

## **Collecting**

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The “anthropological study of collecting” encompasses a diverse range of perspectives and pursuits, and identifying the limits and confines of this concept is of primary importance. At a basic level, the anthropological study of collecting describes the use of anthropological frameworks to study the practices and cultural contexts involved in the accumulation of objects. At a broader level, this includes consideration of the historiography of ethnographic and archaeological collections in order to gain insight into the origins of the discipline of anthropology. It also includes subsequent critiques and reexaminations of the nature of anthropology and anthropological collecting and the methods used in interpreting how material culture is employed in the study of human history and culture.

The critical reevaluations of anthropological collecting practices and contexts in the late twentieth century have followed a school of thought that argues that ethnographic collections are in fact more symptomatic of contact histories and relations of power than indicative of their cultures of origin. This approach shifts the locus of meaning for anthropological collecting away from the indigenous cultures that were the original focus of study and toward the regimes under which these collections were made. This reflexive stance includes postcolonial critiques and the exploration of issues surrounding the use of cultural objects in the representation of indigenous peoples in museums. The reexamination of collecting practices has also led to the restructuring of anthropological practices within contemporary museum settings in order to meet new legal standards and ethics, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), enacted in the United States in 1990. Alongside this reflexive approach, there has been a recognition of indigenous agency and how this has shaped the collecting process. This line of thinking has contributed to cross-cultural and collaborative approaches to the curation (collection, exhibition, and management) of ethnographic objects in museums.

The historical development of anthropological collecting and subsequent critical frameworks are explored here by looking at—in order of occurrence—cabinets of curiosity, early explorations for the purpose of commerce and science, colonialism and collecting, the “museum period” of anthropology, the practice of “salvage ethnography,” the professionalization of anthropological collecting practices in museums, reflexive anthropology, and the development of cross-cultural and collaborative frameworks. This developmental history reveals how a diverse set of endeavors resulted in objects that, while they initially may have been collected as curios, souvenirs, or as objects surrendered during subjugation through warfare or missionization, became part of anthropological collections. These objects and their histories explain how the discipline of anthropology emerged out of natural history studies and diverse cross-cultural contexts, including the subsequent reevaluations of how imperial and colonial regimes paralleled the development and, therefore, contextualized interpretations of anthropological collections.

### **Cabinets of curiosity**

“Cabinets of curiosity”—also known as Wunderkammers or Kunstkammers—originated from Renaissance learning practices and were developed in Europe in the late sixteenth century as

essential tools for “comprehending ‘the universal nature’ of things” (Impey and MacGregor 2001: xvii). With the expansion of interactions between Europe, the Far East, Southeast Asia, and Africa and the discovery of the New World, hitherto unknown animals and plants were brought to Europe that provoked questions about the scope and order of the natural world. Equal fascination was awarded to newly encountered peoples, resulting in the collection and display of “artificial curiosities” in the form of weapons, tools, and clothing. As a result, these cabinets included an extensive range of interests, such as zoological and botanical gardens, geological specimens, libraries, antiquities, art, and human-made objects showing ingenuity and the technological advances of the age.

The immense diversity in the types and functions of these collections of natural and artificial objects resulted from their origins either in the scholarly pursuits of physicians and natural philosophers or in princely and aristocratic exercises in the symbolic arrangement of humanity’s place in the world. The former resulted in the development of botanical gardens and natural philosophy collections. Examples include the museum and botanic gardens at the University of Bologna directed by Ulisse Aldrovandi, starting in 1568, and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, founded on the collections of antiquarian Elias Ashmole, which were given to the university in 1677. The latter, the princely collections, commonly evolved into the first types of art galleries and museums open to the public.

There is evidence that the earliest “cabinets” were also designed as professional resources through which specimens were exchanged among scholars and cross-referenced in publications. In this manner, they became research collections that contributed to the principles of taxonomy and, later on, became the precursors to museums and the eventual establishment of disciplines such as medicine, botany, zoology, geology, and anthropology. The Danish medical professor Olaus Worm represents an example of a university teacher who employed collections in the training of students in natural philosophy. His collecting activities started in 1620 in Copenhagen and resulted in the catalog *Museum Wormianum*, in which he ordered natural and artificial objects, beginning with “lower” forms—minerals and stones—and leading to plants, animals, and eventually the “higher” form represented by human anatomy.

While the types of objects collected for these cabinets during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were similar, the organizing principles of the natural philosophers and princely collectors differed. Physicians employed strict schemas based on natural philosophy while aristocratic collections largely followed aesthetic principles—although the line between the two was not wholly distinct. Often objects that started in natural philosophy collections were later absorbed into royal collections. For example, after his death, Worm’s collections were accessioned by King Frederick III into the *Kunstkammer* in Copenhagen, where they were reorganized according to historical and artistic values.

The collection made by the British physician Sir Hans Sloane, who was active in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, reached a remarkable 75,575 specimens and eventually became the collection on which the British Museum was founded in 1753. The Sloane collection is recognized for its enormous size and for the advanced degree of documentation that accompanied it. The collection included some of the earliest ethnographic objects of African, Euro-American, and Native American origins, including items listed from specific cultures such

as the Cherokee and Huron. A similar assemblage and one of the precursors to the more systematic ethnographic collections of the nineteenth century was the “Holophusicon” or the Leverian Museum, established by Ashton Lever in 1771, which later became one of the largest collections open for both scientific research and for viewing by the general public.

### **Collecting in the “age of exploration”**

Some of the earliest collecting of cultural objects that can be traced to known collectors and their specific field excursions dates back to the eighteenth century and the age of maritime exploration. Early collecting in the eighteenth century focused on the search for resources that would be economically useful in the expanding trade and settlement pursued by Britain and other European countries. High importance was given to plants that might prove economically useful, as well as fauna in the form of shells, birds, and mammals as well as fossils. Cultural “curiosities” were also collected. Almost everywhere ships came ashore, trade took place for the refurbishment of supplies and the procurement of things that would be advantageous at future exchanges.

Of the European explorations, the “voyages of discovery” of Captain James Cook are the most well-known. The first voyage (1768–71) was funded by the Royal Society of London with the purpose of recording the transit of Venus and journeyed to Tahiti, Australia, New Zealand, Java, and the Cape of Good Hope, Africa. The second (1772–75) sailed to the Pacific and included parts of Melanesia and Oceania. The third voyage (1776–79) was organized to locate a Northwest Passage around the American continent and journeyed to the Northwest Coast as well as Alaska. There are approximately 2,040 objects labeled that are reported to have come from the Cook voyages (Kaeppler 1978). Although many of these now reside in ethnographic museums and collections, the widely recognized early collections, such as those associated with Cook, predated the development of the field of anthropology. Due to the importance of the Cook voyages and their role in scientific endeavors such as cartography, the objects collected on the voyages found homes with emerging scientific collections and cabinets of curiosity. The more systematic collections produced by Joseph Banks, Johann Reinhold Forster, and his son, George, are now conceived as precursors of and contributors to the beginnings of the discipline.

Explorations of the Northwest Coast of America, the Pacific Ocean, and Asia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also resulted in the collecting of objects that eventually formed some of the earliest collections in ethnographic museums. The voyages were largely for purposes of commerce, especially for early maritime whaling and the fur trade. Mariners focused on collecting things to memorialize their experiences; however, their diaries and ship logs reveal how seamen also had general interests in observing and explaining the practices of peoples they encountered. In Salem, Massachusetts, in 1799, sea captains founded the East India Marine Society, which included a museum to house objects brought back from maritime trade routes. When trade declined in the late nineteenth century, locally managed collections of this kind were transferred to institutions such as the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, where they became the founding collections for ethnology.

At the time of their collection, cultural objects brought home by explorers embodied a wide range of motivations and values (Thomas 1991). These included personal ones representing the

triumphs of the voyage, as well as the fulfillment of requests by private collectors and gifts to express gratitude to the patrons of the voyages. At a practical level, objects were also obtained in order to be sold for income. The kinds of participants involved in collecting also varied, as seen in the case of the United States Exploring Expedition (1838–42), during which officers and ordinary seamen collected three times as many cultural specimens as the scientific corps, revealing the diverse demographics of early collecting practices (Isaac and Isaac 2015).

While these explorations piqued people’s curiosity about the customs and material goods of the peoples of newly encountered lands, for much of the eighteenth century their study was not considered a subject for science. Collectors took an interest in cultural objects as a means to incorporate the arts and traditions of various societies into their cabinets, but they had no specific methods for their study. Early museums, such as the Leverian, the British Museum, and the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, institutionalized the collecting of “artificial curiosities” and also introduced them to a diverse public, but attempts to organize cultural objects according to any classificatory scheme did not appear until late in the nineteenth century.

### **Colonialism and collecting**

Through the expansionist and imperialist policies and practices of European countries, trade routes that had been opened up during the “age of exploration” were increasingly used to colonize and exploit newly encountered lands, resources, and the people who inhabited and used them. The European colonial era that spanned from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries is recognized as a significant contributor to the development of the discipline of anthropology and its instruments of practice, such as ethnographic museums. In particular, the period spanning the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries represented the most active period in terms of the quantity and diversity of ethnographic objects collected through a range of endeavors and contexts—a large portion of which found their way into museums.

A wide variety of collecting contexts emerged out of this era—scientific and military expeditions, archaeological excavations, the tourist trade, missionization, individual collecting, and institutionalized museum-based collecting. Colonial-related collections are also understood to embody the contradictory elements of their time period. On the one hand, there was growing curiosity about cultural and regional differences—a factor that contributed to the development of anthropology—and, on the other hand, there was the violent subjugation of colonized peoples, often through military force. These perspectives and responses structured nationalist narratives and fueled debates about human progress, race and hierarchy, “savagery” and “civilization,” and the role of technology in how nations obtained prominence on this newly imagined and competitive world stage. World’s fairs and expositions materialized these relationships, becoming showcases for the latest technological advances and usages for natural resources, which were exhibited alongside the “living” villages of the indigenous peoples of the colonies. Cultural objects collected for these expositions later formed the foundations of national ethnographic collections, such as the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, the Chicago Field Museum, and the United States National Museum (USNM) in Washington, DC.

A parallel relationship is also seen to have developed between anthropology and colonialism, where scientists took an interest in documenting and studying newly encountered cultures and

looked to governmental and colonial administrations to provide the necessary infrastructure to do this work. In the early nineteenth century, with the discipline at a nascent stage and with fieldwork practices not yet established as a critical methodology, the first ethnologists asked colonial administrators and travelers for information to be collected on their behalf. In 1872, Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers addressed the Anthropological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, inviting members to develop questions to facilitate the collecting of data. The result was the publication of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1874), which operated as a guide to help travelers generate accurate anthropological observations for the scientific community at home. Second and third editions were published in 1892 and 1899, providing further instructions on types of objects for the traveler to collect, as well as on technologies such as photography, which were encouraged in order to obtain as detailed information as possible.

By the late nineteenth century, the colonial administrations of Europe and US government surveys had produced vast quantities of data—maps, census records, statistics, and photographs. As Elizabeth Edwards suggests, “the colonial endeavor was an information project which simultaneously supported, appropriated and formulated anthropological, geographical and medical knowledges” (2014, 172). New technologies—photography, film, and sound recordings—were employed to obtain and ensure as comprehensive a study of these environments and cultures as possible.

Ethnologists, museums, and individual collectors increasingly argued for more intensive collecting methods as they raced against what they saw as the inevitable destruction of these cultures by colonial forces and rapidly expanding settler communities. This approach, now known as “salvage ethnology” (Gruber 1970), included exhaustive collecting techniques as well as archaeological surveys resulting in the removal of antiquities from Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean, and South America to collections and museums in Europe and the United States. At the same time, missionaries actively purchased or confiscated weapons and religious objects from the peoples they worked among, selling them to raise funds for the missions or sending them back home to institutions such as the London Missionary Society for use in displays and to educate the public on their success in converting “savages” into Christians.

### **Anthropological museums**

The first ethnographic museum appeared in 1837 with the founding of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. At the same time, specialized learned societies were developing, such as the Ethnological Society in Paris, founded in 1839, with similar societies being formed in New York in 1842 and London in 1843. With the establishment of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in 1866, the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879, and its subsequent location in the USNM in 1881, an age of professional ethnographic museology was ushered in.

The “museum period” (1880–1920) in anthropology introduced the establishment of museum-based professional training programs for the emerging discipline. Degrees in linguistics and archaeology were introduced at the University of Pennsylvania in 1886, Harvard University introduced degrees in ethnology and archaeology in 1890, and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford had introduced a diploma with papers in ethnology, physical anthropology, archaeology, and

sociology by 1906. During these early years, anthropological research and teaching methods followed previously established natural history methods for the classification and analysis of specimens. At Harvard, Jeffries Wyman, the first director of the Peabody Museum, who had trained as a natural scientist and taught anatomy at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, believed that these methods offered a suitable transition from the study of objects of natural history to those of human prehistory. Hence, "the observational skills necessary for analysis, identification, and enumeration of shells and bones of animals, birds and fish were easily transferred to stone implements or potsherds" (Browman 1989, 85).

Natural history methods merged with theories of evolution as well as experimental practices devised to uncover the intellectual forces behind the invention and manufacture of cultural objects. In Britain, Pitt-Rivers formulated methods that could train the body as well as the mind, arguing that students should learn how the human mind materialized languages, arts, and social institutions through a "comparative anatomy" of cultural objects (Pitt-Rivers cited by Gosden and Larson 2008, 123). Accordingly, objects manifested historical and cultural ways of knowing and, in learning how to make them, anthropologists were able to better understand their creators. Examples include the work of Henry Balfour and Edward Burnett Tylor, who practiced creating stone tools and instruments for fire making. At the same time the American anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing of the Bureau of American Ethnology distinguished a body of theory about heuristic knowledge and the relationship between making and knowing something through conducting experiments in pottery making and fire making, terming his work the "manual-mental method" (Isaac 2010).

By the late nineteenth century, evolutionary theory about the progression, modification, and diffusion of physical traits was adopted by anthropologists looking for mechanisms to organize cultural characteristics into a comprehensive system that could explain the differences between races. Social evolutionary theory, such as that conceived by Lewis H. Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877), constructed a hierarchy divided into three stages of progress—"savagery," "barbarism," and "civilization"—all of which classified people according to the technology they used. Since cultural objects operated as evidential data, collecting and analyzing them became a fundamental preoccupation for anthropologists. Pitt-Rivers organized things by function and according to a sequence that progressed from simple to complex to show the evolution of each type. Anthropologists of the Bureau of American Ethnology and USNM, including Otis Tufton Mason, relied on Lewis H. Morgan's stages of human progress; Mason added the use of the culture area concept to organize traits according to specific regional environments.

In the 1920s, due to the development of new theoretical approaches in social and cultural anthropology, the discipline shifted away from museum-based object analyses of culture and turned toward university departments as the primary location for research and teaching. In the United States, Franz Boas critiqued the evolutionary schemes of the day, arguing for historical methods. In Britain, a new school of anthropology emerged in the 1930s through the work of Bronisław Malinowski at the London School of Economics and with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown at Oxford, both of whom prioritized in-depth fieldwork and the study of social structures over comparative and generalist methods.

While the collecting of ethnographic objects declined from the mid-twentieth century onward, the rise of conservation archaeology, which targeted at-risk areas in the United States and elsewhere, resulted in an increase of federally and state-funded repositories and, therefore, a continued need for museum-based anthropological research and collection management programs. As methods such as physical anthropology and bioarchaeology gained interest, the formation of large comparative osteology collections became desirable for the purposes of research and teaching, with revisions to excavation and collecting practices being introduced due to the legislation of NAGPRA in 1990.

### **The “crises of anthropology” and collecting**

Independence movements and the collapse of colonial regimes following World War II led to an era in the twentieth century defined by emerging and self-governing nations. Scholars from these previously colonized societies openly critiqued anthropology, challenging it as a colonialist and racist endeavor. At the same time, an increase in the emergence of the ethnography of urban, “complex” European societies contributed to decreased confidence in anthropology as a set of scientific methods designed to study “primitive” and preliterate societies. During the 1960s and the “revolt against positivism,” previously assumed objectivities of fieldwork methods also came under scrutiny. Critics argued that these methods held biases stemming from the cultural and political position of the ethnographer and, moreover, resulted in unequal power relations between European colonizing nations and their subjects, thereby creating an “asymmetrical anthropology” (Stocking 1992, 342).

The “postparadigm” era (Marcus and Fischer 1999) that followed introduced postmodernist, postcolonialist, and poststructuralist approaches, all of which influenced how the history and rationale of anthropology and associated collections were then interpreted. This era also ushered in reflexive methodologies that advocated for the disclosure of the conditions under which fieldwork was taking place and collections made, as well as the ethnographer’s recognition of his or her own cultural or personal subjectivities.

This reflexive form of anthropology subsequently reframed how collections and museums were studied within anthropology, as well as in history and art history. Emphasis was placed on the subjectivity of collections and exhibits, as well as on debates about multicultural representation. Michael Ames, Janet Berlo, Flora Kaplan, Ivan Karp, Steven Levine, Ruth Phillips, and Peter Vergo were instrumental in developing approaches that considered how collections and museums embodied social ideologies over time. A school of critical museum anthropology developed that approached collection histories and cross-cultural contexts not only in terms of the biographical approach to the collector and his or her cultural context but also as a means to look at the nature of contact and exchange through interpretive lenses such as economics, trade, and colonial regimes of power.

The recognition of museums as social institutions and as indicators and instruments of change was influenced by the civil rights movement in the 1960s and appeals from the public and indigenous communities for the democratization of museums. Key topics in what became known as “new museology” (Vergo 1989) argued for the need for increased public access and the inclusion of indigenous peoples as stakeholders in the curation and exhibition of objects and

collections, and also prompted discussions about who controls cultural heritage. Representational frameworks became a dominant mode for interpreting museums, exhibits, and collections (Karp and Levine 1991). Saussurian linguistics and semiotic approaches viewed objects as signs that encoded meanings that structured society. Other representational approaches placed the emphasis on relationships of power, instigating inquiries into who was representing whom.

By the 1990s, following pressure from indigenous peoples to repatriate and return human remains and sacred objects, NAGPRA in the United States and similar laws and protocols in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom were enacted that reshaped the ways in which collections were curated in postcolonial and postsettler societies. At the same time, an increase in the establishment of indigenous-led cultural resource-management programs and museums further contributed to the recognition of culturally pluralistic perspectives on the value of objects and collections.

Approaches used to study collections in the early twenty-first century stem from this recognition of the plurality of knowledges, resulting in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural frameworks bridging history, archaeology, art history, communications, social anthropology, technology and society studies, and media and cultural studies. Increased interests in material culture studies have advanced the study of collections as social constructs. This area includes the study of exchange and commodities, the biographical and historical meanings of collections, the collector as consumer, the dynamics between power and knowledge as seen through collections, and the polysemic nature of objects themselves. The study of agency—both in terms the recovery of types of agency that have been overlooked through culturally influenced or gendered interpretations of history and agency that is gained through new recognition and inclusion—is of increasing interest in the anthropological study of collections (Harrison, Byrne, and Clark 2013). In addition, this area includes theory exploring the extent to which objects themselves have agency.

Appeals by indigenous peoples to recognize their culturally specific approaches to knowledge and cultural heritage have further developed into “decolonization” studies that advocate the use of indigenous ontologies in the structuring of knowledge within museums responsible for collections of indigenous origin (Silverman 2015). With the introduction of digital technologies such as databases and websites, researchers and communities have begun to experiment with ways to digitally reconfigure how collections are described and organized, redefining them according to indigenous categories. Recognition of the diversity of knowledges operating alongside science has introduced cross-cultural and collaborative approaches in museum anthropology, such as co-curation strategies, where collections are exhibited or cared for according to both museological and indigenous values and practices as well as scholarship challenging the dichotomy between indigenous and scientific knowledges. New areas have also emerged through knowledge revitalization programs and collaborative projects between museums and indigenous communities that use collections to revitalize and facilitate the transmission of traditional knowledge in indigenous communities.

SEE ALSO: Art, Anthropology of; Colonialism and the Museum; Display, Anthropological Approaches to; Endangered Cultures and Languages, Documentation of; Evolutionism; History and Anthropology; Material Culture; Museum Conservation; Museum Experiments; Museums



and Source Communities; NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990); Photography, Anthropology of; Reflexivity; Repatriation of Cultural Property and Human Remains; Threads

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