in general were first created to evoke the appearance of something that was absent, clearly a suitable approach to the unicorn. He writes, “Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked—and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people.”⁶¹

Berger’s estimation is correct not only in that the unicorn’s image has continued to endure, but also in that shifting perceptions of the creature have become recognizable: around the twelfth century the depicted unicorn’s horn took on a new spiraled shape, indicative of the narwhal tusks beginning to surface in Europe. There are innumerable examples of this neoteric form in both two- and three-dimensional visual works, e.g. an English miniature from circa 1300 illustrating a pacified unicorn (fig. 23).⁶² Two sets of tapestries woven circa 1500, the famous “Unicorn Tapestries” and the “Lady with the Unicorn” (South Netherlandish and Flemish, respectively), prominently feature unicorns as part of their imagery (figs. 24-25).⁶³ An early sixteenth-century German bestiary, or compendium of animals, includes a drawing of two unicorns (fig. 26).⁶⁴ And in Moretta da Brescia’s *St. Justina of Antioch with a Donor* (ca. 1530) a unicorn rests in the foreground (fig. 27).⁶⁵ All of these examples portray an equine form with a single, spiraled horn that clearly resembles the tusk of a narwhal. As this pictorial imagery

⁶⁰ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 22-23.

⁶¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1991), 10.

⁶² Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 60-61.

⁶³ Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 13, 28, 30, 63.

⁶⁴ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 42.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 127-29.

circulated around Europe and narwhal tusks filtered into the market, belief in the unicorn remained strong and unquestioned.

Medicinal Properties of the Unicorn Horn

Moreover, the unicorn was not simply an animal, but a creature that was endowed with extraordinary powers within the realms of the physical and the spiritual. Its presence in art and literature attested to this. Belief had arisen that the horn of a unicorn had antidotal and medicinal properties, making the narwhal tusk an all the more potent and sought-after commodity. This idea originated from Ctesias' circa 400 B.C.E. report that:

...the dust filed from this horn is administered in a potion as a protection against deadly drugs...those who drink out of these horns, made into drinking vessels, are not subject, they say, to convulsions or to the holy sickness. Indeed, they are immune even to poisons if, either before or after swallowing such, they drink wine, water, or anything else from these beakers.⁶⁶

Aelian also claimed that “from these horns [the people of India] make drinking-vessels, and if anyone puts a deadly poison in them and a man drinks, the plot will do him no harm. For it seems that the horn both of the horse and of the ass is an antidote to the poison.”⁶⁷ The impact of these initial statements—misperception again of the rhinoceros, whose horn was used medicinally in Eastern cultures—was enormously influential and long-lasting. Centuries later in 1563, the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner alleged that “the potency of the unicorn is more curative forward near the tip than behind, and care

⁶⁶ Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, 27.

⁶⁷ Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, 201.

should be taken to buy the whole or at any rate large chunks of the horn, as so to run less risk of trickery...Genuine unicorn is good against all poison...” A contemporaneous amulet fashioned from a piece of narwhal tusk mounted in gold (ca. 1600) shows evidence of being scraped presumably for medicinal use (fig 28).⁶⁸ And a seventeenth-century doctor’s broadsheet advertises “true Unicorns Horn” boasting a list of all that it can cure, including scurvy, gout, fainting fits, melancholy, and “The Green Sickness” (fig. 29).⁶⁹

Faith in the curative power of unicorn horn was so potent that unicorns became emblematic of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century apothecary shops; they turn up on a mortar in Frankfurt and as a carved, three-dimensional signboard in Rottenbuch (figs. 30-31).⁷⁰ In Germany alone, there were over one hundred shops using the unicorn as their insignia at this time.⁷¹ The Apothecaries’ Society of London opted for two unicorns to surround their coat of arms in 1617.⁷² Most naturalists and pharmacists involved in the early studies of medicine invariably counted narwhal tusks or even pieces of them as part of the collection of *naturalia* necessitated by their professions. The visual association of the unicorn with the medicinal field disseminated and intensified belief in the animal among a wider demographic, namely those who were not wealthy enough to possess a tusk of their own or an object made from it. This belief was reinforced by the powders and shavings taken from the tusk and dispensed by apothecaries in the hope of curing innumerable ills.

⁶⁸ Beer, *Unicorn*, 173, 212.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 113-15, 184.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 173, 212.

⁷¹ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 166. Interestingly, the unicorn is still the symbol of a popular pharmacy chain in Germany called *Einhorn-Apotheke*, or “Unicorn Pharmacy” (fig. 32).

⁷² Brummer, *The Narwhal*, 76.

Because of their supposed antidotal properties unicorn horns were long collected by those in power who desired to protect themselves from the ever-present threat of poisoning. The tusks would have been used to touch food before it was consumed for the purpose of neutralizing any toxin. According to historian Rüdiger Robert Beer, Charles the Bold “always had a piece of the horn ready on his dining board.”⁷³ Daston and Park also indicate that Charles the Bold had six narwhal tusks mounted “like very long candles” on the same piece of furniture that held the dishes, indicating a proximity to the dining table.⁷⁴ For this reason, objects made out of narwhal tusks within the cabinets of early modern collectors were most often in the form of drinking vessels. As mentioned by Ctestias and Aelian, drinking from beakers fashioned out of unicorn horn would have provided a convenient way for wary rulers to be shielded from any lurking poisons.⁷⁵ Medieval inventories recorded such objects (e.g. a fragment of the tusk mounted in silver that was used to test for poison from the 1388 royal accounts of France and two unicorn goblets owned by the dukes of Burgundy), but there are no known extant examples.⁷⁶ The elaborate tankard owned by Rudolf II mentioned earlier is a vessel of this type from the seventeenth century (fig. 8).

Guido Schoenberger sheds light on several more examples of vessels made from narwhal tusk, including two dating from the sixteenth century; one is thought to have belonged to Philip the Handsome (1478-1506) and the other was made in 1572 for the Bavarian treasury in Munich.⁷⁷ From the seventeenth century, Schoenberger highlights

⁷³ Beer, *Unicorn*, 117.

⁷⁴ Daston, *Wonders*, 108.

⁷⁵ Another precaution, taken by the kings of France, was to acquire place settings fashioned from the horn, a practice which persisted until the French Revolution in 1789. Bruemmer, *The Narwhal*, 10.

⁷⁶ Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 29.

⁷⁷ Guido Schoenberger, “A Goblet of Unicorn Horn,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* New Series 9, no. 10 (June 1951): 285-88.

six goblets made in Frankfurt, Germany, all of which are illustrated here (figs. 33-38).⁷⁸ All six are very similar in style, measuring approximately twelve inches in height and mounted in silver-gilt. Most have the image of a unicorn carved in flat relief onto the tusk itself or have small three-dimensional rampart unicorns forming part of the lid or base. Figure 38 also features an enameled mount that depicts white unicorns among its imagery.

In addition to being formed from what was thought to be the creature's horn, five of the beakers discussed above also have both two- and/or three-dimensional representations of unicorns. There are other examples of drinking vessels, however, which solely portray unicorn imagery without using the tusk itself as a material. A fifteenth-century flagon presumed to be Burgundian includes a unicorn among other animals in its decoration (fig. 39).⁷⁹ And a cup made by Elias Geyer in Leipzig, Germany (ca. 1600) from silver, gilding, enamel, and a turban-snail shell gives three-dimensional form to the visual idea of a unicorn (fig. 40).⁸⁰ Both of these vessels are devoid of narwhal tusk and demonstrate, in conjunction with the unicorn imagery seen in two-dimensional works, that even without the use of the tactile relic of the creature, the unicorn had become a recognizable and significant symbol.

The Unicorn and Christianity

⁷⁸ Throughout my research, these beakers and Rudolf's tankard appear to be the only known extant examples of narwhal tusk vessels that I have found.

⁷⁹ Beer, *Unicorn*, 172, 212.

⁸⁰ I was only able to find this particular cup online at The Gilbert Collection official Web site, http://www.gilbert-collection.org.uk/previous_exhibitions/dresden/index.html; however, much of the collection is catalogued in *The Gilbert Collection at Somerset House* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers in association with the Gilbert Collection, 2000).

The already complex legend of the unicorn was further augmented by the spread of Christianity. The religion incorporated the unicorn within its texts and used it as a visual symbol. The Hebrew Bible had used the word *רֶ'עַם*, or *re'em*, to describe an animal that was strong, powerful, and incapable of being tamed. The word most likely referred to a type of wild ox, such as the long-extinct Assyrian *rimu* depicted in profile in Mesopotamian art so that its two horns appeared to be one. The translators of the Septuagint, or Greek version of the Old Testament, used the word *monokerōs* for *re'em* meaning “one horn.” In Latin this became *unicornis*.⁸¹ Hence, the translators of the King James Version of the Bible, published in 1611, used the word unicorn; it appears nine times in the texts, including Numbers 23:22 and 24:8, Deuteronomy 33:17, Job 39:9-10, Psalm 22:21, 29:6, and 92:10, and Isaiah 34:7.⁸²

Psalm 92:10 reads “But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an [sic] unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.”⁸³ Within such biblical passages, the unicorn was often interpreted allegorically by early theologians as a symbol of Christ. Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and one of the four original Doctors of the Church, wrote “Who is this Unicorn but God’s only son? The only word of God who has been close to God from the

⁸¹ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 27. Modern translations of the Bible replace the word “unicorn” with “wild ox.”

⁸² Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ Numbers 23:22 reads, “God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.” Numbers 24:8 reads, “God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.” Deuteronomy 33:17 reads, “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.” Job 39:9-10 reads, “Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow, or will he harrow the valleys after thee?” Psalm 22:21 reads, “Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.” Psalm 29:6 reads, “He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.” Isaiah 34:7 reads, “And the unicorns shall come down with them, and the bullocks with the bulls; and their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust made fat with fatness.”

⁷⁰ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 31-34.

beginning! The word, whose horn shall cast down and raise up the nations?”⁸⁴ This interpretation was fostered by an ancient Greek text known as *Physiologus*, written by an unknown author sometime between the second and fourth centuries. A precursor to medieval bestiaries (as seen in fig. 26), the didactic *Physiologus* described the habits and characteristics of different animals and plants, each one followed by a moral conclusion. The text indicated that the unicorn was a strong and fierce animal that could only be tamed by a virgin. The virgin must patiently wait alone in a forest where the unicorn would seek her out and lay its head in her lap; only then could it be caught or killed. This is the scenario illustrated in Figure 23, the English miniature depicting a chain-mailed knight impaling a pacified unicorn that is resting beside a naked maiden. The text of *Physiologus* went on to equate the unicorn with Christ, who had inhabited the womb of the Virgin Mary.⁸⁵

The “Unicorn Tapestries” mentioned earlier, now at the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, can be analyzed according to this interpretation (figs. 41-47).⁸⁶ Within the seven tapestries, the unicorn can be seen purifying a poisoned stream with its horn, chased through a forest by hunters and dogs, interacting with a (clothed) maiden, killed and taken to a castle, and ultimately chained to a pomegranate tree. Just as the divine Christ became human through the Virgin Mary, the unicorn surrendered its ferocity and became tame through its encounter with the young woman. Although the unicorn is killed, it lives again in the final tapestry, symbolizing Christ and the idea of the Resurrection. As Christ was bound eternally to the Tree of Life, the unicorn is chained to

⁸⁵ Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 17-23.

⁸⁶ The Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries can also be interpreted in a secular manner. *Ibid.*, 30.

a pomegranate tree, symbolic in itself of everlasting life.⁸⁷ The association of unicorns with virgins also resulted in the creature becoming a symbol of chastity. This quality can be perceived in the painting *St. Justina of Antioch with a Donor* (fig. 27), as Saint Justina was a patron saint known for her vows of chastity.⁸⁸

Given these connotations, it is not surprising that Christian art often contained unicorn imagery. In a 1413 Psalter from Utrecht, God is shown blessing a unicorn symbolizing Christ by placing a hand on its horn (fig. 48).⁸⁹ A 1515 window from St. Vincent's Church in Rouen titled *Triumph of Innocence* shows a unicorn sitting among other animals in a forest, alluding to the creature's purity (fig. 49).⁹⁰ Some churches even boasted a narwhal tusk among their treasuries of relics and ecclesiastical decorative objects, as the Christian faith also had confidence in the medicinal properties of the unicorn horn. For example, at the medieval French abbey of Saint-Denis, a six-and-a-half-foot long tusk was mounted inside the church's interior on a column of gilded copper. As late as 1657, churchgoers were able to drink water in which the horn had been soaked in hopes of curing their ailments and attesting to their belief in the occult. In this case the curative power of the horn also mirrored that of Christ.⁹¹

An intricate web intertwining age-old assumptions associated with medicinal myths and religious associations, coupled with the dissemination of visual images and written texts, conspired to make narwhal tusks a multifaceted commodity. Seduced by their spectacular appearance, enigmatic origin, multilayered symbolism, and perceived properties, it is no wonder that so many collectors included the marvelous "unicorn horn"

⁸⁷ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 112-14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 127-29.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁰ Beer, *Unicorn*, 177, 213.

⁹¹ Daston, *Wonders*, 68-69, 74.

within the confines of their princely collections and cabinets of curiosities. However, as European exploration of the world progressed during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, explorers to the Arctic ultimately came across the mysteriously tusked narwhal. It was first assumed, due to its horn, that the whale was a sea-going counterpart to the land-based unicorn, and hence it was dubbed a “sea-unicorn.”⁹²

Navigator William Baffin, who made several Arctic voyages between 1612 and 1622, records finding unicorn horns washed up on the shore, which he writes “...are supposed to be rather of some sea creature, than of any land beast...” and concludes after seeing one of these that, “...if the horne be of any good value, no doubt but many of them may be killed.”⁹³ This confusion over the new creature is evident in a seventeenth-century illustration depicting both a sea unicorn and a narwhal—the sea unicorn has the body of a fish and head of a horse (fig. 50).⁹⁴

In the early seventeenth century Dutch and Danish traders established trade with the Inuit of Greenland and began directly importing narwhal tusks to Europe. The tusks became much more widely available and essentially flooded the market. Most people continued to believe that the precious unicorn horn still existed, but that the narwhal tusk could be used as a cheaper alternative. The debate over the authenticity of the horn was on the rise. Concerned for their professional reputation, Danish merchants appealed to the well-regarded professor and scientist Olaus Worm (1588-1654) for help in determining the true nature of the tusk. Unfortunately for the tradesmen, Worm

⁹² Bruemmer, *The Narwhal*, 12.

⁹³ Clements R. Markham, ed., *The Voyages of William Baffin, 1612-1622* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1881), 71, 153.

⁹⁴ Beer, *Unicorn*, 183, 213.

presented his research and conclusion as “The Horn of the Unicorn” in 1638 in Copenhagen and definitively reclassified the so-called unicorn’s horn as the tusk of the narwhal (fig. 51).⁹⁵ In an illustration of Worm’s own cabinet from 1655, a narwhal tusk with attached skull is evident among his other *naturalia*, leaning against the rear left-hand window (fig. 52).

Although the true source had been revealed, the tusk of the narwhal continued to be collected in the seventeenth century but was often re-categorized within existing collections to reflect its new position as simply a wonder of nature. The belief in the tusk’s medicinal properties greatly decreased and eventually disappeared. By the nineteenth century common walking sticks fashioned from the tusk had replaced the ornamented scepters and vessels of kings.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the legend of the unicorn, perpetuated through the realms of literature, religion, medicine, fine and decorative art, and many a *Wunderkammer*, would remain within western consciousness.

Chapter Two: Collecting Since the Late Nineteenth Century:

⁹⁵ Bruemmer, *The Narwhal*, 116-17, 120.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

“A Culture of Abundance”

Those who collected unicorn horns and the myriad of objects found in the *Wunderkammern* of early modern Europe were a select few, that is, monarchs, nobility, prosperous merchants, and men of science. Although this wave of collecting was relatively large, it remained an elitist activity that did not include the majority of the population who lacked the necessary funds and accessibility. Conversely, it has been noted that in most of Europe and North America today, one in three people collects something; collecting, it appears, has become a popular activity.⁹⁷ This chapter will chart this transformation in collecting by focusing on the rise of consumer culture and the concomitant democratization of collecting within the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The unicorn as a cultural symbol and a collectible object will then be considered within this “new” context.

The Rise of Consumer Culture

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of great social, economic, and technological changes within the United States. Continual westward expansion, massive swells in population and immigration, staggering growth of urban areas, innovations in machinery and transportation, and the overall shift from an agrarian to an industrial

⁹⁷ Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), preface. There is a vast literature on the subject of collecting.

society considerably affected many aspects of everyday life.⁹⁸ These enormous changes, coupled with a dramatic increase in manufacturing making more and more goods increasingly available, caused American society to switch its emphasis from production to consumption.⁹⁹ People quickly learned how to consume these newly accessible products under the influence of widespread commercialization. Historian William Leach in his book *Land of Desire* explains the transition:

From the 1890s on, American corporate business, in league with key institutions, began the transformation of American society into a society preoccupied with consumption, with comfort and bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition, with more goods this year than last, more next year than this. American consumer capitalism produced a culture almost violently hostile to the past and to tradition, a future-oriented culture of desire that confused the good life with goods.... The cardinal features of this new culture were acquisition and consumption as the meaning of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.¹⁰⁰

As author Russell Belk succinctly puts it, “The belief that such unbridled access to things should lead to unbridled happiness is the central premise of a consumer society.”¹⁰¹

As consumer culture developed during the late nineteenth century, the domestic interior became a primary focus for the newly minted consumer. The industrialization of America had led to a division between the home, a place for comfort and rejuvenation, and the workplace, a site associated with hardship in an often unpleasant urban atmosphere. The interior of the home became the realm of the woman, who remained there while her husband went to work at the office or factory. The ensuing cult of domesticity, largely advocated by Catherine Beecher’s influential home manual *A*

⁹⁸ Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51. Meikle’s observations are part of a widely accepted view on the topic.

⁹⁹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 147-50.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii, 3.

¹⁰¹ Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, 1.

Treatise on Domestic Economy and popular magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, promoted the view that it was the duty of middle and upper-class women to provide a calm domestic haven, one that was safe and protected from the frenzied pace of modern life. Women were encouraged to be spiritual and moral compasses for their families. Furnishing and decorating the home in a manner appropriate to these ideals was part of their "job." As historian Jeffrey Meikle observes, "A proper domestic interior, encompassing everything from carpets and wallpaper to furniture and decorative objects, offered a comforting refuge and inspired a mood of spiritual contemplation."¹⁰²

There were several forums that served to introduce turn-of-the-century consumers to a veritable cornucopia of new and exotic goods with which to fill the home, namely world's fairs, department stores, and mail-order catalogues. International exhibitions such as the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 and the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 were landmark events that showcased thousands of both machine- and handmade products in elaborate and overwhelming settings, providing a kind of "visual intoxication" for the public.¹⁰³ Leach indicates that the Philadelphia fair was the most influential, as it "unlocked the floodgates to what became a steady flow of goods and fantasies about goods." One man wrote about the Centennial, "It was like lifting a veil in revelation of the size, the variety, and the beauty of the world."¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, this type of stimulation had been anticipated by early modern cabinets of curiosities (albeit in a profoundly different context), where visitors were undoubtedly awed by the

¹⁰² Meikle, *Design in the USA*, 52.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 52, 65.

¹⁰⁴ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 32-33.

vast display of the foreign, the extravagant, and the novel glittering before their eyes.¹⁰⁵

Visitors to late nineteenth-century world's fairs obviously far outnumbered (in both quantity and demographics) those who had access to *Wunderkammern*.

The new department stores also attracted a multitude of people, offering a different kind of transcendent experience among tempting displays of luxury goods. They cropped up and flourished in urban areas across much of the United States: Lord and Taylor (1914) and Macy's (1902) in New York, Wanamaker's (1912) in Philadelphia, and Marshall Field (1902) in Chicago. A young woman recalled the opening of Marshall Field as one of "the grandest events that has ever been known in Chicago...in a word, simply Wonderland."¹⁰⁶ These retail establishments functioned in a similar manner to world's fairs by inciting desire through enticing displays that seduced consumers, particularly women. One observer of New York's Fifth Avenue windows in 1902 remarked, "What a stinging, quivering zest they display, stirring up in onlookers a desire to secure but a part of what they see, the taste of a vibrating presence, and the picture that it makes."¹⁰⁷ Author L. Frank Baum referred in 1890 to a particular store display as a "dazzling spectacle," a "peep into Elysium."¹⁰⁸ Store windows possessed formidable selling power, exceeding advertising cards, posters, billboards, and electric signs in what Leach calls "capturing consumers." Since anyone walking down the street could gaze into such windows, Leach suggests that this glass medium served to "democratize desire" in the masses.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Belk, *Collecting*, 13-14. Both also played on the theme of exoticism; while cabinets of curiosities collected artifacts to represent exotic cultures (e.g. South American featherwork), late nineteenth-century world's fairs set up pavilions which showcased non-native peoples such as Samoans and Eskimos.

¹⁰⁶ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 31.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 55, 63.

Another significant means of encouraging consumerism across America was the mail-order catalogue, such as the first one published by Sears, Roebuck and Co. in 1893. This catalogue and others like it illustrated hundreds of pages of products, providing a visual feast that left one impressed advertiser remarking, "...a woman can buy almost as satisfactorily from these plates as from the counters."¹¹⁰ Whetting the appetites of a more rural audience, a contemporaneous observer noted that these catalogues descended upon customers "in the most obscure and remote localities, raking the country as with a fine-tooth comb."¹¹¹ Leiss describes the arrival of the Sears catalogue in rural areas as a "major social event." By 1907 the company was printing six million copies of its catalogue per year, with the 1908 edition containing nearly twelve hundred pages.¹¹²

Alongside industrialization and consumerism grew mass-mediated communication.¹¹³ While world's fairs, department stores, and mail-order catalogues presented a plethora of goods and disseminated desire, magazines, newspapers, household guidebooks—and later radio programs and television—would use advertising and marketing campaigns to influence how Americans spent their hard-earned money.

As William Leiss writes in his book *Social Communication in Advertising*:

...the marketplace itself began to assume the tasks of instructing individuals how to match their needs and wants with the available stock of goods and consumption styles. Quite simply, individuals need[ed] guidance on what foods to choose and how to prepare them, on how to dress and wear ornamentation, on how to select and arrange their home furnishings, on how to entertain guests, and on innumerable other points of daily life.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹¹² William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-being*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990.), 71.

¹¹³ Ibid., 93.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

Between 1870 and 1900, advertising in the United States swelled in volume from fifty million dollars to 542 million spent per year. And early in the twentieth century, commercial publishing began to focus less on the actual function of products and more on the pleasure and satisfaction that acquiring them would bring. Leiss describes the “visible expressions of human contentment” in advertising as “mark[ing] the transition from a market-industrial society to a consumer society.”¹¹⁵ Cultural historian Jackson Lears writes that goods through advertisements served as therapeutic means to anchor people in a changing world.¹¹⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, advertising increasingly became an integral part of modern culture developing the mechanical and electronic infrastructures relied upon for today’s exchange of information.¹¹⁷

Inundated with novel goods to create a domestic sanctuary and persuaded by visual ephemera, late nineteenth-century consumers responded by zealously overstuffing their parlors. Heavily upholstered chairs and sofas piled high with pillows and furniture of various revival styles mingled with diminutive tables, “artistic” easels, Japanese-inspired screens, mirrors, houseplants and stands, ceramics, figurines, and mantles and pianos that overflowed with draped fabrics and bric-a-brac, all against a background of richly patterned carpets, curtains, wallpaper, and ornate woodwork (fig. 53). At the time, the critic Edward Morse (1838-1925) dismissed the American parlor as a “curiosity shop” with a “maze of vases, pictures, plaques, bronzes” and “suffocating wall-papers, hot with some frantic design.”¹¹⁸ Most of this visual decadence was inessential and consisted of commercially produced objects that were acquired and arranged in the hopes of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁶ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 177-183.

¹¹⁷ Leiss, *Social Communication in Advertising*, 5, 91.

¹¹⁸ Meikle, *Design in the USA*, 54-56.

expressing one's own taste and character; through their display, the objects served to convey the wealth and status of the owner.

French critic Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) referred to such accumulation of goods by Europeans and Americans alike as “bricabracomania,” an illness of sorts caused by the “uneasiness of the soul, the loneliness and emptiness of the human heart in the new industrial society.”¹¹⁹ Likewise, writer Randolph Bourne (1886-1918) blamed the rise of industrialization for saturating America's cultural void with commercialism: with its “leering cheapness and falseness of taste and spiritual outlook,” the new consumer culture had taken hold particularly in America, Bourne claimed, because there “existed no residue of pre-industrial culture to resist it.”¹²⁰ As people were insatiably consuming more and more manufactured goods to satisfy their emotional and spiritual needs, Leiss explains that:

As soon as cheap consumer goods began to appear in large quantities, commentators started to fret about the leveling of tastes, that is, the collapse of the distinction, formerly so clear, between items of refined design possessed by the rich and the rough possessions of the poor. Industry's cleverness was beginning to devise passable mass-produced imitations of objects that the poor had only dreamed of owning in the past.¹²¹

The combination of overflowing goods, conspicuous consumption, and the leveling of tastes was identified by historian Warren I. Susman as the “culture of abundance,” and it provided an atmosphere ripe for the democratization of collecting.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Rémy G. Saisselin, *Bricabracomania: The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), xiv.

¹²⁰ Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 176.

¹²¹ Leiss, *Social Communication in Advertising*, 55.

¹²² Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), xx. Susman writes, “Simply put, one of the fundamental conflicts of twentieth-century America is between two cultures—an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance.” This topic is

The Democratization of Collecting: Individuals and Museums

The constant proliferation of tantalizing goods and the newfound appetite for material possessions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with and nurtured the rise of collecting as a leisure pursuit for middle-class Americans. Collecting, defined by Belk as “the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences,” was clearly made easier by an infinite and vast array of mass-produced objects and their placement within the home.¹²³ By the late nineteenth century in England people were already collecting things like postage stamps, matchboxes, Staffordshire figures, postcards, biscuit tins, sports memorabilia, and thimbles. According to Belk, the collecting of such manufactured objects was mirrored in the United States and suggests a “legitimization” of mass-produced goods as collectible objects.¹²⁴ Such purely decorative objects, increasingly available to an enthusiastic and more affluent audience, eclipsed the *objets d’art* traditionally singled out by more discriminating or elite collectors. As author Rémy Saisselin explains:

this mania for collecting, linked to the nervous sensibility of the modern world and its boredom, spread even to those who had no artistic sensibility at all. It is here that the department stores and boutiques, with the help of modern industry, intervened to produce the inexpensive, industrialized bibelot that could be afforded by those who could not purchase the authentic one. The bibelot was thus to be found everywhere and it was this ubiquity and clutter that turned into bric-à-brac.¹²⁵

also discussed at length in Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

¹²³ Belk, *Collecting*, 67.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 46

¹²⁵ Saisselin, *Bricabracomania*, 69-70. Interestingly, author Krzysztof Pomian refers to the assortment of objects collected in the fifteenth century by erudite collectors as bric-à-brac in *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, translated by Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 19-20.

Belk goes further saying that:

the use of the term bric-a-brac rather than *object d'art* or a similar honorific makes it apparent that the objects of such collector consumerism are insignificant trifles and thus delegitimizes the collector's pursuit as one of indulgent pleasure rather than scientific or artistic merit. For bric-a-brac is stuff found in the new department stores rather than galleries and museums. Thus there was a class distinction implied in these discriminations: anyone could buy bric-a-brac; not everyone could discern and acquire *objects d'art*.¹²⁶

Authors Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel similarly propose that the Industrial Revolution brought about this new type of collector—a person of modest means who collected a specialized category of mundane objects that did not belong to the world of fine art.¹²⁷ A gradual and irreversible shift was occurring; collecting was being transformed from an elite aesthetic experience into an egalitarian and consumable one.

Collecting, perhaps an excessive forms of consuming, has continued for the most part unabated to this day. Both the number of people who deem themselves collectors and the types of objects that are considered collectible have gathered momentum during the twentieth century as has the literature on the subject. The rise of a decentralized, media-dominated society (particularly after World War II) brought about new forms of art that portrayed and often celebrated consumerism, material culture, and advertising. And this new emphasis, along with an increase in leisure time (specifically hobbies) and disposable income (aided by the introduction of installment buying and charge accounts beginning around 1922 and of credit cards around 1950) are all factors that have ensured the continual and expanding interest in collecting.¹²⁸ In addition, as author John Windsor

¹²⁶ Belk, *Collecting*, 41.

¹²⁷ Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "Glorious Obsessions, Passionate Lovers, and Hidden Treasures: Collecting, Metaphor, and the Romantic Ethic," Stephen Harold Riggins, ed., *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-semiotics of Objects* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 25.

¹²⁸ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 299.

writes, another reason for the rise in twentieth-century collecting is the increase in home ownership. He states, “More people are buying collectables as interior decoration, to identify with in the ‘I am what I own’ mode.”¹²⁹ The “decorating factor,” agrees art historian Joseph Alsop, is very much a consideration when it comes to collecting and is a topic included in Joan Kron’s book *Home-psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration*.¹³⁰ Woodward likewise suggests that the modern consumer “speaks” with his or her choice of furnishings and decoration.¹³¹ This relationship between collecting and home decoration parallels the late nineteenth century, when increasing numbers of new consumers filled their homes with a plethora of goods to reflect both their taste and societal position in the industrialized world. It also reflected a new sense of self as Diana Fuss in her 2004 book *The Sense of an Interior* wrote:

The compartmentalization of the bourgeois interior provides one of the necessary historical conditions for the romantic discovery of the self and for the philosophical exploration of the interior life. The architectural privatization of the house also historically coincides with the economic industrialization of work, with previously home-based laborers moving outside the house and into the public workplace... The bourgeois subject, increasingly invested in the design and decoration of the dwelling place, experienced interiority as a new ontological state...¹³²

From antiques and modern art to beer cans and fruit labels, it is now possible to see virtually anything as a potentially collectible object, recalling Lyotard’s postmodern “anything goes” attitude. Collecting today belongs within the larger construct of

¹²⁹ John Windsor, “Identity Parades,” in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 62.

¹³⁰ Joan Kron, *Home-psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1983), 206.

¹³¹ Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 24.

¹³² Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10-11.

consumerism as a part of material culture. Not surprisingly, individuals today are more likely to collect objects that are mass-produced as opposed to those that are considered to be natural objects, antiquities, fine art, or hand-crafted items.¹³³ This is obviously the case with Ian Maxted, a collector of patterned toilet paper (fig. 54). According to professor of English and critical theorist Bill Brown, this “...insanity may seem to be one mark of our postmodern condition—in which even the immediate past becomes the object of intense nostalgia, and in which the most banal acquisition can get touted as a wise speculation.”¹³⁴ Literary critic Susan Stewart notes that such ephemeral collections (e.g. toilet paper, wine bottles, or political buttons) “serve to exaggerate certain dominant features of the exchange economy: its seriality, novelty, and abstraction. And by means or by virtue of such exaggeration, they are an ultimate form of consumerism.”¹³⁵ As Belk indicates, it is not that such types of collected objects (e.g. Hawaiian shirts, comic books, license plates, cigar bands) all of a sudden *became* art objects, but that they shifted from being regarded as “inauthentic” to “authentic” artifacts, that is, they have been repositioned as “worthy” objects (a concept further discussed in Chapter Five).¹³⁶

These items often fall into the category of “kitsch,” a term used to describe both art that is pretentious to the point of being in poor taste and mass-produced objects that are regarded as unoriginal, vulgar, or excessively sentimental.¹³⁷ The word became widely used in the early to mid-twentieth century as it was applied to both objects and a

¹³³ Belk, *Collecting*, 116, 118.

¹³⁴ Bill Brown, “The Collecting Mania,” *University of Chicago Magazine* 94, no. 1 (October 2001), 38-43.

¹³⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 166-67.

¹³⁶ Belk, *Collecting*, 53.

¹³⁷ Although its etymology is uncertain, most scholars concur that the word “kitsch” is derived from the German word *kitschen*, meaning “to collect rubbish from the street” or the verb *verkitschen*, meaning “to make cheap.”

way of life that had resulted from industrialization. American art critic Clement Greenberg popularized the word in his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in which he argued that avant-garde art had emerged as an aesthetic resistance against kitsch, which strengthened traditional conventions and appealed to mass tastes.¹³⁸ The kitsch object announces itself as “beautiful,” “significant,” or “poignant,” but these values are not inherent; they originate solely from the object’s connotations. Examples of kitsch include lawn ornaments such as garden gnomes and plastic pink flamingos, velvet paintings, religious souvenirs or souvenir replicas of famous landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, and the architecture of Las Vegas in its totality. The boundaries between kitsch and high art became further blurred within the development of postmodern thought and the distinction of “camp”—an ironic admiration of what might otherwise be deemed trite. Susan Sontag writes in her essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” that:

the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration...the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails...Camp [] makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica...Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste...The ultimate Camp statement: it’s good *because* it’s awful.¹³⁹

And Woodward in his survey of material culture studies observes that within a postmodern construct, “there is evidence of a fragmentation of old hierarchies of cultural tastes, meaning pop-culture objects and even “kitsch” objects can have as much aesthetic cachet as objects valued by the upper-classes, depending on social context.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49.

¹³⁹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 275, 283, 289, 291-92.

¹⁴⁰ Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 136.

The democratization of collecting that took place within the realm of individual collecting and notions of kitsch and camp have also affected institutional collecting. Museums, often regarded as establishments that value, acquire, and showcase only what is traditionally deemed “high” art, began to endorse a more liberal viewpoint in the late twentieth century as to what is considered collectible. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most museums were organized according to categorical genres such as fine art, ethnography, geology, natural history, and other specializations that had emerged out of the encyclopedic cabinets and collections of early modern Europe.¹⁴¹ The earliest museums, such as the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (which opened in 1662 and is widely regarded as the first museum of the modern world), held assemblages of *naturalia* and *artificialia* nearly indistinguishable from that of *Wunderkammern*.¹⁴² The Peale Museum in Philadelphia was an American version of this type of collection, opened in 1786 by the painter and collector Charles Wilson Peale (a member of the distinguished Peale family of artists). It consisted of portraits, fossils, a mastodon skeleton, seashells, stuffed animals, wax models, and a great number of natural oddities. (Ironically, after Peale’s death in 1827, Phineas T. Barnum acquired the collection and combined it with cruder elements from the carnival, circus, zoo, and sideshow.¹⁴³)

The trend for encyclopedic and curious collections like the Ashmolean Museum and the Peale Museum were gradually supplanted by more specialized or “high art” public museums, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, established in 1870. While the MFA initially displayed original works of art alongside curiosities including mummies, a buffalo horn, and Zulu weapons, as well as innumerable reproductions of

¹⁴¹ Belk, *Collecting*, 32.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

paintings and sculptures, the board of directors decided to filter out the popular art, reproductions, and novelties from the collection and to expand the fine art in the collection. They also moved the museum to a more exclusive location and actively shunned lower-class patrons. This transition from what Belk calls “carnavalesque freak shows” to “elite showcases of high culture” resulted in a more rarified perception of museums.¹⁴⁴

The founding dates of many public museums in America actually correspond with the rise of department stores, world’s fairs, and consumer culture in the late nineteenth century, all things that celebrate a profusion of material things and blend together high and popular culture.¹⁴⁵ World’s fairs were the basis of some prominent museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (1852) and Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries Museum in Washington, D.C. (1881).¹⁴⁶ And historian Neil Harris has in fact compared period rooms in museums to furniture displays in department stores of the same period.¹⁴⁷ It was department stores that first acquired and displayed much modern and American art, as most museums were hesitant to collect anything other than traditional works.¹⁴⁸ Some museum directors, such as John Cotton Dana who founded the Newark Museum in 1909, viewed traditional museums as “remote temples and palaces” that were inaccessible to most people and felt that museums should be more like department stores, which were “filled with objects closely associated with the life of the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 106-07.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 103-04.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹⁴⁷ Discussed by Neil Harris in speaking at the Sixteenth Annual Symposium on the Decorative Arts & Design at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in April of 2007. Books by Harris include *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), *Grand Illusions: Chicago's World's Fair of 1893* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1993), and *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁴⁸ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 136.

people.” Dana was probably the first American museum director to hold exhibitions of industrially made goods, believing that “the function of museums was to show the meaning of the arts in relation to industrial society.”¹⁴⁹

A similar opinion was held by Richard Bach, an industrial arts associate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Starting in 1917, Bach planned a series of exhibitions showcasing manufactured commodities that had been designed in the museum’s own design studios using the institution’s holdings as inspiration. The results were displayed side by side, with La France Rose soap boxes and Colgate toothpaste containers sharing space with Louis XIV jewel boxes and other art objects. Pioneers in the American museum field, people like Dana and Bach, believed that if museums wanted influence, status, and patronage they needed to collaborate with commerce.¹⁵⁰ According to Belk:

the twentieth century has seen the proliferation, privatization, and re-emergence of democratic commercialized institutional collecting...involv[ing] a multifaceted set of links between museums, corporations, collectors, dealers, artists, and the public. As these linkages arose the former boundaries between high culture and popular culture, sacred and profane, profit and non-profit, and art and commerce have all become blurred.¹⁵¹

These breakdowns are evident in more recent museum shows. In 1990, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened an exhibit called “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture,” which acknowledged and applauded how consumer goods, mass media, and advertising had been transformed into art.¹⁵² Although the majority of museums have been hesitant to allow branded objects into their collections, this is starting to change, and museums seem to be taking their cue from individual collectors.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 167-69.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 172-73.

¹⁵¹ Belk, *Collecting*, 110.

¹⁵² Ibid., 111.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 156.

In 1990, the Walsall Museum, a small art gallery in Walsall, England, organized an exhibition entitled “The People’s Show.” Residents of Walsall were asked to loan their personal collections for display in the museum, resulting in arrangements of Madonna memorabilia, souvenir tea towels, hotel soaps, neckties, ceramic animals, and so forth. This hodgepodge of about 16,000 mass-produced objects was made more personal and significant through the addition of each individual collector’s name, photograph, and personal comments about their collection. The exhibition drew one of the largest crowds that the Walsall had ever seen in its visitorship, approximately 10,000 people. Author Cathy Mullen explains its appeal:

It was not a sparse arrangement of objects whose significance required the viewer to adopt an exclusively aesthetic disposition or to utilize specialized academic knowledge. Rather, this abundant array of cultural artifacts invited viewers to refer to their feelings and understandings of family, friends, special events, vacation trips, gift-giving, eating, dressing and decorating their homes. Rather than eschewing associations with that which entertains, these objects revel in being curious, silly, ironic, adorable, sentimental.

Although many of the objects in the Walsall exhibition may have veered towards the kitsch, the collections shed light on the material culture of everyday life. Due to the overwhelming response and success of the show, the Walsall Museum has continued to host such exhibitions, and the idea has been adopted or adapted by many other museums.¹⁵⁴ In 1993-94 a similar undertaking in Britain called the Leicester Collecting Project randomly distributed 1,500 questionnaires with the aim of further understanding the process of collecting. The questions were followed up with in-person interviews in order to fill out the quantitative data with qualitative information. The return rate was an

¹⁵⁴ Cathy Mullen, “The People’s Show,” in Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 287-90.

impressive sixty percent, indicating both the popularity of and interest in the act of collecting.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, some museums started to acquire atypical items—according to academic Susan M. Pearce, the Victoria and Albert Museum began collecting such ephemera as Doc Martens, Lycra leggings, and Bic ball-point pens for their twentieth-century gallery (opened by 1992) with the assumption that such things could be seen as art due to both their design and their importance as signs of the time.¹⁵⁶ In 1992 the V & A's European Ornament Gallery also featured an exhibition of "outrageous, charismatic and kitsch ties" sent in by the public. The owners of the two ties deemed "most appalling" were later asked to donate them to the museum's permanent collection.¹⁵⁷ In a similar vein, the Smithsonian Institution (once named the National Cabinet of Curiosities¹⁵⁸), which has long collected ordinary objects that represent the history of America, recently acquired a collection of hundreds of airline sickness bags.¹⁵⁹ All of these examples can be viewed as the type of exaggerated, disposable collections that Stewart previously referred to as representative of the novelty and seriality of the current marketplace, only here they appear in the context of prominent art institutions.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Pearce, *On Collecting*, 12.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-48.

¹⁵⁷ Martin Delgado, "It's Man at V & A's Tasteless Tie Show," *London Evening Standard* (March 19, 1992), 12.

¹⁵⁸ Brown, "The Collecting Mania," 38-43.

¹⁵⁹ Belk, *Collecting*, 147.

¹⁶⁰ Museums have also become aligned with commercialism on a larger scale through their collaboration with corporations. For example, in 1991 the Royal Ontario Museum presented "The Real Thing at the ROM," which featured paintings of Santa Claus used in Coca-Cola advertisements. Coca-Cola not only lent the paintings, but offered a discount admission with the purchase of Coke products. Museums grappling with rising art prices and decreasing federal support often rely on corporate sponsorship to subsidize the enormous costs of exhibitions. Some corporations created even stronger partnerships with museums by opening museum branches in their corporate offices, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened branches in the headquarters of Champion International, Equitable Life Assurance, Park Tower Realty, and Philip Morris during the 1980s. A similar theme has been the establishment of corporate art collections, which serve to improve corporate morale, foster public support, and provide a sound financial investment. Sometimes such collections can even promote the particular industry with which it is linked—Campbell Soup Company has a collection of antique soup tureens on

Chapter Three: Unicorns in Popular Culture: Updated Myths

It is within this modern context of collecting and collectibles that the unicorn now has to be placed. After Olaus Worm's definitive declaration in 1638 that the legendary unicorn horn was in fact the tusk of a narwhal, it is conceivable that the creature might have faded into oblivion, a relic of centuries past. However, despite the animal's physical nonexistence, the visual representation of the unicorn conceived centuries ago has maintained itself to this day. Universally recognizable, the contemporary unicorn is still portrayed as a graceful, horse-like quadruped characterized by an elegant, spiraled horn emerging from its forehead. No longer aligned with rulers, pharmaceutical benefits, or religious beliefs, the current perception of the unicorn is one of airbrushed triviality; the beast often reigns supreme over prismatic landscapes cloaked in rainbows, clouds, and mysticism (fig. 55). The unicorn inhabits a fairy-tale world, keeping company with fairies, princesses, wizards, and dragons. The plush toys and make-believe games of childhood, spiritual shops specializing in crystals and incense, or fantastical games like Dungeons & Dragons are the modern domain of the unicorn, locating it within the realm of the popular and the kitsch.

Contemporary literature on class and popular culture interpret this prevailing view of the unicorn as a symbol of vulgarity and tastelessness. Unicorns share the spotlight with Chia-Pets, velvet paintings, and processed meat snacks as in the earlier cited *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* and in Fussell's *Class*, a book that pokes fun at America's

permanent display at the prestigious Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum in Delaware. Ibid., 114-16, 118.

social rankings.¹⁶¹ Fussell cites the unicorn's frequent appearance within the beloved mail-order catalogues of the middle class, illustrating his point with a "high-prole living room" fully decorated with the motif of the unicorn (fig. 56).¹⁶² How did the unicorn, with its lofty pedigree in the fine and decorative arts and its place within the cabinets of kings, become such fodder for American social critics? The seventeenth-century discovery of the horn's inauthenticity clearly had an impact in that it removed the creature from any tangible relationship with the real world. In its new realm of the imaginary, the unicorn, rather than valued for any intrinsic properties, came to be seen as a make-believe creature, a figure of mysticism or parody depending on the individual.

In order to better understand this transition, it will be necessary to trace the emergence of the unicorn within early American culture as well as its recent manifestation in American art, literature, film, and popular culture. Early examples of the unicorn between 1700 and 1900 are few and far between, but European settlers certainly brought long-established lore and knowledge of the unicorn with them as they inhabited the New World. One of the earliest examples of this was manifested within the architecture of the Old State House in Boston, Massachusetts. Built in 1713, the building's east-facing façade was embellished with two carved, three-dimensional animals, a lion and a unicorn, in 1747 (fig. 57).¹⁶³ These creatures unequivocally signified the supporters of the British coat of arms, which featured a rampant lion and unicorn. Unicorns and other mythical beasts such as griffins, mermaids, and dragons were not uncommon in heraldry. Historian F. Edward Hulme notes that fantastical

¹⁶¹ Stern, *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, 304-05.

¹⁶² Fussell, *Class*, 141.

¹⁶³ Boston Historical Society and Museum official Web site, <http://www.bostonhistory.org/?s=osh&p=history>. See also footnote 165.

creatures like these were “as much a reality in medieval works on natural history as an elephant is to us,” implying that belief in such creatures was fully held when they were originally incorporated as heraldic devices. The unicorn was first used in association with the Scottish royal arms between 1460 and 1488, under the rule of James III. The current Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom (the lion representing England and the unicorn representing Scotland) has remained unchanged since the reign of James I of England, who ruled from 1603 until 1625 (fig. 58).¹⁶⁴ The Old State House lion and unicorn carvings were emblematic of Britain, and, as such, they were removed and burned in 1776 but later restored in 1882.¹⁶⁵ The large size and prominent placement of the unicorn on the façade of this significant city building indicates its importance and familiarity to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century viewer not only as a symbol of the monarchy but also as part of a visual vocabulary much different from how we view the unicorn today.

A similar visual representation of the unicorn can be found in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch decorative objects, such as painted dowry chests. This ethnic group often incorporated motifs from their homeland of Germany, where the unicorn had been a familiar symbol of apothecary shops since the seventeenth century.¹⁶⁶ There are several known examples of painted chests that depict unicorns (figs. 59-60). Figure 59 is an example from Berks County, Pennsylvania painted in 1784 by Henrich Faust, whose grandfather had emigrated from Germany.¹⁶⁷ Figure 60 is a

¹⁶⁴ F. Edward Hulme, *The History Principles and Practice of Heraldry* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1969), 99-100, 197-98, 200-01.

¹⁶⁵ Jane Holtz Key, *Lost Boston* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 64, 247.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Kauffman, *Pennsylvania Dutch: American Folk Art* (New York and London: American Studio Books, 1946), 12.

¹⁶⁷ Beatrice B. Garvan and Charles F. Hummel, *The Pennsylvania Germans: A Celebration of Their Arts: 1683-1850* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982), 30.

slightly later example, dated 1803, from the same county.¹⁶⁸ Both portray profiles of two upright, dark-colored unicorns facing tree or flower-like forms within the central panel of the chests. Historian Phillip H. Curtis believes that the unicorns here symbolize purity and feminine chastity, attributes long associated with the unicorn.¹⁶⁹ Joseph Downs, writing about the work of Pennsylvania Dutch craftsmen, agrees, noting that this symbolism would have been especially appropriate for a marriage chest. Downs also observes that a pair of unicorns rampant seems to be indicative of Berks County in general; this perhaps can be seen as an acknowledgement of the unicorn's traditional function in heraldry to signify a particular locale.¹⁷⁰

This interpretation can also be applied to the unicorns that were occasionally used in Pennsylvania Dutch *fraktur*, or illuminated writing (fig. 61-64). The authors of *The Pennsylvania Germans: A Celebration of Their Arts: 1683-1850* suggest that the influence for this depiction probably came from engravings of the British coat of arms (fig. 58) that were widely disseminated at the time.¹⁷¹ The four examples illustrated here, made between 1790 and 1830, all are composed of pairs of chained rampant unicorns facing each other on either side of a central element. The unicorns found on the Old State House in Boston and in Pennsylvania Dutch decorative arts imply that the creature was recognizable, and that its significance to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans lay in its heraldic roots.

¹⁶⁸ Beatrice B. Garvan, *The Pennsylvania German Collection* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982), xxiv, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Phillip H. Curtis, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, *Pennsylvania German Art, 1683-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 145.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph Downs, "The de Forest Collection of Work by Pennsylvania German Craftsmen," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 29, no. 10 (Oct., 1934), pp. 165-66.

¹⁷¹ Garvan and Hummel, *The Pennsylvania Germans*, 33.

Tapestries.”¹⁷⁶ The famed tapestries had been on display at the Cloisters, along with a complementary narwhal tusk (fig. 68), since 1937 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art had acquired them as a gift from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

The Zell-Ravenhearts traveled across America to various Renaissance festivals, forums that welcomed and celebrated elements of fantasy such as elves and wizards. At these venues, they dressed as a wizard and enchantress and performed with their unicorns.¹⁷⁷ Their enactments necessitated props like the hanging quilt seen in the background of Figure 69, a textile clearly imitative of “The Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry panel (fig. 47). The surgical experiment first executed by Dove within the field of science was used by the Zell-Ravenhearts for the purpose of entertainment. The references to the “Unicorn Tapestries” in their performances are indicative of the unicorn directly transitioning from the realm of high culture to that of popular culture.

The surgically-altered goats were more fully exploited in 1985 when Zell-Ravenheart and Morning Glory signed a four-year contract with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for the lease and exhibition of four of the unicorns. The circus presented “The Living Unicorn!” that same year. Significantly, the company mentioned the famed tapestries in the show’s program: “Artists have often pictured this most mystical of beasts—the celebrated Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries, crafted in Belgium during the 1500s, are among the finest. These magnificent creations are among the treasures in the permanent collection of The Cloisters in New York City.”¹⁷⁸ The reference sought to ally the more garish aspects of the circus act with an artwork and a

¹⁷⁶ Sideshow World official Web site, <http://www.sideshowworld.com/interview-OZ.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey official Web site, <http://www.ringling.com/explore/history/legend/unicorn.aspx>.

museum recognized and valued for their cultural elitism. In his discussion of advertising, John Berger elucidates this concept:

Any work of art ‘quoted’ by publicity serves two purposes. Art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishing which the world gives to the rich and the beautiful. But a work of art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest; an oil painting belongs to a cultural heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European. And so the quoted work of art (and this is why it is so useful to publicity) says two almost contradictory things at the same time: it denotes wealth and spirituality: it implies that the purchase being proposed is both a luxury and a cultural value.¹⁷⁹

The correlation between the spectacle of “The Living Unicorn” and the Cloister’s tapestries was perhaps drawn to validate the spectacle that drama critic Scott Cummings vividly describes as he witnessed it in 1985. It is quoted at length here to give a full sense of how the unicorn was popularly presented:

...Ringling-Barnum collects dozens of children for the flashy production number which features the “unveiling” of “The Living Unicorn.” Herded into shiny white Pegasus-mobiles, they are whizzed around the hippodrome track as part of a grand parade in tribute to mythical beasts and the power of make-believe... This phantasmagoria reaches a zenith in the Grand Spectacular First Act Finale: “Once Upon A Unicorn...” Imagine Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” converted with Disney-like innocence into a Las Vegas-style halftime extravaganza in honor of the male sexual organ and what do you get? “The Birth of Penis!!!” ...“Celebrate the fantasy,” says the ringmaster, “where myth becomes reality.” The band plays a medley of circus and show tunes while the parade of legendary creatures fills the track with color and activity. Finally, with a drumroll and fanfare, a pageant wagon rolls out. Standing in the center of a giant gold clamshell is The Living Unicorn and by his side a stunning blonde dressed like Glynda, the Good Witch of the North [fig. 70]. The unicorn’s front hooves are up on a foot-high step that makes him look more equine and accentuates the upward thrust of the undeniable horn arching from the center of his brow. It is not the long spiral spike horn to be seen in “The Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry at the Cloisters; it is a large dull goat horn, set off by the beast’s long and bushy white coat. As the wagon circles the hippodrome track, Glynda traces the line of the horn with her finger so that even the folks in the cheap seats can glimpse the unfathomable... The spectacle climaxes in a frenzy of pageantry. Elephants with gold-and-silver-sequined unicorn tapestries on their backs and feathered showgirls astride their necks lumber around the track. Clowns on 5’, 10’, 15’ stilts parade behind. Pink-and-

¹⁷⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 135. By “publicity,” he means advertising.

purple zebra-striped centaurs dressed like Roman Centurions pull chariots. As the music crescendos, sparkling coils spiral up out of low Ionic columns around the arena, butterfly-girls with iridescent wings waft overhead, and The Living Unicorn, now standing on a round dais in the center of the center ring, slowly rises 10' in the air. Throughout, the unicorn stares out with blank goatish complacency, occasionally reaching back to scratch his hindquarters, oblivious to the lavish phallic ritual going on in honor of his zoological oddity.¹⁸⁰

Cummings' detailed review reveals that the theme of the Cloister's tapestries was further played upon by the elephants' glittery "unicorn tapestr[y]" costumes. The overall atmosphere of make-believe, complete with a "Glynda the Good Witch"-type character and hovering "butterfly-girls," emphasized the unicorn's place within the realm of the fantastical. The show's pageantry ahistorically associated the unicorn with Greek and Roman culture and mythology through the integration of Pegasus, centaurs outfitted as centurions, and Ionic columns—further muddying the already complex history of the creature. Cummings also notes the act's blatant celebration of the phallic nature of the horn, with Glynda's caress and the finale escalation as apt metaphors.¹⁸¹ All of this pomp and circumstance did not ensure "The Living Unicorn" to be a popular success however, as many sensed or actually knew that the goat-like creature was not a "real" unicorn. In spite of this, the spectacle did convey the aforementioned subtexts to an extensive audience (made up largely of children) who, consciously or unconsciously, absorbed these connotations into their collective comprehension of the unicorn.

It was the 1968 fantasy classic *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle (fig. 71) that had further sparked the Zell-Ravenhearts initial interest in unicorns when they read it in the mid-1970s. Beagle's novel had also been influenced by the Cloisters tapestries but it also grew out of the counterculture of the 1960s. It concerns a unicorn that, believing she

¹⁸⁰ Scott T. Cummings, "Big Circus, Little Circus," *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1986), 121-22.

¹⁸¹ The phallic aspects of the horn are discussed in the conclusion.

is the last of her kind left in the world, embarks on an epic journey to find out what happened to all the other unicorns. According to the story, the rest of the unicorns had been driven into the sea where they were transformed into narwhals and kept as prisoners by a cold-hearted old king. Prince Lir, the king's benevolent son, falls in love with the last unicorn while she is disguised as the beautiful Lady Amalthea. With the help of the prince and her traveling companions, the last unicorn discovers how to save the rest of her kind, who ultimately change back into unicorns by the end of the story. *The Last Unicorn* addressed themes such as the search for identity, loneliness, and the power of magic—appropriate topics for a fabled creature of enigmatic origins imbued with extraordinary capabilities.¹⁸² It also associated unicorns with kings and princes, but here in the context of a romantic fairy-tale kingdom. The story's interpretation of narwhals and their transformation back into unicorns also stirred up a kind of hope among readers—a possibility that unicorns really might exist, that perhaps Olaus Worm's conclusion was wrong after all. The influence from *The Last Unicorn* was widespread due to its enormous popularity; it was reprinted in 1974, 1991, and 2007, has sold over six million copies, and has been translated into twenty languages.

This influence was expanded by the animated version of *The Last Unicorn* made in 1982, a movie that featured the voices of well-known actors including Alan Arkin, Jeff Bridges, Mia Farrow, and Angela Lansbury (fig. 72). Unlike the book, a fantasy novel read largely by adults, the cartoon-like format of the movie undoubtedly appealed to children. The movie accurately represented the novel as the screenplay was written by Beagle himself. In the “Special Features” segment of *The Last Unicorn* DVD, Beagle remembers that his mother (who was an elementary school teacher) described a unicorn

¹⁸² Peter Beagle, *The Last Unicorn* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

to her class in 1944, when he was five years old. Beagle also recollected his desire as a child to see the “Unicorn Tapestries” at the Cloisters.¹⁸³ Inspiration from the tapestries is evident in the movie—the animation during the opening credits borrowed directly from the tapestry panel “The Unicorn Dips His Horn into the Stream to Rid It of Poison” (figs. 73-74), while a brief glimpse of the corner of a wall hanging in the king’s castle bears an unmistakable resemblance to “The Unicorn Leaps the Stream” (figs. 75-76). Here again, Beagle’s translation of the Cloisters tapestries, while less obvious than their manifestation in the Zell-Ravenhearts’ enactments or Barnum & Bailey’s “The Living Unicorn,” is suggestive of the shift in the unicorn from the context of museum-worthy art to that of popular culture. This is especially significant because the book and the film adaptation of *The Last Unicorn* reached such a broad audience, disseminating not only the unicorn in general but also its position within a fairy-tale world.

Other examples in literature are indicative of a comparable transition of the unicorn from high to popular culture. Unsurprisingly, early books utilize the unicorn as a symbol of British heraldry; the aptly-tilted *Grandpapa Easy's New Lion and The Unicorn Fighting for The Crown* was a book of juvenile poetry published in London in 1845.¹⁸⁴ A similar book called *Rex the Coronation Lion Comes to Town* was published in London in 1937.¹⁸⁵ While still relating to the established coat of arms, here the emblematic lion and unicorn lost their traditional formality by being rendered as cartoon-like characters on the book’s cover (fig. 77). Adaptations of this “lion and unicorn” tale were sometimes included in children’s nursery rhyme books published in the United States, such as *Jack*

¹⁸³ “The Tail of the Last Unicorn,” in “Special Features,” from *The Last Unicorn*, DVD, directed by Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin, Jr. (United Kingdom: Incorporated Television Company, 1982).

¹⁸⁴ Grandpapa Easy [pseud.], *Grandpapa Easy's New Lion and the Unicorn Fighting for the Crown* (London: Dean & Co., c. 1845).

¹⁸⁵ James Riddell, *“Rex” the Coronation Lion Comes to Town* (London: Hutchison, 1937.)

and Jill from 1911. It included the story “The Lion and The Unicorn” among other children’s classics like “The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe.”¹⁸⁶ Books of this nature certainly gave rise to the popularity of unicorns as appropriate for children, a concept later expanded by the film and toy industries. The publication of books relating to unicorns has continually increased throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the first two months of 2008 alone, there were at least thirteen books with the word “unicorn” in the title and all were published within the genres of fantasy or children’s literature.¹⁸⁷

The unicorn figured as a major aspect of Tennessee Williams’ critically acclaimed *The Glass Menagerie* of 1944, a play that between its staged and printed renditions and subsequent film and television adaptations reached a considerable adult audience. The creature appears in the play as the favorite piece in character Laura’s Wingfield’s collection of miniature glass animals (fig. 78). During Scene VII, the horn of the delicate unicorn (a creature frequently interpreted as symbolic of both Laura and her fragility) is accidentally broken off, and with it so are Laura’s hopes for the future.¹⁸⁸ In a critical interpretation from 1971, reviewer Gilbert Debusscher explored the play’s numerous references to Christianity, citing in particular Williams’ use of the unicorn as a “traditional, time-honoured Christian symbol,” one that “usually represent[ed] purity.”¹⁸⁹ Debusscher’s interpretation is significant because it suggests that as late as 1971 (and

¹⁸⁶ Stacy H. Wood Martin, *Jack and Jill* (Chicago: M. A. Donohue & Company, 1911). Interestingly, a scholarly journal published by Johns Hopkins University Press that examines children’s literature was founded in 1977 with the title *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

¹⁸⁷ Amazon.com official Web site, http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=sr_pg_1/104-7445628-1113554?ie=UTF8&rs=1000&sort=daterank&unfiltered=1&rh=n%3A1000%2Cp%5F28%3Aunicorn&page=1.

¹⁸⁸ Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, in *Tennessee Williams: Plays 1937-1955* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2000), 455-457.

¹⁸⁹ Gilbert Debusscher, “Tennessee Williams’s Unicorn Broken Again,” in Harold Bloom, ed. *Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 47,51-56.

certainly when the play debuted in the 1940s) the unicorn was still considered within the long-established framework of religion and not yet simply aligned with the fantastical. Furthermore, Williams' decision to include a unicorn figurine in Laura's glass collection in the first place, and specifically as the piece that is broken with each performance of the play, is indicative of the availability of glass unicorn figurines for consumption prior to 1944.

Just a few years before *The Glass Menagerie*, however, Walt Disney's 1940 animated film *Fantasia* depicted unicorns frolicking to Beethoven's music in the sequence "The Pastoral Symphony" alongside centaurs, cherubs, Pegasus, and various gods of Greek mythology, anticipating the pageantry of Barnum & Bailey.¹⁹⁰ The unicorns were rendered as colorful, diminutive, and adorable creatures (fig. 79-80), again predicting the future popularity of unicorns as toys for children. The movie was regarded by the United States Library of Congress as "culturally, historically and aesthetically significant," and assuredly left a vast audience with an infantilized impression of the unicorn.¹⁹¹ The continued popularity of *Fantasia*, which was rereleased numerous times (most recently in 2000), has strengthened this version of unicorns in the public at large, as has the more recent Japanese anime film *The Fantastic Adventures of Unico*, released in the United States during the mid-1980s. This movie is about a young unicorn named Unico who spreads happiness and grants wishes to those he befriends (figs. 81-82). With his squat body, oversized, round face, enormous eyes, tuft of red hair, and short, cone-like horn, Unico does not look like a stereotypical unicorn, but rather is a baby unicorn who transforms during critical times in the movie into a larger, more elegant and horse-

¹⁹⁰ *Fantasia*, DVD, directed by Ford Beebe, Jim Handley, and Hamilton Luske (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Productions, 1940).

¹⁹¹ The Library of Congress official Web site, <http://www.loc.gov/film/filmabou.html>.

like unicorn.¹⁹² Unico employs special powers involving the use of his horn as a means of shielding himself and others against danger, recalling the former belief in the horn's protective powers. *The Fantastic Adventures of Unico* portrayed the unicorn as an innocent, magical, and caring creature that dwelled in an imaginary landscape, whose appearance was again particularly comforting to children and was part of a new interest in Japanese animation.

Perhaps capitalizing on an interest in unicorns, the movie *Legend* debuted in 1985 starring Tom Cruise as the forest-dwelling Jack, and Mia Sara as Princess Lily, who together must save the last surviving unicorn from the evil Lord of Darkness before he plunges the world into eternal darkness. The film embodied a more sinister world of fantasy and became a cult classic among a teenage audience. In the movie Jack describes unicorns as "sacred animals" who "express only love and laughter," accentuating the creature's virtuous qualities. Sara's role as a princess whose purity and innocence attracts the unicorn to her in the midst of a magical and enchanted forest carries on the long-standing association between unicorns and virgins while emphasizing the position of the creature within a fantastical realm inhabited by princesses, elves, fairies, and goblins (figs. 83-84). The unicorn's horn clearly resembles a narwhal tusk and it is brutally severed by the Lord of Darkness' minions (fig. 85). It is capable of extraordinary powers that can be used for both good and evil, thus continuing the age-old belief in the horn's remarkable powers.¹⁹³

An allusion to the unicorn as a protector against poison is also evident in the movie *Stardust*, a fantasy film from 2007 adapted from the novel written by Neil Gaiman

¹⁹² *The Fantastic Adventures of Unico*, DVD, directed by Osamu Tezuka (Takadanobaba Shinjuku-ku, Japan: Sanrio and Tezuka Productions, 1981).

¹⁹³ *Legend*, DVD, directed by Ridley Scott (Los Angeles, CA: Embassy International Pictures, 1985).

in 1998. In the movie a young man named Tristan (Charlie Cox) sets out on a quest to find a fallen star in the mysterious land beyond his own in order to win the heart of his beloved Victoria (Sienna Miller). The star transforms into a striking young woman called Yvaine (Claire Danes), who Tristan discovers and leaves chained to a tree so he can search for food. After several hours, a unicorn appears in the forest, uses its horn to break Yvaine free, and gives her a ride to a nearby inn (fig. 86). The lodgings happen to be owned by a witch (Michelle Pfeiffer) who has also been looking for the fallen star to suit her own purposes. When Tristan arrives at the inn in search of Yvaine, the witch attempts to poison him with a glass of wine. Just as Tristan is about to take a sip, the unicorn kicks down the door and dramatically saves him from swallowing the toxic drink (fig. 87).¹⁹⁴ *Stardust* creates an obvious correlation between Yvaine and the fabled virgin sought out by unicorns and directly references the unicorn's antidotal powers for a general audience.

In most of these films the unicorn serves as an illustrious character and seems redolent of early mystical ideas, but in other instances the unicorn, like Mickey Mouse or the Muppets, grows ever younger and cuter and becomes a symbol of kitsch. This infantilization along with its connection to the 1960s perhaps is what has led the unicorn to be featured as a symbol of parody. For example, in the 2004 film *Dodgeball* (a comedy not geared towards children or fantasy buffs) the unicorn appears as a figure of ridicule. Unlike Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and her collection of glass animals that contained a single unicorn, *Dodgeball's* female lead Kate Veatch (Christine Taylor) is an ardent collector exclusively of unicorns. When Kate's admirer Peter

¹⁹⁴ *Stardust*, DVD, directed by Matthew Vaughn (Los Angeles, CA: Di Bonaventura Pictures, 2007). Many people were probably also enticed to see the movie because of the star-studded cast.

LaFleur (Vince Vaughn) enters her house, he looks around astonished at the unicorn-themed décor, including a full-size carousel unicorn, wallpaper borders, figurines, lamps, pillows, decorative plates, snow globes, wine glasses, and posters (figs. 88-90). Kate simply shrugs and murmurs, “I like... unicorns,” smiling sheepishly and laughing a little, clearly embarrassed.¹⁹⁵ Her awkwardness is heightened by the fact that her character is a rather strait-laced attorney, adding to the scene’s comic relief. The choice of unicorns specifically as the decorative theme for Kate’s house is indicative of the unicorn’s standing in contemporary culture as a debased collectible object, its use here not unlike Fussell’s high-prole living room—tasteless at best (fig. 56). This point of view provokes a difficulty among viewers in taking the creature and its collector or the character seriously. Although only observable for a split second, one of the discernible wall posters is a reproduction of “The Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry, which yet again is a reference to high culture neatly merged into a collection of kitsch. *Dodgeball* furthermore suggests a gendered identity for the unicorn collector (a topic discussed in the conclusion), associated here so clearly with the female lead and her surroundings.

Television programs have likewise portrayed the unicorn collector and the unicorn as collectible object as questionable in terms of taste and maturity. The WB’s cult series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a show especially popular among teenagers, aired an episode in October 2000 that featured a witless vampire known as Harmony holding and caressing a unicorn figurine prior to nestling it among the others in her collection (figs. 91-92). The figurine had been stolen for Harmony by one of her minions from a magic

¹⁹⁵ *Dodgeball*, DVD, directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 2004).

shop where the discoverers of the theft referred to it as “cheap, tasteless statuary.”¹⁹⁶ By further describing the unicorn as an imported ceramic from Thailand that would retail for \$12.95, the show represented the unicorn as emblematic of shoddy knick-knacks in general. Although it is somewhat ironic that Harmony (a vampire and thus inherently evil) collected unicorns in the first place, her stereotype as a “dumb blonde” may account for her amassing the virtuous creature. The fact that she is female again alludes to the gendered nature of unicorn collecting. As with *Legend*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s focus on teenage protagonists battling the forces of evil (in this case vampires and demons) aligns the unicorn with a more sinister side of make-believe.

The theme of someone who lacks mental competence *and* who is appreciative of unicorns is also evident in the *30 Rock* episodes mentioned in the Introduction. It was obviously not shocking to the audience of this show (a primetime comedy not targeted towards children, fantasy buffs, or cult fans) that someone whose behavior is as peculiar as the character Kathy Geiss’ should also have a penchant for unicorns (figs. 3-5). We have come to collectively understand and accept the unicorn within these constructs. Historian Lynn Spigel, in her work on the assimilation of television, writes that “magazines, television programs, and advertisements give us a clue into an imaginary popular culture—that is, they tell us what various media institutions assumed about the public’s concerns and desires.”¹⁹⁷ In analyzing the examples of unicorns found in books, movies, and television in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can see how the

¹⁹⁶ “Amazing Profit Margins” and “Harmony The Happy Vampire,” from the episode “Real Me,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, DVD Season 5, directed by David Grossman (Fox: October 3, 2000).

¹⁹⁷ Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8.

producers of these media perceived unicorns, and thus how we as a whole might or should perceive them.

The appeal of the imaginary and the unicorn's accumulative connotations with fantasy, magic, princesses, fairies, and inherent virtuousness have also lent themselves quite naturally to the marketing of children's toys, particularly those intended for girls. The dolls Barbie and the Bratz have their own sinewy versions of the unicorn: Barbie's pulls a swan carriage, emphasizing the romantic prince-and-princess relationship between Ken and Barbie, while the Bratz unicorn has glow-in-the-dark wings that flap at the push of a button, recalling the erroneous assimilation of the Pegasus found in *Fantasia* and Barnum & Bailey's "Living Unicorn" (figs. 93-94). My Little Pony has a line of unicorns with names such as "Rarity the Unicorn" and "Crystal Princess," alluding to the creature's singularity and its place within a modern magical kingdom (fig. 95). There are countless examples of unicorns within this genre, many of which are saturated with bright pink and purple hues. Most are steeped in "cuteness," a quality that author and contemporary critic Daniel Harris in his analysis of the aesthetics of popular taste describes as the "grotesque, the malformed" . . . with pitiable "saucer eyes" of "moist pools" on "round, unthreatening faces," "painfully swollen" appendages ending in "useless pink stumps" or "paws as cumbersome as boxing gloves," and frequently topped by a "luxuriant profusion of hair, often of an absurd length."¹⁹⁸ Many of these features are evident in the "Long Legged Stuffed Unicorn" for sale on Unicorns.com, a website devoted to selling all things unicorn (fig. 96).¹⁹⁹ This disproportionate form, similarly

¹⁹⁸ Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 1-5, 8, 10.

¹⁹⁹ Unicorn.com official Web site, <http://www.unicorns.com/store/customer/product.php?productid=708&cat=17&page=1>.

visible in the unicorns of *Fantasia* and *The Fantastic Adventures of Unico*, characterize a creature very different from the wild and untamable beast described centuries ago in

Physiologus. Harris expounds:

The aesthetic of cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutations...Far from being an accident of bad craftsmanship, the element of the grotesque in cuteness is perfectly deliberate and must be viewed as the explicit intention of objects that elicit from us the complex emotions we feel when we encounter the fat faces and squat, ruddy bodies of creatures...The grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable.²⁰⁰

Such popular toys as these have also developed subsidiary roles as objects collected by adults, signaling the creature's resonance among young and old alike as well as its status as a collectible object. Enthusiasm for collecting My Little Pony is so strong that it has spawned another group—individuals who customize the plastic toys into one-of-a-kind collectibles, often resulting in the transformation of ponies into unicorns since the addition of a horn is an obvious way to rework the toy (figs. 97-101). These customized versions are sold for as much as one hundred dollars and are often displayed and judged at My Little Pony fairs across the country in cities like San Francisco and Las Vegas.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic*, 4.

²⁰¹ 2008 My Little Pony Fair Collectors Convention official Web site, <http://www.mylittleponyfair.com/index.htm>. The conventions began in 2003 and are attended by approximately 350 people, many of whom are collectors. The 2008 fair took place in Providence, Rhode Island and was endorsed by Hasbro, the toy's manufacturer, who produces a commemorative pony exclusively for each fair. Events included a Custom Workshop, a Cleaning and Restoration Workshop, Custom and Art contests, and the trading and selling of ponies. In addition, altering My Little Pony even extended to the New York art scene in 2005 when Hasbro and Thunderdog Studios collaborated in the Pony Project, in which almost fifty international female artists were asked to decorate an eighteen inch pony figurine in their preferred medium. The resulting ponies were displayed at the Milk Gallery in Chelsea and included a unicorn named "Silent Star Pony" by American graphic artist Dame Darcy (fig. 102). According to Sarah Bronilla, the media director of Thunderdog Studios, "an exhibition like the Pony Project is a great way to introduce the iconic My Little Pony brand into the world of art and pop culture...The international popularity of My Little Pony coupled with the extraordinary talents of participating artists and designers lends itself to a unique showcase of art," from Hasbro official Web site, <http://www.hasbro.com/media/default.cfm?page=release&release=405>.

One final area in which the unicorn appears is in the beauty industry. In 1984 the cosmetics firm Max Factor & Company introduced a new cologne for women called “Magical Musk by *Toujours Moi*,” which they marketed as “the fragrance of hidden powers.” The bottle featured a white plastic top molded in the shape of a unicorn head and was sold in a box illustrating the creature. The accompanying advertising slogan encouraged women to “capture the magic of the unicorn,” against a dramatic photograph of what looked like a real unicorn rearing up within a misty forest (fig. 103).²⁰² Arthur Asa Berger, who writes about advertising, points out the importance that cosmetics firms place on youth and beauty, stating that cosmetic advertisements frequently “play upon the anxiety women feel as they start getting older about no longer being young and no longer being beautiful. It may even be more extreme than that: no longer young, *therefore* no longer beautiful.”²⁰³ To alleviate such fears, “Magical Musk” drew on the ancient tale involving virgins and unicorns, provoking a fantasy that one could transform into a young and beautiful object of desire by using the cologne. The cologne’s “hidden powers” (an allusion to the unicorn’s extraordinary abilities) would enable a woman to seduce the most elusive of creatures, that is, the man of her dreams. Environmental psychologist Paco Underhill, writing about the activity of shopping, remarks that “shopping is a transforming experience, a method of becoming a newer, perhaps even slightly improved person. The products you buy turn you into that other, idealized version of yourself.”²⁰⁴ The woman who purchased “Magical Musk” bought into the magical fantasy world inhabited by the unicorn and, in doing so, became more magical and fantastic herself.

²⁰² Jezebel official Web site, <http://jezebel.com/343843/oldies-but-goodies>.

²⁰³ Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 76.

²⁰⁴ Paco Underhill, *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 116-17.

According to one eBay seller, Max Factor also produced a hinged metal ring in which to keep solid perfume around 1960.²⁰⁵ The ring's imagery mimics "The Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry, depicting a circular fence enclosing a unicorn next to a tree (fig. 104). Other undated solid perfume lockets with similar representations can be found on eBay; these are in some cases produced by the French perfume company Corday, who had originally created the *Toujours Moi* perfume in 1924 (figs. 105-107).²⁰⁶ These lockets clearly make reference to the "Unicorn Tapestries" and in doing so suggest the story of the virgin and her attractiveness. Max Factor was not the only well-known cosmetics brand to utilize the unicorn in its products; in the 1970s Avon Products, Inc. produced a unicorn-shaped glass perfume bottle and in 1981 manufactured a porcelain potpourri in the shape of a unicorn as part of their "Tapestry Collection," again invoking the famed tapestries (figs. 108-109).²⁰⁷ In 2001, Estée Lauder Companies, Inc. issued a solid perfume compact in the form of golden "Magical Unicorn" with crystals and enameling to house their popular "Pleasures" fragrance, indicating the enchanted nature of the creature (fig. 110).²⁰⁸

In regard to modern-day advertising, John Berger has written that "in no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density

²⁰⁵ eBay official Web site, http://cgi.ebay.com/Vintage-Max-Factor-Unicorn-Ring_W00QitemZ190189257966QQcmdZViewItem?hash=item190189257966.

²⁰⁶ It is unclear whether Corday produced Max Factor's "Magical Musk" cologne.

²⁰⁷ Avon perfume bottle from Fox and Unicorn Online Shop official Web site, http://www.fox-and-unicorn.de/shop/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=3&products_id=376 and Avon potpourri from eBay official Web site, http://cgi.ebay.com/Avon-Tapestry-Collection-Unicorn-Sachet_W00QitemZ6258994478QQcmdZViewItem.

²⁰⁸ eBay official Web site, http://cgi.ebay.com/ESTEE-LAUDER-Solid-Perfume-Compact-Magical-Unicorn-2001_W00QitemZ310013146369QQcmdZViewItem?hash=item310013146369. Many of these containers have since developed into highly collectible objects, particularly for perfume collectors.

of visual messages.”²⁰⁹ This inundation of imagery is palpable in American contemporary culture in general, and, as we have seen, the unicorn as a part of these visual messages has surfaced within numerous contexts. To summarize, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the creature’s depiction signified the British monarchy and materialized as a decorative motif of one American subculture in particular, the Pennsylvania Dutch, who adapted its heraldic roots and associated it with chastity. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century books for children in the United States and Great Britain upheld the perception of the unicorn as symbolic of the British coat of arms and brought the creature to the attention of a young audience. Spurious scientific interest in the unicorn developed after the eccentric experiments of Dr. Dove in 1936, emphasizing the animal’s peculiarity. It was just one year earlier that the Metropolitan Museum of Art had acquired the “Unicorn Tapestries,” aligning the unicorn with the elitism of a renowned institution. Then in 1940 the unicorn emerged in film as an infantilized and fantastical creature in *Fantasia*, and in 1944 *The Glass Menagerie* cast the unicorn as a counterpart to the lonely and fragile character of Laura, while also recalling its religious symbolism.

It was however within the counterculture of the 1960s and its emphasis on spreading beauty, love, and honesty that the unicorn appears to have been most adopted and manipulated. It was part of the gentle symbols of the “hippies” such as peace signs, daisies, and rainbows that became a visual semiotics of love. The Stearns note the interest in unicorns revived at this time: “unicorns had a smidgen of nonconformist cachet. Like rainbows, they signified that their owner wanted to ‘different.’”²¹⁰ And

²⁰⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 129.

²¹⁰ Stern, *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, 305.

Fussell observes that this benevolent perception of the unicorn added to its later popularity: “the unicorn, unlike the dragon, is one mythical animal that is wholly benign, thus resembling such creatures singled out for canonization by proles as whales, dolphins, pandas, and koala bears.”²¹¹ (These same animals are cited by Daniel Harris as assuming the popular aesthetic of “cuteness”.²¹²) In fact, it is said that in the mid-1960s “hippies” gathered at a coffeehouse in San Francisco called the Blue Unicorn.²¹³ A recent television commercial for the 2008 Honda Odyssey minivan attests to the association between the 1960s and the unicorn. To the tune of Heart’s 1977 classic hit “Barracuda,” airbrushed renderings on a vintage van come to life, psychedelically transforming from a hulking Viking to a bikini-clad woman astride a soaring tiger to a crystal ball-bearing wizard to a maiden in Renaissance garb atop a flying unicorn-Pegasus. Magical powder sprinkled by the damsel takes the form of the current Odyssey against a background of growing mushrooms and a distant castle; the 1960s-style balloon lettering reads, “Rejoice With The Van Gods...The Newly Designed...Odyssey... Respect The Van” (figs. 111-116).²¹⁴ Here, any distinctions between 1960s psychedelia, Greek mythology, and a fantastical fairy-tale realm are erased as the Honda is represented and marketed as a “magical” vehicle.

Renaissance Fairs and *The Last Unicorn* had also emerged out of this 1960s alternative culture; both served as inspiration for the Zell-Ravenhearts in the 1980s. But the Zell-Ravenhearts exploited the scientific procedures of Dr. Dove for commercial and

²¹¹ Fussell, *Class*, 141.

²¹² Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic*, 5.

²¹³ It is said that the word “hippie” was first used in print in an article from the *San Francisco Examiner* in September of 1965 in which journalist Michael Fallon describes a new generation of beatniks who congregated at the Blue Unicorn. Numerous Internet searches support this.

²¹⁴ Honda Cars official Web site, <http://automobiles.honda.com/odyssey/videos.aspx>.

entertainment purposes, culminating in Barnum & Bailey's phantasmagoric "The Living Unicorn." During the 1980s there was an increase in all things unicorn, from this circus spectacle to movies like *Legend* to the introduction of toys such as My Little Pony and the "Magical Musk" fragrance for women, illuminating a magical and fairy-tale perception of the creature. Within this trajectory, many of the traditional connotations regarding the unicorn are touched upon, such as the antidotal power of the horn and the virgin legend. Collectively, such allusions have led to what Fussell calls "a dimly recalled connection with virgins" among the general public.²¹⁵

Throughout many of the aforementioned manifestations flowed a singular work—the "Unicorn Tapestries," demonstrating how an object or depiction from high culture can be borrowed by and integrated into popular culture. Since their acquisition and exhibition in 1937, the famed tapestries have been referenced in live entertainment, film, cosmetics, and have served as an endless source of fascination and inspiration for various people. The unicorn itself, first symbolic of heraldry and high culture, has gradually become debased by this incorporation into popular culture. Leiss points out that:

as the general wealth increases, the proportion of positional goods in total production becomes progressively larger. Positional goods are things that allow us to detect social status differences among individuals; their chief value lies in the fact that some persons have them and others do not...When only a relatively few persons have access to goods that are generally desired...the status benefits to them...are enormous. A rising level of general affluence means that more people can strive for these symbols of success...The marketplace, however, also responds by subtly debasing and reinterpreting the success symbols...²¹⁶

If we look at the unicorn as a symbol that indicated value, or as a "positional good" that at one time belonged to the realm of kings and princes, we can say that once it became accessible to a mass audience it became tarnished. This was a process that began

²¹⁵ Fussell, *Class*, 141.

²¹⁶ Leiss, *Social Communication in Advertising*, 298.

with the seventeenth-century discovery that the unicorn was in fact nonexistent and was then accelerated by the rise of consumer and popular culture. Fussell observes that everything in a developed and industrialized society will inevitably become proletarianized, a process he refers to as “Prole Drift.”²¹⁷ In this theory, the traditional things of high culture will eventually end up both appealing to and adopted by the lower classes. Hence, the unicorn that once signified elitist attributes has become the decorating motif of middle-class living rooms and the subject of social criticism. Shed of its traditional associations, the unicorn became perceived by many as an object for ridicule, a sentiment multiplied by its appearance and use as a collected object in movies and television shows like *Dodgeball* and *30 Rock*.

²¹⁷ Fussell, *Class*, 203.

Chapter 4: The Unicorn as Collectible Object and Its Modern-day Collectors

Within the framework of democratized individual and institutional collecting, a relatively new phenomenon has developed that demonstrates a clear link between collecting, consuming, and perhaps “Prole Drift”—that is the rise of “instant collectibles.” Companies such as the Franklin Mint or the Bradford Exchange produce millions of ready-made collectible objects in the form of figurines or wall art that are sold with accompanying documents to verify their authenticity. Although it may seem superfluous to “authenticate” mass-produced objects, it should be noted that similar documentation is provided with the “authentic reproductions” sold at the gift shops of renowned museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose online store sells several reproductions of “The Unicorn in Captivity” in the (essentially valueless) form of posters, pillows, neckties, tote bags, and Christmas ornaments (figs. 117-121).²¹⁸ The only significant difference between these objects and instant collectibles is that the museum’s prestige and possession of the original work of art justifies the retailing of mass-produced replicas only distantly related to the original work of art and somehow signifies “good” taste to the buyer.²¹⁹ In addition to verification, many instant collectibles also boast a limited number of casting days, allowing, says Fussell, enough time so that “billions of the hideous things can be turned out.”²²⁰

²¹⁸ The Met Store official Web site, <http://www.metmuseum.org/search/iquery.asp?command=text&datascope=all&attr1=unicorn&c=t%3A11%2F%2F%3Assl%2F%2Fsitemap+taxonomy%2F%2F%3AThe+Met+Store%3A>.

²¹⁹ Belk, *Collecting*, 122-23.

²²⁰ Fussell, *Class*, 135.

Belk indicates that it is the middle class, and women in particular, who form the majority of the United States population who collect these instant collectibles.²²¹ Fussell satirically discusses the middle-class love for mail-order catalogues which predominantly feature instant collectibles (now largely replaced by corresponding online stores):

Addressed to ‘Resident,’ these tumble through the mail slot all year long... Resident secretly likes receiving these catalogs, for they suggest that someone out there believes he has money and recognizes that he has the power to choose... Catalog buying is the perfect way for the insecure and the hypersensitive and the socially uncertain to sustain their selfhood by accumulating goods. The things bought are not important things—indeed, almost everything offered in these catalogs is conspicuously unnecessary, except as a device to sustain the ego.²²²

These catalogues and online stores chiefly peddle sentimental themes such as baby animals, wide-eyed children, idyllic landscapes, hunting scenes, and patriotic emblems. They also embrace the world of fantasy by offering supernatural subjects including dragons, wizards, fairies, and so forth. It is within this context that we often encounter the contemporary unicorn, in the form of inessential or decorative and collectible figurines or ornamental wall art.

For example, the Bradford Exchange offers the “Mystic Messengers Collectible White Unicorn Fantasy Art Wall Décor,” retailing for \$39.99 plus \$6.99 for shipping and handling (fig. 122). The description is as follows:

Their world is a wondrous place, where silvery waters tumble down a moonlit mountain like liquid white lightning searing through the night. Stop, and listen to your heart flutter as two unicorns leap out of the brush and into the clearing. Hold your breath and take in this exhilarating moment of wonder in white unicorn fantasy art wall decor individually handcrafted on sparkling crystalline. Enter the world of prancing unicorns with this unique wall decor featuring Amanda Swartz’s acclaimed unicorn fantasy art, available only from Bradford Exchange. This limited-edition three-dimensional keepsake or collectible unicorn gift is hand-finished with custom-blended paints. Enchanting demand is expected, and you won’t want to miss out. Order now!

²²¹ Belk, *Collecting*, 97, 100.

²²² Fussell, *Class*, 131-32.

The advertisement goes on to emphasize the authentic, distinctive, and transcendent qualities of the object: “Be reminded of the possibilities of magic” by this “awe-inspiring” and “exclusive...captivating unicorn portraiture...hand-cast of fine artist's resin...chosen for its brilliance and clarity” by a “renowned artist...whose ‘unicorns' coloration perfectly matches that of the waterfall in the background of this white unicorn wall decor, as if the unicorns were formed by these magical waters” and “limited to 295 casting days...hand-numbered with matching Certificate of Authenticity.”²²³ Although this type of pseudo-poetic jargon is applied to the majority of the company's products, the use of particular adjectives—mystic, wondrous, enchanting, magical—points to how the unicorn is collectively perceived by and/or marketed to the public at large. Leiss points out that

consumers are also manipulated by an advertisement's promise that the product will do something special for them—something magical that will transform their lives...advertising works much as mythology does in primitive societies, providing simple, anxiety reducing answers to the complex problems of modern life by playing on the deep symbolic structures of the human imagination...advertisers, it is held, manipulate people by subtly mixing reality and fantasy, by creating a ‘magic show’ that makes it hard to tell what one's ‘real needs’ are or where to draw the line between sensible behaviour and careless over-indulgence.²²⁴

In this case, the advertisement invites the potential customer to pass into the mystical realm that unicorns are symbolic of by possessing the object, allowing an escape from everyday life and unlimited access into a fairy-tale world. According to John Berger, this type of advertisement is effective because it “speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred...It remains credible because the

²²³ Ibid.,

<http://www.collectiblestoday.com/ct/product/prdid900411.jsp?unicorn/prod///6///Y&endeca=true>.

²²⁴ Leiss, *Social Communication in Advertising*, 25, 32.

truthfulness of [advertising] is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to daydreams.”²²⁵ As sociologist Colin Campbell writes, “individuals turn away from what they perceive as an unstimulating real world in order to dwell on the greater pleasures imaginative scenarios can offer...daydreaming creates certain permanent dispositions: a sense of dissatisfaction with real life and a generalized longing for ‘something better.’”²²⁶ Unicorn collectibles abound at CollectiblesToday.com, the umbrella website for companies like the Bradford Exchange, in the form of jewelry, figurines, and music boxes (figs. 123-125). It can be determined from these offerings that the unicorn is not only alive and well, but an object to be collected by those who find significance in the fantasies collectively evoked in the advertisements of such products.

What makes the unicorn suitable as a modern-day collectible? One reason may have to do with the size of the majority of unicorn collectibles. Discussing miniaturized landscapes such as miniature golf courses and children’s zoos, Stewart notes that the process of miniaturization serves to:

realize the exotic and the fantastic on a miniaturized scale. The image that is produced not only bears the tangible qualities of material reality but also serves as a representation, an image, of a reality which does not exist. The referent here is most often the fantastic, yet the fantastic is in fact given “life” by its miniaturization. Although we cannot miniaturize what has not had material being in the first place, we can align the fantastic to the real and thereby miniaturize it by displacement... From the privatized and domesticated world of the miniature, from its petite sincerity, arises an “authentic” subject...

She uses a unicorn as her case in point: “For example, the miniature unicorn is a popular gift-shop item, and we must assume that we are expected to read the scale as “miniature

²²⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 146.

²²⁶ Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” from Lawrence B. Glickman, ed. *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 24-25.

unicorn: unicorn :: miniature horse: horse.”²²⁷ The imaginary unicorn is hence given life through both its small scale and its association with the horse, a real animal. Belk notes that miniatures are such popular collectibles because they give the owner “an omnipotent sense of mastery,” or sense of physical control over their collection.²²⁸ This also explains why children are so often fond of miniatures such as dollhouses or toy trains; these small-scale toys serve as diminutive worlds over which they can preside. Belk also indicates that as collectors, and consumers, we delight in the miniature and the fantastic.²²⁹

In 2001, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a story about 17-year-old Samantha Reno, a collector who has almost one thousand unicorns crowding her bedroom (fig. 126). Although it would be easy to dismiss Samantha as an adolescent with a penchant for stuffed animals, she has (as we shall see) much in common with adult unicorn collectors. Samantha began collecting unicorns after being “captivated by” the movie *The Last Unicorn* eleven years ago, indicating of the influence of popular culture. She acquires unicorns at flea markets and garage sales and will spend as much as \$40 on a single object. Samantha’s collection consists of unicorns made from ceramic, crystal, fabric, glass, metal, plaster, plastic, and wood. Her favorite piece is a “sixteenth-century tapestry” (presumably a reproduction of a panel from the “Unicorn Tapestries”) given to her by a family member. According to the article, Samantha is particularly interested in

²²⁷ Stewart, *On Longing*, 60, 172.

²²⁸ Belk, *Collecting*, 70.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

the history of the unicorn and “the way they have influenced culture over the centuries.”²³⁰

In order to discover other people who were acquiring unicorn collectibles and their reasons for doing so, I scoured websites relating to unicorns, such as “Unicorn Dreams” at http://lair2000.net/Unicorn_Dreams/Unicorn_Dreams.html, a site that provided an informative guestbook containing visitor email addresses. I also searched eBay for high and/or repeat bidders on unicorn-themed objects, some of which sold for as much as \$850.²³¹ (It is interesting to note the high number of unicorn items found on eBay—over 6000 results—as well as some of the usernames and email addresses of bidders e.g. kirin@elidor.de, *kirin* meaning a Japanese unicorn and *Elidor* referring to the name of a 1965 fantasy novel about battling darkness by Alan Garner). Although I sent out many more inquiries, I was able to communicate in depth with seven unicorn collectors: Lynda, Debbie, Alex, Gabi, Matthew, Celia, and Richard. I interviewed each via email with a questionnaire that I formulated, found in Appendix I. The following section will summarize the information gathered from the inquiry forms. This is admittedly a very small sampling but can at least shed some light on what a few present-day collectors say about themselves as collectors of unicorns. This approach can also attest in part to the popularity of the unicorn as a collectible object in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, one that has no intrinsic value but rather is solely concerned with the representation of something known to be imaginary. In addition,

²³⁰ Marcie Hall Newbold, “Lakota East student intrigued by unicorn legend,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (June 24, 2001).

²³¹ eBay official Web site, http://cgi.ebay.com/THE-GOLDESS-AND-UNICORN-6007-N-R_W00QitemZ160169914386Q0ihZ006QQcategoryZ13819QQssPageNameZWDVWQOrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem.

while advertising, books, and films might promote certain views of the unicorn, it is helpful to see how the audience reacts to them or has their own perceptions.

Lynda's Unicorns

Lynda, a 49-year-old human resources supervisor for the United States military with no children, has been collecting unicorns since 2004 and has about forty unicorns in her collection. She began collecting unicorns because she was “intrigued with their beauty and mystery” and continues to have the same passion for them. She also collects Elvis Presley memorabilia. Lynda keeps her collection of unicorns, mostly figurines or wall art, displayed in her house. Her collection is arranged by size and she is working on having a larger display area so that all of the unicorns will be exhibited in one place. Her collection is private and has never been shown publicly, nor does she communicate with any other unicorn collectors.

Lynda purchases the unicorns herself on eBay, spending as much as \$130 on a single object. She will not acquire things simply because they have a unicorn theme. Lynda does not name any of the unicorns in her collection because she indicates that most have names furnished by the manufacturer, alluding to the mass-produced nature of the objects. She considers her collection an investment and is not opposed to the idea of selling a unicorn if she has a duplicate or one that she does not like as much as the others. She does not view her collection as complete and states: “As long as they keep making Unicorns, there will always be more to collect.”

Lynda, someone who “genuinely appreciates beauty and mystery,” feels relaxed when she views her collection, “like there are no worries in the world.” She describes

unicorns as mystical, beautiful, and graceful and believes that they are guardians or protectors. She thinks there are both male and female unicorns that are white in appearance with gold horns. Lynda does not know what a narwhal is and is not familiar with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities. She does think that unicorns have medicinal or antidotal properties “based on the stories of Unicorns,” but does not associate them with any particular religion. Lynda does not remember being aware of unicorns as a child. Although she believes that unicorns exist only in “a spiritual way” today, Lynda does think that they were in existence “many, many years ago.”²³²

Debbie’s Unicorns

Debbie (age and occupation unknown to me) has been collecting unicorns since 2003 and has roughly one hundred unicorn figurines in her collection, all of which are currently packed away due to remodeling. She also collects Pegasus figurines, alluding to the erroneous affiliation between unicorns and Greek mythology. She does not name any of her unicorns. Debbie has shared her collection with others but has never exhibited it to the public, nor does she have any contact with other unicorn collectors.

Debbie acquires her unicorn figurines through eBay, catalogues, and retail stores. The most she has spent on a unicorn is approximately \$1000. She feels unsure if her collection is complete, as she explains, “...if I see something extraordinary and I like it, I will buy it.” Debbie does not think of her collection as an investment and is not opposed to selling them.

²³² Lynda, e-mail message to author, October 24, 2007.

Debbie describes herself as “kind, loving, childlike, organized and anal at times, picky, giving, patient, [and] easy-going.” Aware of unicorns as a child, she thinks her childlike attitude may have led her to start collecting unicorns “because they are beautiful.” Debbie describes unicorns as beautiful, magical, and healing and believes that they symbolize beauty. She feels that “each piece of my collection is special and that makes me happy.” Debbie thinks there are both male and female unicorns that are white with golden or bone-colored horns. She knows what a narwhal is but is unfamiliar with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities. However, she does associate unicorns with European and Scandinavian countries and believes that unicorns have medicinal or antidotal properties. Both a religious and a spiritual person, Debbie is open to the possibility that unicorns exist today and believes that they certainly did exist in the past.²³³

Alex’s Unicorns

Alex is the first of two unicorn collectors that I met in person after he was introduced to me by a mutual acquaintance who knew of my thesis topic. My friend had informed me that Alex might be quite shy about his collection, but revealed to me that Alex enjoyed unicorns enough to use the URL www.blueskiesandunicorns.com for his wedding website and had a unicorn centerpiece (with a glowing horn) at his wedding. Alex, who is a 34-year-old photographer with no children, has been collecting unicorns since 1999 and has no more than twenty unicorns at any given time in his collection. Alex began collecting unicorns because he “kept seeing them in thrift stores,” initially giving them to his girlfriend (now wife) as gifts while keeping some for himself. He

²³³ Debbie, e-mail message to author, October 27, 2007.

describes the feeling of finding inexpensive thrift store unicorns as a “rush...similar to a magical feeling...a chance sighting of something otherworldly.” Alex does not collect anything else and does not name any of the unicorns. His collection, which consists of crystal, ceramic, and metal figurines, drawings, prints, a photo-realistic calendar, and objects such as flower pots and wind chimes, is arranged in no particular order in his New York City apartment. Although Alex shares his collection with friends, he has never exhibited it publicly and he does not communicate with other unicorn collectors.

Alex acquires unicorns mainly from thrift stores and the most he has spent on a single unicorn is approximately \$15. He would consider acquiring a unicorn-themed object even if he did not like the object itself. Alex does not feel that his collection is, or ever will be, complete. He does not think of his collection as an investment and would never sell a unicorn from the collection.

Alex describes himself as a person with “an appreciation of the unseen and unspoken,” and possesses “a feeling that anything is possible, that reality is a loose set of rules that only works until it doesn’t.” Somewhat aware of unicorns as a child, he describes unicorns as radiant, magical, and special and believes that they symbolize purity and the invisible world. Alex states that he feels “a little weird” when he looks at his unicorn collection. He thinks that there are both male and female unicorns that are white with white horns. Alex is familiar with both narwhals and sixteenth- and seventeenth century European cabinets of curiosities. A spiritual person, he does not associate unicorns with any particular religion or with having any medicinal or antidotal properties. Alex is “sure [unicorns] must have” existed in the past.²³⁴

²³⁴ Alex, email message to author, May 1, 2008.

Gabi's Unicorns

Gabi, a 39-year-old customs officer, has been collecting unicorns since 1985 and has thousands of unicorn objects including approximately 400 books, comics, and coloring books, 350 different note-cards and collector cards, 100 pewter unicorns, 250 resin figurines, 150 porcelain figurines, 35 collector plates, 75 other figurines made from glass, crystal, wood, brass, or stone, 25 pieces of jewelry, and an assortment of small things such as pencils, stickers, stamps, and coins. She and her husband made a decision not to have children and when asked this she remarked, "Oh god, I guess they would give me a heart attack every time they would come near my unicorn collection." Gabi does not name any of the unicorns, and does not collect anything else. Her collection is displayed in glass cabinets and on shelves in her home in Hilden, Germany (figs. 127-130). It is arranged by brand or material. Gabi considers her collection private but has a website, <http://www.elidor.de>, which showcases her collection. She would like to exhibit her collection and does communicate with other unicorn collectors in Germany.

Gabi first began acquiring unicorns as gifts from others. Her friends and family have since stopped this practice because it is too difficult for them to find a unicorn that she does not already own. Gabi searches eBay for unicorns and notes that in Germany it is hard to find unicorn figurines that do not incorporate fairies, indicating the association between the two. Gabi is rather particular in the unicorns that she collects, preferring that they be "simply unicorns" and that she "can't stand fairies together with unicorns in a figurine." Gabi also looks for unicorns while on vacation in places such as Canada, Ireland, or Scotland, where "you'll find them without even searching for them." She has spent as much as \$300 on a single unicorn.

Although her husband feels that she has “too many” unicorns, Gabi does not think her collection is complete. She feels that it probably never will be, stating “as long as the factories won’t stop producing them I will always find new ones I’d like to add,” providing another reference that the objects collected are mass-produced. Gabi sometimes sells unicorns from her collection because “as time moves on, taste changes” as well as to make room for new unicorns. Collecting since age 17, Gabi does not still have any of her “starting stock” of unicorns, which she describes as being “lovely and pretty” at the time she acquired them. Gabi does not think of her collection as an investment, but collects purely for the “fun and joy” of it.

Describing herself as solitary, curious, and skeptical, Gabi says she loves looking at, rearranging, and handling the unicorns in her collection. She describes unicorns as beautiful, mysterious, mystical, and fascinating but does not think that they symbolize anything in particular. Gabi thinks that there are both male and female unicorns of many colors with horns resembling “a narwhale in form and color but maybe not that big.” Familiar with narwhals, she would like to own a narwhal tusk—“a fake one made of resin.” Although she indicates knowledge of the narwhal, Gabi still expresses that she does not like “the idea of hunting [unicorns] and [cutting] off their horn” for the medicinal or antidotal properties that she deems them to have.

Gabi is also aware of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities, which she describes as “horrible display shows of disabled humans and animals.” She does not associate unicorns with any particular religion and first became aware of unicorns as a teenager when she saw the movie *The Last Unicorn*—another indication of the impact of popular culture. Gabi does not believe that unicorns exist

today—“sad but true there is no such animal as a Unicorn,” but believes that animals resembling unicorns may have been around “in the times when a saber tooth tiger exist[ed].”²³⁵

Matthew’s Unicorns

Matthew, a 40-old train driver with no children, has been collecting unicorns since 1984 and currently has about one hundred unicorns in his collection. At one point Matthew had around five hundred unicorns but he has since thinned down the collection because he felt it was overcrowded, especially since he considers that “traditionally, unicorns are very solitary animals.” Matthew, who does not collect anything else, displays his collection throughout his house in Newcastle, England in “a deliberately defuse [sic] way so as not to overpower our home. A visitor wouldn't be in much doubt that someone in the house liked unicorns, but might not conclude it was a life-long pursuit.” Almost all of the rooms in the house have at least one or two unicorns on display and Matthew states that “the best figurines grace the bedroom and the living room, sharing place with several dragons that belong to my wife,” alluding to the unicorn’s place alongside other legendary creatures within the realm of the fantastical.

The types of objects in Matthew’s collection include “fictional and factual” books, DVDs, CDs, CGI models, computer games, figurines, posters, toys, stickers, bookmarks, badges, brooches, buttons, tee-shirts, embroidery designs, plates, mugs, and stained-glass. He will occasionally name a unicorn in his collection if it reminds him of a particular character from a book, such as one he coined Jewel from C. S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*.

²³⁵ Gabi, e-mail message to author, October 28, 2007.

Matthew acquires unicorns from eBay, mail-order catalogues, retail shops, craft fairs, or as gifts. Although he used to obtain unicorns “completely indiscriminately,” he is now much pickier, due in part to space considerations, but mainly because he says, “I hold unicorns to be an ideal, and if I acquire a new unicorn, it must live up to that.” Matthew estimates spending as much as \$250 on a single unicorn, noting that he “wouldn't necessarily balk at paying quite a lot more... I'm the sort of person that approaches things with the attitude ‘If I want it and can afford it, it's worth the price.’” He will also go to great lengths to obtain a unicorn, once spending three years to track down a particular CD soundtrack of *The Last Unicorn* (another indication of the movie's popularity) or riding his bicycle a total of eighty miles to purchase a pewter brooch while on vacation in Dorset.

Matthew considers his collection an informal one- “it's really just a large number of unicorn 'things' that I enjoy having around.” It is mostly private, with the exception of visiting friends and family, and has never been exhibited publicly. Matthew feels that a collection of unicorns would not be of any interest to anyone in the vicinity of where he lives and believes that people who are interested in unicorns are “fairly far between.” However, Matthew has had sporadic contact with other collectors. One in particular, Geoff, lives not very far from him and they often contribute to each other's collections. Geoff also has several of Matthew's unicorn figurines on permanent loan. Both men have websites devoted to unicorn artwork and stories; Matthew's “Unicorn Dream” is available at <http://www.unicorn-dream.co.uk/> and “Geoff's Unicorn Page” at <http://www.unicorn-meadow.co.uk/unicorns/index.html>.

Matthew would never sell a unicorn from his collection, but has given some away in the past. He states, “I couldn't explain it—particularly as I have no problem with *buying* a unicorn—but *selling* one just seems wrong somehow.” However, when Matthew pared down his collection he did get rid of some of the cheaper and more poorly executed pieces that had only been acquired because they were unicorns, including a My Little Pony (suggestive of the toy’s popularity among adult collectors). He says, “I found it really hard to just throw them away, as if I were somehow hurting their feelings.” He does not think of his collection as an investment, at least not in a monetary sense. Matthew does not feel that his collection is complete, noting that he just bought “a writing book with a resin cover featuring a prancing unicorn in relief” the day prior to answering these interview questions. He feels “reverent” when looking at his collection, and does not “regard [the unicorns] as mere objects.”

Matthew describes unicorns as beautiful, graceful, and magical and further elaborates:

Unicorns vary a lot through history and through different cultures. Modern fantasy holds as many variations, and I believe that modern fiction has as much right to shape them as any ancient tome. The only common ground really is that they have one horn, as their name dictates, but I believe that to be a real unicorn, it must be the embodiment of those three qualities.

He believes that unicorns symbolize “just about every positive virtue really...I've heard them described as ‘life elementals.’ They make a wonderful ideal to aspire to. It's not an ideal that any mere human is ever likely to get very close to, but it's not a bad direction to travel.”

Matthew believes that there are both male and female unicorns as well as ones that are neither and both sexes, with “magical” white coats and horns of an ivory, beige,

or black color, or of metallic gold, silver, or crystal. Matthew is familiar with narwhals, defining one as “the unicorn of the sea, whose spiral tusk is commonly held to be a unicorn's horn.” Unfamiliar with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities, Matthew does think that the horn of a living unicorn can heal anything and nullify any poison. He accepts that Christianity has had a strong influence on the legend of the unicorn, but does not identify unicorns with any specific religion today, alluding to the loss of this particular connotation over time. Matthew’s friends have suggested that he himself could start a “Church of the Unicorn.”

Matthew, who describes himself as somewhat shy, creative, and always ready to help, started collecting unicorns because of his love for horses, fantasy, and the horse-like creatures of myth and legend including centaurs, winged horses, and kelpies. He recalls:

Unicorns rose to the fore in this regard when I was about fourteen and saw a picture in a Dungeons & Dragons manual. It was just an ink-sketch but something struck me. Not long afterwards, I read C. S. Lewis' *The Final Battle*... This inspired me to look for more unicorns in fantasy literature. Since it wasn't as easy to find books back then (pre-internet!) it wasn't for a couple of years that I happened across *The Last Unicorn* by Peter Beagle. I've never read another book that I found so moving. To me (and, I understand, many other unicorn-lovers) Beagle's lyrical style was very beautiful, and a perfect carriage for portraying a creature possessed of such unearthly beauty and magic. That was it! I began acquiring unicorns from this point!

Matthew’s description is again indicative of the association between unicorns and the creatures of Greek mythology and the influence of popular culture, particularly *The Last Unicorn*. Matthew does believe in unicorns, stating:

they exist, but where and how is an unknown. I just *feel* it. There's been a time or two in my life - usually when I'm moved by something - when I could easily believe - and do - that there is a unicorn there, unseen...there have been times when I could easily believe there was some ethereal unicorn present, watching.²³⁶

²³⁶ Matthew, e-mail message to author, August 6, 2007.

Celia's Unicorns

Celia, who is 48 and has one grown son, used to be an account and tax preparer but no longer works due to a disability. She has been collecting unicorns since at least 1967 and has over two hundred and fifty unicorns in the form of lamps, figurines, music boxes, candles, stuffed animals, bookmarks, framed wall pictures, posters, and paintings. She does not name any of the unicorns because there are so many. She also collects Pegasus objects and teddy bears, once again pointing to the correlation between unicorns and Greek mythology. Celia's entire unicorn collection is located in a room by itself where it is arranged by size, color, and material. She considers the collection private, but will show it to people who are interested. She has never publicly exhibited the collection and does not communicate with other unicorn collectors.

Celia acquires unicorns as gifts or buys them for herself, spending as much as \$55 on a single unicorn. She does not think that her collection is complete, stating that "as long as there are Unicorns and Pegasus to be collected I will collect them" and that "anything that is a Unicorn will be collected and put with my collection." "Never in a million years" would Celia sell a unicorn from her collection, particularly because some unicorns were made from limited edition molds, referring to the type of casts that Fussell stated could produce "billions" of instant collectibles.²³⁷ Celia thinks of the collection first as a love and then as an investment.

Describing herself as loving, peaceable, spiritual, and most of all honest, Celia feels "at peace and calm and very proud" when she looks at her collection. She began collecting because "of the beauty and meaning behind the unicorns and what they stand for," noting that unicorns can be found in the Bible. However, she does not associate

²³⁷ Fussell, *Class*, 135.

unicorns with any specific religion today, referring again to the loss of this particular connotation within the collective mind.

Celia describes unicorns as magical, loving, and pure and believes that they symbolize purity. She thinks that there are both male and female unicorns that are “your basic white, black, brown and golden with golden horn, black horn, or white horn.” Celia is familiar with narwhals and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities. She believes that unicorns have medicinal properties “not for humans but for their own kind.” Celia is unsure whether or not unicorns exist today but believes that they did centuries ago.²³⁸

Richard’s Unicorns

Richard is the second collector that I met in person and it was only by chance that I discovered he was a collector of unicorns. I attended a social gathering at his home in Newport, Rhode Island as a student of the Victorian Society in America Summer School of 2007, a program that provided an in-depth study of the architectural and cultural facets of late nineteenth-century Newport through an intensive series of lectures, site visits, and guided tours. The program also considered Newport’s plethora of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century architecture. Richard, an accomplished interior decorator and prominent figure in Newport society, had graciously opened his Federal house for us to explore. In addition to being a classic example of early American architecture, the house was also beautifully decorated in accordance with Richard’s flair. He had previously worked with the acclaimed and eccentric decorator Sister Parish (1910-1994) and had filled his home with a sophisticated and whimsical blend of impressive antiques, boldly

²³⁸ Celia, e-mail message to author, August 1, 2007.

patterned textiles and wallpapers, and exotic flowers. A classmate of mine informed me that she had seen a framed drawing of a unicorn in one of the rooms (fig. 131). Upon closer inspection, I realized that although unicorns were not at first perceptible, each room was literally teeming with them in the form of books, bookmarks, bookends, livery buttons, jewelry, pillows, porcelain, prints and drawings, stamps, sculptures, trinket boxes, wastebaskets, and so on (figs. 132-134). Because Richard was the host of nearly forty people at the time of my visit, I only spoke briefly to him about the unicorn objects. He informed me that they were mostly gifts and that his decorating business was named “The Red Unicorn.” A few months later I sent Richard the same questionnaire that I had sent to the other collectors and learned the following information.

Richard, who is in his 60s and has no children, has been collecting unicorns since at least 1957 and has “hundreds—no real count” arranged throughout his house in no particular order. He does not name any of the unicorns. Richard is particularly proud of a set of dishes that were made for John Humphrey, Lord Mayor of London (1842), that feature pink unicorns in the center with pink and green borders. He also collects pewter and Chinese export porcelain. Richard considers his collection of unicorns private, has never exhibited it in public, and does not communicate with other unicorn collectors.

Richard buys unicorn objects for himself or he receives them as gifts. He estimates spending as much as \$5,000 to \$6,000 on a single unicorn object. Richard began collecting because of a family crest and ring he owned, both of which featured a unicorn. He does not consider his collection complete and would not acquire an object merely because it related to a unicorn. Richard does not consider his collection an investment and would never sell one of his unicorns.

A spiritual man, Richard feels “very happy” when he looks at his unicorn objects and considers the unicorn to be a symbol of Christ and associates them with Christianity. He believes that unicorns are white with ivory horns and are un-gendered. He is aware of narwhals and sixteenth- and seventeenth- century European cabinets of curiosities. Richard does not think that unicorns have medicinal or antidotal properties (except in legend) and does not believe that unicorns exist, or that they ever existed.²³⁹

Many of the collectors interviewed made direct reference to unicorns within popular culture; from the “Unicorn Tapestries” to the textual and animated *The Last Unicorn* to the creature’s acquired associations with dragons, fairies, and Pegasus. Only Richard, a collector of high-end antiques, finds the unicorn emblematic of Christ and Christianity—perhaps this is telling in that the most seemingly upper-class collector still associates the unicorn with a traditional meaning. The other six collectors all place the creature in a fantastical world. In the next chapter I will weave together the motivations of these collectors with those of Rudolf II and carry out a contemporary analysis of collecting to see if any commonalities exist among these collectors and their notion of the unicorn object itself.

²³⁹ Richard, letter to author, October 23, 2007.

Chapter 5: Transformations and Continuities in Collecting and Collectors: The Unicorn Object Reconfigured

Although the precise and idiosyncratic motivations for each and every collector vary greatly and, perhaps, can never be fully grasped, one thing is certain: all collectors are utterly passionate about *objects*, and in this case those that relate specifically to unicorns. What motivated Rudolf II to commission a beaker made from what he supposed to be a unicorn horn from his court jeweler around 1600 was almost certainly different from the motivation experienced by “unicornlady1966,” the highest bidder for a ceramic cup with a unicorn lid on eBay in 2007 (figs. 8, 135), but perhaps there are some similarities to be found.²⁴⁰ But this chapter will compare the practices of unicorn collectors of past and present to explicate these motivations, and it will also explore how the unicorn object itself has transformed over time.

Far from simply a leisurely pursuit, Rudolf’s reasons for collecting were manifold. Rudolf came from a long line of Hapsburg collectors that were renowned for their breadth and innovations within the history of collecting.²⁴¹ With collecting in his blood, Rudolf ultimately amassed a collection that was unparalleled. Simultaneously it functioned as a visual display of wealth and power, a tool of political negotiation, a source of ready money, and a cultural concourse for leading artists, scientists, and

²⁴⁰ eBay official Web site, http://cgi.ebay.com/English-Ceramic-China-Cup-with-wonderful-Unicorn-Lid-Ar_W00QitemZ130162922092QQihZ003QQcategoryZ10862QQssPageNameZWDVWQQrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem.

²⁴¹ Not only did Rudolf inherit the collections and court artists of his father, Maximilian II, but Rudolf also spent much of his adolescence residing at the court of his relative Philip II of Spain (1527-1598), whose vast and discriminating collection helped to shape Rudolf’s future collecting habits. In addition, his uncle Archduke Ferdinand II (1529-1595) was also a renowned and ambitious collector, from Thomas DaCosta Kaufman, “From Treasury to Museum: The Collections of the Austrian Habsburgs.” Elsner, *The Cultures of Collecting*, 137, 144.

scholars. Historian Paula Findlen suggests that collecting during the early modern period was also a way of “aestheticizing the self.” By this she means that in gathering prime examples of antiquities, art, and nature, a collector subsequently “invented himself,” or created a reflection of the attributes he supposed himself to possess. Findlen uses the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) as an example of one whose collection was a veritable self-portrait: the most magnificent objects from his collection, including narwhal tusks (representative of rarity, expense, and extraordinary powers), were displayed in the same room as his own portrait.²⁴²

Like Aldrovandi, Rudolf’s collection was a reflection of himself. Findlen writes that, “by the time of Rudolf’s death in 1612, it was hard to distinguish his own reputation from that of his artefacts.”²⁴³ Although it shared many commonalities with other *Wunderkammern*, Rudolf’s collection explicitly expressed his own particular and distinctive predilections. Always searching for new things to augment his collection, the introverted Rudolf spent most of his time preoccupied with his possessions and seemingly ignoring his political duties. But as historian Thomas DaCosta Kaufman argues “...Rudolf was not avoiding affairs of state, but making a political statement.” Kaufman discerns that at a time when rulers were also expected to be collectors, Rudolf’s collection functioned not only as a political device, but also as a demonstration of his microcosmic authority over a larger world. Renaissance interest in the Hermetic tradition (specifically the interrelated concepts of the microcosm and macrocosm) allowed Rudolf

²⁴² Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 294-95, 308. According to his guest books, Aldrovandi had many visitors to his collection; thus, all who saw it were likely to transpose the remarkable traits of the objects to Aldrovandi himself, from Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 136-42.

²⁴³ Paula Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” from Fučíková, *Rudolf II and Prague*, 209.

to use the objects in his “magic memory theater” to connect himself to the occult.²⁴⁴ Objects imbued with magical forces that resonated with cosmic powers could be contemplated by Rudolf, who presumably summoned these higher forces for insight and wisdom to be associated with his own monarchy. Findlen concurs, writing that Rudolf’s collection “became a powerful symbol of the Emperor’s vision of the world—an extended allegory of his earthly reign...Rather than being the folly of a delusory prince, the *Kunstkammer* was a calculated part of Rudolf’s persona as an omniscient ruler and a logical expansion of the Habsburg tradition of patronizing the arts and sciences.”²⁴⁵

The more psychoanalytic Muensterberger observes that Rudolf, “a man living on the threshold between rational thought and mysticism,” also had all the characteristics of an anal-obsessive personality. Rudolf’s belief that bezoar stones (small, hard concretions found in the intestines of ruminant animals and widely collected in early modern Europe) possessed antidotal properties led him to wear one on his person.²⁴⁶ According to Findlen, Rudolf also possessed a bezoar stone that was so large it was carved into a drinking cup.²⁴⁷ This conviction explains the foremost motivation behind Rudolf’s commissioning of a tankard made from the horn of a unicorn. Irrespective of its aesthetic value as an object of meticulous craftsmanship uniting art and nature and its relative worth from the incorporation of precious metal and gemstones, the real significance of the beaker was in the assumed antidotal powers of an otherwise worthless narwhal tusk.

The mystical unicorn tankard was just one single object in Rudolf’s vast collection that embodied the universe over which he ruled. This type of collecting, where

²⁴⁴ Kaufman, “From Treasury to Museum, 144-45.

²⁴⁵ Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” 211.

²⁴⁶ Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 191-95. A physician of Rudolf’s had recommended that he wear the stone.

²⁴⁷ Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” 212.

choice examples are selected with the aim of completing a set, is defined by Pearce as “systematic collecting.” Based on classification, objects are removed from their contexts and placed into serial relationships that necessitate organized space; systematic collecting is therefore envisioned as display.²⁴⁸ This is evident in Rudolf’s array of objects and their methodical arrangement within his cabinet. Thus, we can summarize Rudolf’s motivations for collecting as follows: he grew up in an atmosphere that fostered the custom of collecting, collecting was an implicit part of his duties as a ruler, and he amassed objects that reflected his own specific tastes and interests as well as his power. His impetus to possess a vessel comprised of unicorn horn, in particular, related to his reliance on supernatural objects that allied him to the larger universe, in this case an object that would avert the ever-present threat of poison.

Rudolf undoubtedly believed that unicorns existed and had faith in the protective powers of their horns, prompting him to commission the unicorn beaker for his massive *Wunderkammer*. For Rudolf the horn was authentic. But what about the motivations and beliefs of present-day unicorn collectors? When directly compared to Rudolf and his motivations, the differences with present-day unicorn collectors seem glaring—Rudolf was after all a Holy Roman Emperor who assembled one of the most significant collections in early modern Europe. The seven collectors I interviewed are ordinary people who collect as a leisurely pursuit unrelated to their employment. Four out of the seven recalled that their parents had collections of some sort but there was no indication that these collections were in any way influential. Although the seven contemporary collections do serve as a reflection of their owners, they differ tremendously from

²⁴⁸ Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” from Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 201-02.

Rudolf's in that they are comprised solely of unicorn objects with no pretense to authenticity. The actual reasons given by the collectors as to why they collect unicorns—Lynda is “intrigued with their beauty and mystery,” Celia because “of the beauty and meaning behind the unicorns and what they stand for”—seem more mystical and attached to symbolism than rational or pragmatic.²⁴⁹

As we have seen in Chapter One, Rudolf's prime motivation in enhancing his collection with a unicorn object was his belief in the antidotal nature of the horn. It may seem superfluous to consider whether the alleged properties of a creature now acknowledged to be imaginary continue to inspire collectors, particularly when these so-called “powers” often fall victim to parody: online retailers peddle “Unicorn Power” chewing gum with which “you can harness the majestic power of the unicorn” or “Enchanted Unicorn” bandages that use their “magical healing power” to remedy “even your ouchiest owies” (figs. 136-137).²⁵⁰ Surprisingly, however, five of the seven unicorn collectors (everyone except Alex and Richard) actually believe that unicorns do have medicinal or antidotal properties of some kind. These five, and Alex, also feel that unicorns exist today and/or that they existed in the past. Even so, it is unlikely that these convictions are the principal motivations for their collecting of unicorn objects.

Belk suggests that collections often do not begin purposefully, but rather start off with a gift or accidental find that prompts a quest for similar items.²⁵¹ This is the case with Gabi, whose unicorn collection began when she acquired a few unicorns as gifts and

²⁴⁹ From here on all quotations taken from the interviewees are not noted individually. All forthcoming quotes are taken from the questionnaire answers which were previously noted.

²⁵⁰ Gum and bandages at Archie McPhee official Web site, <http://www.mcphee.com/items/M6148.html> and <http://www.mcphee.com/items/11748.html>, respectively.

²⁵¹ Russell W. Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” from Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 318.

now consists of thousands of unicorn objects and Alex, who continually came across unicorns at thrift stores, as he put it, “a chance sighting of something otherworldly.” Belk also indicates that some collections are “discovered” after the fact, when an unintentional accumulation of like objects becomes apparent.²⁵² Matthew rejects the notion that his unicorns are a “formal collection” by stating that he does not keep a catalogue and that he feels that they are “really just a large number of unicorn 'things' that I enjoy having around.”

Danet and Katriel, in their paper “No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” explore several motivations characteristic of collectors that are applicable to the interviewees. One is the ambition to acquire only “perfect” objects, either in the physical (e.g. free of cracks, blemishes, or scratches) or the aesthetic sense (e.g. a fine art masterpiece). A derivative of this motive entails the continual improvement of an existing collection.²⁵³ Gabi recalls that she no longer has the “starting stock” of unicorns that formed her early collection because she has since frequently traded up as her taste has evolved and she can afford more expensive unicorns. After paring down his collection, Matthew only acquires new unicorns “if they really impress [him].” By discarding many of the unicorns that he used to collect “indiscriminately” and by limiting himself to adding only exceptional examples, Matthew is striving for perfection within his collection. Danet and Katriel also indicate that collections, like pets, are objects to be both loved and dominated.²⁵⁴ The concept of ownership is paramount to some collectors: Gabi specifically noted that she delights in looking at, rearranging, and handling the

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Danet and Katriel, “No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” from Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 233-34.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 228-29.

unicorns in her collection. Possessing and caring for inanimate objects allows Gabi complete control over them; most of her unicorns peer out from within the confines of carefully organized glass-front cabinets (figs. 127-129).

Danet and Katriel also note that a number of collectors have a tendency to personify the objects in their collection.²⁵⁵ This can take the form of naming, talking to, or imparting human emotion to the objects. When Matthew thinned out his collection, he described how it pained him to discard the unwanted unicorns because he felt that he was “somehow hurting their feelings.” Describing one as a My Little Pony, he followed the emailed statement with a happy-faced emoticon, as if he felt rather sheepish that a grown man would feel bad about throwing away a toy, particularly one associated with little girls. In this case, the unicorns have transcended their materiality as inanimate objects; Matthew concurs by revealing that he “can never regard them as mere objects.”

Alternatively, Danet and Katriel mention that many collectors are prompted by more rational need to fill a space, be it the page of an album (e.g. stamps), a shelf, or a room.²⁵⁶ This idea is brought to fruition in Gabi’s crowded display cabinets and shelves (figs. 127-130). Similarly, Celia’s unicorn collection consumes an entire room of her house. Debbie noted over and over again that her collection was packed away because of renovations, presumably an indication of her frustration that the unicorns are not “filling up” their customary places. The collections of Matthew and Richard are both dispersed haphazardly throughout their whole houses, and in the case of Richard, not perceptible at first glance. His arrangement of unicorns can most likely be conflated with his techniques as an interior decorator.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 223.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 231-32.

Collectors can also be motivated by the sheer thrill of the hunt and the great lengths it can take to obtain a desired object. This aspect of collecting is most clearly seen in Matthew's approach; he spent three years and “immense amounts of trouble” tracking down a particular CD soundtrack of *The Last Unicorn* and recalled bicycling a total of eighty miles over steep hills to secure a specific unicorn. This kind of commitment and extravagance demonstrated towards an object is akin to the emotions elicited from love and lust.

It seems that all seven of the collectors I interviewed participate in the type of collecting defined by Pearce as “fetishistic collecting.” Pearce separates fetishistic collecting from the systematic collecting practiced by Rudolf II and “souvenir” collecting, where the object becomes capable of carrying the past into the present by representing events that can be remembered but not relived. In fetishistic collecting, the aim is to compulsively acquire more and more of the same type of object, or “samples,” without a fixed ending point (with the exception of death, financial ruin, or a shift in interest). Pearce asserts that fetishistic collections are an attempt to create a “private universe” by the collector, whose imagination identifies with the beloved object. This object provokes such strong emotion in the collector that he or she is stimulated to accumulate as many as possible.²⁵⁷ In keeping with this analysis, the seven interviewees indicated that their collections were not complete, that they did not foresee completion, and that they had no intention of ceasing to acquire unicorns. Celia, Lynda, and Gabi all explicitly stated that for as long as unicorn objects continue to exist or to be manufactured, they will continue to collect them.

²⁵⁷ Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” 195-97, 200-01.

As Belk emphasizes, without something left to collect, a collector is unable to define him- or herself. It is only with the repetitive acquisition that an impression of “mastery and prowess” is attained.²⁵⁸ Muensterberger elaborates that the pleasure experienced from one object is not enough: “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.”²⁵⁹ This desire may account for the overflow of objects in early modern *Wunderkammern* and perhaps in many contemporary collections as well. What Belk calls a “delight in profusion” has been largely accelerated by mass production and the parallel democratization of collecting.²⁶⁰ And as Woodward writes, “if consumption could ever be characterized in historical perspective as typically utilitarian—that is, being essentially a question of utility in use—then by contrast it is now characteristically constructive: identity-forming, reflexive, expressive and even playful.”²⁶¹

As we have seen, forming a “private universe” through the perpetual collection of significant objects was a concept embodied by Rudolf, who used these magical objects to align himself with the occult. Muensterberger notes that all collectors assign power and value, or an “intrinsic life force” to objects, regardless of whether they are extraordinary or mediocre. These imbued objects in turn offer “magical compensation” and facilitate “a magical escape into a remote and private world.”²⁶² This is the primary motivation shared by the seven interviewees. As Danet and Katriel note, “Collecting...brings together a twofold interest in the world of objects—objects viewed in their distinctive

²⁵⁸ Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” 324.

²⁵⁹ Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 13.

²⁶⁰ Belk, *Collecting*, 63.

²⁶¹ Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 23.

²⁶² Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 9, 13, 15.

concreteness and objects viewed as invitations to reverie and fantasy, or ‘springboard[s] to fantasy.’”²⁶³ In fact, Belk even suggests that mundane or ordinary objects shift into the realm of the sacred through the very process of collecting. When collectors “remove an item from the secular, profane, undifferentiated realm of the commodity, and ritually transform it into a personally and socially significant object...the sacralized item becomes a vehicle of transcendent experience which exceeds its utilitarian and aesthetic endowment.”²⁶⁴ With this rationalization we can begin to understand why Mathew feels “reverent” when he looks at his collection, while others may see only a kitschy accumulation of unicorn replicas. In discussing objects as they relate to decorating, author Joan Kron states, “To the outsider, the vase or the book or the plate is just that, but to the [owner], the cherished item fairly glows with significance.”²⁶⁵ According to Belk, this sacredness is also ascertained from a collector’s unwillingness to sell objects from the collection (with the exception of upgrading).²⁶⁶ As Matthew disclosed, “*selling* one just seems wrong somehow.” Celia agreed, proclaiming that “never in a million years” would she sell one of her unicorns.

Belk observes that both *Wunderkammern* and modern-day collections are attempts to categorize, comprehend, and dominate: “...collectors who possess an interrelated set of objects control a ‘little world.’”²⁶⁷ In representing a microcosm of the universe, Rudolf’s vast collection guided him in understanding and governing the larger world while simultaneously reinforcing his status as a ruler. The collections of unicorns accumulated by the present-day collectors, most often in the form of miniature objects as

²⁶³ Danet and Katriel, “Glorious Obsessions,” 29.

²⁶⁴ Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” 320.

²⁶⁵ Kron, *Home-Psych*, 56.

²⁶⁶ Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” 321.

²⁶⁷ Belk, *Collecting*, 70.

discussed by Stewart, create private worlds over which they alone physically dominate, resulting in Belk's "omnipotent sense of mastery."²⁶⁸ As Brown indicates "...the collector can claim some mastery, some exhilarating expertise. Collectors collect more than objects; they collect the knowledge (however pedestrian or profound) that empowers them to take pleasure in those objects and to take advantage of someone else's ignorance."²⁶⁹ Collections can also be perceived as an extension of the individual. Not only did Rudolf's collection reflect his widespread yet particular interests (forming a self-portrait of sorts), it also brought to light his faith in the supernatural. Likewise, the unicorn collections of the interviewees mirror the specific preferences of each one (e.g. Gabi looks specifically for figurines that do not incorporate fairies) and reveal their confidence, perhaps unconsciously, in the "magical compensation" supplied by these objects.

Danet and Katriel observe that all collectors also experience an inner conflict between rationality and passion. Rationality is visible in the deliberation taken when evaluating which objects to buy and at what price or in determining the quality or authenticity of an object. Passion can be seen in the ceaseless acquisition of objects, a "have to have it now" attitude, the great lengths often taken to obtain an object, the time spent tending to the collection, and the adoration of objects as expressed by collectors.²⁷⁰ Rudolf simultaneously revealed in the logical and orderly workmanship of his instrument makers while articulating his passion when he proclaimed (in regard to receiving a long-awaited object), "Now it is mine!"²⁷¹ Lynda and Debbie demonstrate rationality in that

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Brown, "The Collecting Mania."

²⁷⁰ Danet and Katriel, "No Two Alike," 222.

²⁷¹ Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 193, 195.

they will not indiscriminately purchase objects simply because they portray a unicorn, while Celia reveals her passion by declaring “Anything that is a Unicorn will be collected and put with my collection.”

Belk further indicates that even the most mundane of collections (e.g. Mickey Mouse characters, comic books, elephant replicas) can represent to collectors their place in a larger, historical tradition of collecting.²⁷² The types of objects that are selected for collection merely echo the broader circumstances:

Just as it was natural...to assemble cabinets of automata, wonders from the New World, and natural curiosities in a time and place in which science was emerging as the sacred center, so too is it natural to collect and revere mass-produced objects...in a consumer society in which consumer goods have become the central focus of our dreams and desires.²⁷³

Fussell observes how this grand tradition of collecting is manipulated as a marketing ploy with the preconceived collections or “heirlooms” that are so prominent in mail-order catalogues. Here, the promise of a dramatic increase in value and the enticement of “limited editions” imply “that every man is his own Huntington or Frick or Morgan.”²⁷⁴ The instant collectible thus manipulates an indeterminate craving among individuals for fame, importance, and immortality.

Collections, regardless of whether or not they begin intentionally, fulfill a need for the continuous goal of perfection and a desire to fill space; they satisfy a need for the “thrill of the hunt” and/or allow a collector to feel ownership, sometimes through personification. They permit the collector to rule over a private world consisting of objects imbued with magical significance. Representing an extension of the self, collections can provide a forum for expressing rational and passionate tendencies while

²⁷² Belk, *Collecting*, 76.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷⁴ Fussell, *Class*, 135.

also connecting the collector to a greater historical tradition. Collections reinforce one's sense of self in the world as dominant, secure, and identifiable. In many ways, therefore, the collecting processes of Rudolf II and the seven present-day collectors may not be all that dissimilar.

Transformation of the Unicorn as Collected Object

While the motivations for collecting in the past and the present may be comparable, the status accorded to the unicorn object collected today with the one collected in early modern Europe is vastly different and represents a reversal, or a change from high to low culture. Findlen notes that in early modern Europe collecting itself was not defined as either a high or low practice.²⁷⁵ Certainly collecting unicorn horn, a substance worth more than its weight in gold, and other related objects signified a wealthy and important person with a prominent social ranking. Daston and Park point out that “during the period from the twelfth through the late seventeenth century, wonder and wonders—far from being primarily an element of ‘popular’ culture...were partly constitutive of what it meant to be a cultural elite in Europe” and that those who collected were a “select audience of the rich and powerful.” However, the authors then indicate that the curiosities and wonders of the early modern period eventually fell out of favor and, in fact, became vulgar in the minds of intellectual elites.²⁷⁶ With unicorns, this neoteric perspective perhaps foreshadowed the contemporary perception of the creature

²⁷⁵ Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 157.

²⁷⁶ Daston, *Wonders*, 18-19, 88.

as kitschy and tasteless. Daston and Park continue: “Most objects that once adorned the *Wunderkammern* could now qualify for an exhibition of high kitsch. Once the cherished possessions of princes...the tableaux of seashells and coral, the ornamented ostrich eggs...have sunk, at least in the view of art critics, to the cultural level of paintings on black velvet.”²⁷⁷ In contrast to this, curiosities such as narwhal tusks and the objects made from them now reside in world-class art museums, while representations of the unicorn are now on par with velvet paintings, as spelled out so clearly in *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*. However, those who collect unicorns today cannot automatically be assumed to be Fussell’s “proles”—particularly Richard, whose unicorn collection is far removed from kitsch.

Between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, the collected object was supposed to be a physical relic of the unicorn itself—the authentic horn. Therefore, the horn, pieces of one, or objects made from the material repeatedly turned up in medieval treasuries and in the *Wunderkammern* of early modern Europe. Rudolf II’s tankard, which combined an object found in nature with meticulous craftsmanship, is similar to the Chinese scholars’ rocks (frequently mounted on intricately worked bases) described by Turkle in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. She writes, “The bases transform the rocks into things that are made as well as found, objects that invite reflection on the boundary between nature and culture.”²⁷⁸ As early as the fifteenth century however, we have also seen how unicorn-themed drinking vessels were no longer necessarily made from the tactile material of the horn but were solely representational of

²⁷⁷ Daston, *Wonders*, 366.

²⁷⁸ Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 319.

the unicorn in a visual manner (figs. 39-40). Interestingly, in either case the two genres of objects served the same function, but only one incorporated the antidotal substance of the horn. There is no indication, however, whether or not the visual representation alone was considered powerful enough to elicit the unicorn's antidotal powers.

As mentioned above, the majority of all of these types of objects that are still in existence today are now housed in museums, including Rudolf's unicorn tankard which resides in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. This has subsequently elevated the objects to the status of fine art, a concept explained by J. Clifford in his diagram "The art-culture system" (fig. 138). In this diagram, objects that are considered to be material culture, or "authentic artefacts" (narwhal tusks or objects made from them) have the ability to shift from their original position in zone two to that of zone one, the realm of "authentic masterpieces," or the art museum and art market.²⁷⁹ This transition can be seen not only in museums, but also most visibly in the art market with the sale of antique narwhal tusks—rarities that continue to be highly collectible and fetch exorbitant prices from dealers or at auction.²⁸⁰ Two nineteenth-century tusks were sold at Christie's in 2006, one for \$28,916 and the other for \$10,800 (figs. 139-140).²⁸¹ And a 2005 issue of the upscale magazine *World of Interiors* featured the sparsely decorated parlor of a Brooklyn farmhouse elegantly accented by a single narwhal tusk (fig. 141). The text also referenced the legend of the unicorn.²⁸² Although the narwhal itself is more typically associated with scientific magazines such as *National Geographic*, it is occasionally (albeit rarely) commercialized in the same kitschy manner that we identify with the

²⁷⁹ J. Clifford, "Collecting Ourselves," from Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 262-63.

²⁸⁰ Although antique narwhal tusks are legally sold within the United States, it is currently illegal to import newly harvested tusk into the United States. Both kinds are sold legally in Canada and Greenland.

²⁸¹ Artifact official Web site, <http://www.artifact.com>.

²⁸² Adrian Dannatt, "Federal Reserve," *World of Interiors* (December 2005): 82, 148.

unicorn, compared here in the form of snow globes or plastic toys (figs. 142-145).²⁸³ And the term unicorn is still used in textual descriptions attached to objects composed of narwhal tusk, as in the Kunsthistorisches Museum's description of Rudolf's tankard where the material is given as "narwhal tusk" followed by "unicorn" in parentheses—alluding to the transition from a period of uncertainty to one of more scientific knowledge. Furthermore, it implies that while the general public may be unfamiliar with narwhals, they are not unfamiliar with unicorns. (Even Lynda, who has been collecting unicorns for the last three years, said she did not know what a narwhal is. Matthew defines a narwhal as "the unicorn of the sea, whose spiral tusk is commonly held to be a unicorn's horn.")

The examples discussed above (i.e. narwhal tusks selling at exclusive auction houses and gracing the pages of high design magazines) differ greatly from the types of mass-produced unicorn objects collected by our interviewees with the exception, in many instances, of Richard. Most of these manufactured objects, like the narwhal snow globe or plastic toy, would be categorized by Clifford's diagram in zone four, as commodities or "inauthentic artifacts;" these types of objects do not have the ability to shift into the realm of the art market and museum.²⁸⁴ Although seemingly at different ends of the spectrum, narwhal tusks and unicorn objects of kitsch are inextricably linked: without the legend of the unicorn, the highly prized narwhal tusks collected today might lose their cachet, and had it not been for the narwhal tusk, the unicorn myth would have never become as amplified and/or commodified into snow globes.

²⁸³ In August of 2007, *National Geographic* ran a story entitled "Artic Ivory" about contemporary narwhal hunting. The article is available at the National Geographic official Web site, <http://www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0708/feature3/>. The snow globe and toy were the only "kitschy" narwhal items I could find.

²⁸⁴ Clifford, "Collecting Ourselves," 262-63.

M. Thompson, in his essay “The Filth in the Way,” suggests that the very act of collecting can directly affect the categorical value of objects, which he divides into transient, durable, and rubbish.²⁸⁵ In this light, the interviewees would most likely categorize their own unicorn possessions as durable objects (long-lasting goods that will escalate in value), whereas the passer-by may arguably describe them as transient (mass-produced bric-a-brac that will eventually become rubbish). This perception has sometimes left museums to deal with unsolicited donations of transient objects, such as the beer cans or plastic reindeer sent to the Smithsonian and publicized in the 1991 *New York Times* article “Even Kitsch Has a Place at the Smithsonian.” The article indicated that some people view the museum as “a natural resting place for precious items they cannot bear to dispose of at a garage sale” and described the letters that frequently accompany such donations as lamenting—“I want this to go to a place where it will be appreciated. My children don't care, and I want the public to have access to it.”²⁸⁶

In addition to the concept of durable versus transient objects, Danet and Katriel suggest that some people collect “real” objects and others collect the imaginary representations of objects. On the surface it appears that Rudolf possessed a “real” object in his unicorn tankard, while present-day collectors merely collect representations of unicorns with which they form a “total environment of fantasy objects.”²⁸⁷ In hindsight, however, Rudolf’s tankard proves to be just as imaginary since the unicorn never existed. Its value may come now more from its preciousness and its association with Rudolf and his vast collection than from any belief in its authenticity as unicorn horn. The collected

²⁸⁵ M. Thompson, “The Filth in the Way,” from Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 269-71.

²⁸⁶ “Even Kitsch Has a Place at the Smithsonian,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1991, 47.

²⁸⁷ Danet and Katriel, “No Two Alike,” 223.

unicorn object has changed from one believed to be real to one that can only be representational, but has retained its magicalness nonetheless.

Conclusion

Collecting, whether in the past or present, is focused on the material object and a whole host of associations to it. For Rudolf II there were real perceived values; to contemporary collectors there are also values—warranting a look at the unicorn in its form and gender to grasp these associations. In regard to their disposition as supposedly real creatures, unicorns were originally thought to be fierce, strong, and untamable, and historical visual sources frequently depict the unicorn chained, indicating an apparent need for restraint. This can be seen clearly in “The Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry panel, in the unicorn façade on Boston’s Old State House, in heraldry, and in Pennsylvania Dutch *fraktur* (figs. 47, 57-58, 62-64). As a virgin was required to lure and pacify the creature, however, it became associated with chastity and took on a more docile appearance, as in the painting *St. Justina of Antioch with a Donor* (fig. 27). This docile nature also fit with the unicorn as a religious symbol; it appeared as a devoted and loyal servant of God, at peace with the other animals of the kingdom (figs. 48-49). In contemporary popular culture, however, the unicorn exists not simply as a non-threatening creature, but also as a solitary, melancholic, magical, and infantilized one floating on the cusp of parody (figs. 55, 96). The interviewees describe unicorns as mystical, beautiful, graceful, magical, healing, mysterious, fascinating, loving, radiant, special, and pure—adjectives quite in contrast to the ferocious and wild creature of *Physiologus*.

It appears that over time the unicorn has become domesticated. A parallel can be drawn to Elizabeth A. Lawrence’s analysis of bears in her essay “The Tamed Wild: Symbolic Bears in American Culture.” Lawrence explores how the infantilization of the

bear in American culture has changed it from a large, dangerous animal into a cuddly and appealing product suitable for consumption. Lawrence explains that settlers to the New World viewed bears as a threatening species that must be suppressed by means of hunting and killing them. After Theodore Roosevelt's legendary unwillingness to kill a bear while out hunting in 1902, the animal was tamed and commodified through the invention of the teddy bear. While older teddy bears were stiffer and more realistic, today's bears display the malformed qualities of cuteness previously described by Daniel Harris—qualities he ascribes to an American penchant for sentimentality. Lawrence notes that “missing qualities are autonomy, risk, and the wild spirit that cannot be controlled. Teddy bears are neutered, civilized, humanized, and sanitized...[they] embody the ultimate taming, the extreme polarity in the wild-to-tame transition, the conversion of nature to culture.”²⁸⁸ Unicorns have undergone a similar transformation; established through lore as strong and untamable, they have been metaphorically hunted and killed in textual and visual formats that infantilize them (figs. 23, 41-47). This paved the way for the unicorn to be embraced by 1960s counterculture as a gentle symbol and led to the commercialized modern unicorn—one that is, according to the Sterns, “fragile and sad, like a fuzzy little troll doll in need of love.”²⁸⁹

The fabled whiteness of the creature added to this fragility. The unicorn is most often colored white—as evinced from a simple Google Image search for “unicorn.” Out of the first eighteen results that Google provides, all are white.²⁹⁰ In the images from

²⁸⁸ Elizabeth A. Lawrence, “The Tamed Wild: Symbolic Bears in American Culture,” from Ray B. Browne, Marshall W. Fishwick, and Kevin O. Browne, eds., *Dominant Symbols in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 140-43, 149-50.

²⁸⁹ Jane and Michael Stern, *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, 304.

²⁹⁰ Google Image Search official Web site,
<http://images.google.com/images?hl=en&q=unicorn&gbv=2>.

historical sources presented in this paper, more often than not the unicorn is white in appearance, as are the majority of unicorns offered by instant collectible companies such as CollectiblesToday.com as well as unicorns made by toy manufacturers.²⁹¹ For example, Ty's popular Beanie Babies include several variations of "Mystic the Unicorn," but all are white in color (fig. 146).²⁹² All seven of the interviewees described unicorns as being white, with only Celia and Gabi believing that they can be other colors. And the collections of Samantha Reno and Gabi are made up largely of white unicorns (figs. 126-130). The color white is indeed fitting for the creature since it is frequently associated with purity or innocence.

What about the gender of this tamed and pale beast? At the time when people unquestionably believed that unicorns existed—implying that there were both male and female unicorns capable of reproduction, the unicorn was most often visually depicted or described as male.²⁹³ The fabled notion that unicorns could only be tamed by a virgin certainly reinforced this idea, and one can assume that in images such as Figure 23 the unicorn illustrated is male. It is an interesting coincidence that it is only the male narwhal that produces a tusk. In the case of the modern unicorn (twentieth century onwards), the creature has been more frequently represented as female and/or as neutered. Although the unicorns in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Unico*, and *Stardust* are decidedly male and a pair of unicorns (one of each sex) is evident in *Legend*, the unicorns in *Fantasia*, *The Last Unicorn*, in Barbie, Bratz, and My Little Pony toys, and in many instant collectibles are either distinctly female or appear feminized. Remarkably, however, some present-day unicorns that give the impression of femininity are in fact

²⁹¹ CollectiblesToday.com official Web site, <http://www.collectiblestoday.com/ct/ndca/unicorn>.

²⁹² Ty official Web site, http://www.ty.com/BeanieBabies_home.

²⁹³ Gotfredsen, *The Unicorn*, 18, 82, 133.

male. For example, even though The Hamilton Collection's "Messenger of Love Unicorn Figurine" features a "fairy friend"—hence alluding to the virgin tale and insinuating a male unicorn, the unicorn itself appears feminized by the excess of pale pink roses worked into its mane, tail, and neck garland (fig. 147). The description of the statuette, however, refers to this delicate creature as a "majestic" male.²⁹⁴ Furthermore, many contemporary unicorns are not gender-specific at all, a sentiment echoed in the opinions of some of the interviewees; six felt that unicorns are both male and female, including Matthew, who also believes that they can be both sexes at the same time or un-gendered. Richard feels that all unicorns are un-gendered. Fussell in *Class* refers to a unicorn as "himself (herself?)," indicating the ambiguity of the creature's gender.²⁹⁵

Is the collecting of unicorns gender-specific? In early modern Europe, it was certainly more likely that collectors of any kind would be male, with the exception of wealthy and notable female collectors such as Isabella d'Este or Catherine de' Medici (both of whom had narwhal tusks). Today, there are still more male than female collectors among adults.²⁹⁶ Of the seven collectors I interviewed, three are male—not enough to make any generalization. However, according to Belk and co-author Melanie Wallendorf, a female majority in this case would not be unusual since women are much more likely to collect animal replicas while men are more likely to collect antiques, books, automobiles, and objects related to sports. The contrasts between male and female collections are visible in the case studies discussed by Belk and Wallendorf, for example the Mouse Cottage and the Fire Museum. Both collections have been institutionalized

²⁹⁴ CollectiblesToday.com official Web site, http://www.collectiblestoday.com/ct/product/prdid-931995001.jsp?unicorn/_prod/_/_/36/_/_/Y&endeca=true#.

²⁹⁵ Fussell, *Class*, 141.

²⁹⁶ Belk, *Collecting*, 97.

into museums by a retired businessman in order to represent his deceased wife who collected mouse replicas and his own collection of full-size fire engines and fire-fighting equipment. After analyzing the two collections, Belk and Wallendorf conclude that the characteristics of the two museums strongly parallel stereotypical gender roles: “The woman is portrayed by her mouse collection to be small, weak, home-focused, natural, artistic, playful and inconspicuous. Her husband’s collections suggest that he is large, strong, proactive, machine-like, scientific, serious and conspicuous.”²⁹⁷

Unicorn collectibles, most often miniaturized and fanciful, veer towards the feminine, as clearly demonstrated by the unicorn collections of the female characters in *30 Rock*, *Dodgeball*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (figs. 3-5, 88-92). Belk and Wallendorf also note that men are more apt to keep their collections, regardless of subject matter, hidden away; one reason being that their adult friends might consider them to be, among other things, effeminate.²⁹⁸ In speaking with Alex, he told me that he does not “advertise” his unicorn collection to people because he is perceived as a “big guy that likes to surf” (i.e. a “manly” man). The married Matthew, whose collection is in plain view all over his house, did feel inclined to mention at the end of his questionnaire the following: “Without leaning in any way toward homosexuality, I am regarded as ‘being in touch with my feminine side.’ I like the concept of being literally a gentleman: a Gentle Man, and I guess that helps explain why a guy could be interested in a pursuit which is widely regarded as somewhat feminine.” In disclosing this information, Alex

²⁹⁷ Russell W. Belk and Melanie Wallendorf, “Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity in Collecting,” from Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 243-45. Women are also more likely to collect house wares and jewelry.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 242-43.

and Matthew fortify the concept that collecting unicorns has indeed become a gendered activity associated with women.

Intriguingly, Matthew's unicorn website, www.unicorn-dream.co.uk/index.html, features many examples of his own artwork, some of which depict sexually graphic unicorns as phallic males (figs. 148-149). From a psychoanalytical perspective, one reason that the unicorn continues to resonate may have to do with the obviously phallic nature of the horn; this hypothesis helps to interpret Matthew's creations.²⁹⁹ Perhaps self-conscious of the fact that he participates in a type of collecting typically regarded as feminine, Matthew overcompensates by rendering unicorns in a heterosexually explicit manner—an attempt to reinforce his own masculinity. Comparably, Alex displayed an overall reticence and acknowledged feeling “a little weird” about his collection. Of the five other unicorn collectors that were interviewed, four are female (attesting to the gendered nature of collecting unicorns) while Richard, who lives with his male partner and whose career as an interior decorator sanctions the stereotypically feminine roles of shopping for and decorating his home, does not share the insecurities of Matthew and Alex.

The phallic nature of the unicorn itself must be viewed within the province of psychoanalysis. According to its founder Sigmund Freud, we learn about ourselves through fairy tales, jokes, quotations, songs, proverbs, legends, popular customs, myths, folklore, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom, and so forth. Some of the symbols that

²⁹⁹ The term “horny” to indicate sexual excitement was first used around 1889; it derives from “horn,” a word used to mean “an erection” starting around 1785. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, prepared by. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. Vol. VII. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 386, 394.

arise out of these mediums are also apparent in our dreams.³⁰⁰ In writing about the symbolism of dreams, Freud defined phallic symbols as elongated objects that resemble the penis in shape (e.g. umbrellas, posts, tree trunks), long, sharp objects that can penetrate or injure (e.g. knives, spears), objects out of which water flows (e.g. taps, watering-cans), or objects that can be lengthened (e.g. hanging lamps, extendable pencils). For Freud, the unconscious continually desires the phallus and seeks to find it in symbolic forms.³⁰¹ If the horn of the unicorn is viewed as a phallic symbol, then the creature's longevity has been sanctioned by a human fascination, even need, for symbolic forms. In interpreting a patient's dream, the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Serge Leclaire (who studied with Freud successor Jacques Lacan) even points out that "the horn decorating the forehead of the fabled animal" is indeed a phallic symbol:

The unicorn's meaning as a phallic representation constitutes the common theme of legendary stories: an emblem of fidelity, the unicorn obviously cannot be procured without difficulty, and it is said that he who wants to get hold of one must leave a young virgin as an offering in a lonely forest, since the unicorn after having placed its horn on her lap falls asleep right away. To be sure, no unicorn really exists, anymore than does the horn of a unicorn: its place is taken by the tooth of a narwhal, a superb spur of twisted ivory, which draws its beneficent power precisely from the real-nothing it represents.³⁰²

Furthermore, Jungian analyst Michael Vannoy Adams in his book *The Mythological Unconscious*, writes that all of the "images of the unicorn in legend and art constitute a certain context for interpretation. What I might call the "connotations of the unicorn" are

³⁰⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, edited and translated by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 246, 345, 351.

³⁰¹ Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, edited and translated by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), 154-55.

³⁰² Serge Leclaire, *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 74.

so vastly extensive and variously evocative as to complicate and even intimidate any “merely” psychoanalytic interpretation...”³⁰³

The unicorn’s horn as a phallic symbol is fundamentally linked to how it looks. Arthur Asa Berger describes the appearance of phallic symbols in advertising as “a translation in dreams and fantasies of a taboo part of our bodies from below the waist—where its significance would be easily seen—to above the waist, frequently to the head or to the face, where its significance is not so apparent.”³⁰⁴ Obviously in the case of the unicorn, the phallic symbol extends conspicuously from the head. As pointed out by Leclaire, the legendary speculation that only a virgin could tame the unicorn certainly reinforces an allusion to the phallus. Even within a painting representative of chastity, such as *St. Justina of Antioch with a Donor*, the tip of the unicorn’s horn ends precisely at Justina’s loins (fig. 27). This aspect of the unicorn is not lost in contemporary marketing: the American corporation Axtent produced a new herbal energy drink with aphrodisiacal benefits for men and dubbed it “Unicorn.” The beverage features a powerful black unicorn leaping across the front of the can (fig. 150).³⁰⁵ (Likewise, Adams suggests that “the pharmaceutical company Pfizer might appropriately have named the little blue pill that it so profitably sells for “erectile dysfunction,” impotence, or flaccidity, ‘Unicorn’ rather than ‘Viagra.’”³⁰⁶) The most striking correlation between the unicorn and phallicism, however, is brought to fruition in PipeDream’s “Unicorn Pleasure Ring,” a soft purple cock ring featuring a “teaser in the shape of a cute unicorn” that is intended

³⁰³ Michael Vannoy Adams, *The Mythological Unconscious* (New York: Karnac, 2001), 375. Clearly there could be even more to a psychoanalytic discussion of the unicorn.

³⁰⁴ Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 81.

³⁰⁵ Axtent Corporation official Web site, <http://www.axentcorp.com/unicorn.html>.

³⁰⁶ Adams, *The Mythological Unconscious*, 374.

for female stimulation (fig. 151).³⁰⁷ The product invites the user to “experience the magic,” playing on the mysticism long associated with the creature; the lore of the unicorn is further alluded to by the pseudo-medieval font used on the packaging. The product essentially gives life to the horn as a phallic symbol through its male enhancement while simultaneously engaging the female in a way that transcends the metaphorical with its head and horn.

One question still remains: why collect unicorns in the first place? The unicorn’s obvious guise as a phallic symbol, whether real or unreal, is one attribute that can account for the creature’s presence within collections of past and present, if we accept the idea of continuity in the ways people think about sexuality. As we have seen, Rudolf II’s motivations for collecting a unicorn tankard were manifold and included his upbringing, political duties, specific tastes, and confidence in a supernatural realm. In addition, he undoubtedly shared many of the impulses characteristic of present-day collectors, such as the pursuit of perfection or the desire to fill space, the need for the “thrill of the hunt” or to feel ownership, the sense of domination over a private world, the manifestation of an extended self, and a connection to a greater historical tradition of collecting. In “The Collecting Mania,” Brown states:

If, when your eye lingers over the “antiques and collectibles,” you discover an old snow globe and suddenly long to have it—all but ache to arrange it alongside other globes, or other toys, or other scenes of winter—that longing may be provoked by many sources. You may want the snow globe because it reminds you of the one in *Citizen Kane* or the one you dropped and shattered as a child, or because Benjamin took such delight in snow globes. What may be more important, though, is the way—when you pick up the globe and watch the yellowed snow flurry and settle, flurry and settle—that you see a secret world within objects, a world that you yourself can bring to life.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Love Shop.biz official Web site, <http://www.love-shop.biz/sext toys-forhim/cock-rings/the-unicorn-pleasure-ring.html>.

³⁰⁸ Brown, “The Collecting Mania,” 38-43.

Brown succinctly expresses how objects, however commonplace, can open up a private world for collectors. As Turkle more recently has written, “We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity.”³⁰⁹

And Woodward indicates that:

Objects have the capacity to do “social work.” Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, wealth, participation in a leisure activity, or an aspect of one’s social status—all aspects of *social identity*. On the other hand, objects also carry personal, cultural and emotional meanings, related to *subjective identity*—they can facilitate interpersonal interaction, and help a person to act upon him or herself...visually identifying an object within someone’s possession can tell us much about a person, without us having to speak to him or her to confirm such a status...People choose certain objects from within their environment to develop, manage and mediate their sense of self...³¹⁰

We have seen how the very act of collecting can make such objects significant, and that, as Danet and Katriel noted, this act integrates a “twofold interest... objects viewed in their distinctive concreteness and objects viewed as invitations to reverie and fantasy.”³¹¹

Unicorn collectibles, just like any other kind of collected object, serve as “invitations to reverie and fantasy.” The difference, however, is that unicorns in their “distinctive concreteness,” unlike stamps or beer cans, are undeniably fantastic and magical in and of themselves. As a result, unicorn objects offer a double dose of Muensterberger’s “magical compensation,” inspiring a distinct reason to collect them. Rudolf’s unicorn tankard not only functioned literally as a gateway to the occult with its antidotal powers, but also existed as a magical representation of a creature no one had ever seen. Contemporary unicorn collectors are not only assigning what Muensterberger calls an “intrinsic life force” to beloved objects with which their imaginations identify,

³⁰⁹ Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 6.

³¹⁰ Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 135, 137, 139.

³¹¹ Danet and Katriel, “Glorious Obsessions,” 29.

but are also allocating this transcendent power to objects *already* representative of the magical and the fantastic.³¹² In addition, Arthur Asa Berger comments on how contemporary advertisements are structured or connected in some way to ancient myths. In his “myth model,” he attempts to demonstrate how these myths inform many present-day activities, whose relation to them is beyond our consciousness. His ‘myth model’ has the following categories:

1. The **myth**,
2. A **historical event** related to the myth,
3. A text or work from **elite culture** based on the myth,
4. A text or work for **popular culture** based on the myth, and
5. Some aspects of **everyday life** based on the myth.³¹³

It is possible to utilize this model in relation to the unicorn as collectible:

1. The legend of the unicorn,
2. Narwhal tusks emerging in the European marketplace,
3. “The Unicorn Tapestries,”
4. *The Last Unicorn*,
5. Fantastical and/or kitschy unicorn collectibles.

In her article on symbolic bears, Lawrence suggests that “virtually every animal with which people interact has in addition to its own physical being a symbolic identity which may or may not accurately reflect the animal’s nature but which arises out of individual and cultural perceptions of that species.”³¹⁴ Unlike real animals in which this duality can be revealed, unicorns have lived solely in the imagination since their conception. Adams writes that the reality of the unicorn, which he refers to as both a “real-nothing” and an “imaginal-something,” is in its existence “as an image in the psyche” within the “cultural unconscious...Precisely because the unicorn does *not* ‘exist,’

³¹² Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 15.

³¹³ Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 134-35.

³¹⁴ Lawrence, “The Tamed Wild,” 140.

the imagination has to invent it...³¹⁵ Therefore, the creature has always been abstract, allowing it to symbolize extraordinarily diverse things: the wild and untamable, the chaste and loyal, Christ, apothecary shops, Pennsylvania Dutch counties, the magical and fantastical, guardianship, beauty, positive virtues, purity, and so forth. For the Sterns, unicorns sarcastically represent “hopes and dreams.”³¹⁶ And for Fussell unicorns have no real meaning, except to satisfy the middle class “dual desire for the portentous and the vague.”³¹⁷ However, it is precisely this ambiguity that has allowed the unicorn its longevity. To recall Woodward's terms, over time the unicorn has functioned processually, transformatively, and contextually. Whether material or immaterial, the unicorn is a sexually-indistinct white canvas, a blank slate onto which fantastic meanings can be projected and then owned.

³¹⁵ Adams, *The Mythological Unconscious*, 389-91, 397.

³¹⁶ Jane and Michael Stern, *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, 304.

³¹⁷ Fussell, *Class*, 141.

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Appendix I: Interview Questionnaire

1. How long have you been collecting unicorns?
2. Why did you start collecting unicorns? Do you still collect them now for the same reasons?
3. How many unicorns (roughly) do you have in your collection?
4. Do you collect anything besides unicorns? If so, what?
5. Where is your collection of unicorns located?
6. Is your collection arranged in any particular way?
7. Do you share your collection with others or is it private?
8. Have you ever exhibited your collection?
9. Do you have any communication with other unicorn collectors?
10. What kinds of unicorn objects are in your collection (figurines, textiles, etc.)?
11. How do you acquire unicorn objects for your collection (gifts from others, eBay.com, mail-order catalogues, etc.)?
12. Do you name the unicorns in your collection?
13. Would you acquire a unicorn object even if you weren't that fond of it simply because it related to unicorns? For example, if you didn't care a thing about chess but found a unicorn-themed chess set, would you consider acquiring it?
14. Is your unicorn collection complete? If not, do you think it will ever be complete?
15. What is the highest amount of money (roughly) you have ever spent on a unicorn object? (optional)
16. Would you ever sell a unicorn from your collection?
17. Do you think of your collection as an investment?
18. How do you feel when you look at your collection of unicorns?
19. Do you believe that unicorns exist? If no, do you believe that unicorns have ever existed?
20. What three adjectives would you use to describe unicorns in general?
21. Do unicorns symbolize anything in particular to you?
22. Do you know what a narwhal is?
23. Do you think unicorns are male or female?
24. What color are unicorns? What color are unicorn horns?
25. Do you associate unicorns with any particular religion? Would you say you are a religious person? A spiritual person?
26. Do you associate unicorns with having medicinal or antidotal properties?
27. Are you familiar with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities?
28. Were you aware of unicorns as a child (through toys, books, art, etc.)?
29. Did your parents collect anything?
30. Would you be able to give a brief description of yourself? What qualities in yourself do you think have led to your becoming a collector of unicorns?
31. Do you have any images of your unicorn collection that you would like to share (either by email or regular mail)?
32. Is it okay to use your first name in my thesis?