Patriotism, Values, and Continuity: Museum Collecting and "Connectedness"

What psychological or social purposes are served by collecting? And, more specifically, what can we learn about categorizing and interpreting various styles of collecting from exploring the development of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania?

Through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and its collection history we can watch an evolution of ideas about the "uses" of history and artifactual evidence. Founded in the 1820s under the leadership of Philadelphia patrician John Fanning Watson, the Society early developed clear goals: to guide the museum visitor—subtly or not so subtly—to appreciate and to emulate the established social order and its implied values of patriotism, morality, public service, and excellence in craftsmanship. Artifactual remains of Philadelphia's statesmen, the Society's founders hoped, would remind Philadelphia citizens of the noble tradition to which they should aspire. The Society's founders were not alone in their trust that the relics of the past might provide the instruments for social harmony. As Michael Ettema has expressed it:

The educational message of museum founders . . . depended on the Victorian faith in the inherent ability of objects to communicate abstract values . . . a unity of purpose.¹

The urge to collect, catalogue, and organize speaks to the need not only to create orderly routine in daily life, but also to create order in the framework by which people think about their own lives. Indeed, a penchant for "collecting" seems almost universal among human-kind: witness the enormous number of "collections" across the world.

Children collect rocks and insects; connoisseurs collect rugs and fine china, wine and political campaign buttons. Every collector, willy-nilly, is drawn into the process of sorting, categorizing, and, ultimately, interpreting the collection, whether the collection is eclectic and all-inclusive or very selective and exclusive. And what applies to an individual collector most surely applies in the case of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In his introduction to *In Praise of What Persists*, a series of short essays by American writers about what motivates them, Stephen Berg comments:

... whenever I read something that moves me I want to know in the simplest sense how the author wrote it ... where it came from. ... [The authors] can reach back into their experience, reconstruct and connect events, faces, books, gestures ... and transcendences, in a limited attempt to define the conditions which, they come to discover and believe, have formed their work.²

The writers represented in Berg's collection have tried, in their own work, to make sense out of the culture they have absorbed and the one they are creating, thereby achieving a "connectedness" with the past—real and imagined. Alice Walker speaks to the same concern in a different way. In a recent essay discussing her effort to retrieve writer Zora Neale Hurston from obscurity, Walker describes her search for this "lost" writer of the previous generation:

*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children ... if necessary, bone by bone.*³

Similarly, Elie Wiesel found the bonds of the past tugging at him. In *Messengers of God* he wrote:

When I was a child, I read ... Biblical tales with a wonder mixed with anguish. I imagined Isaac on the altar and I cried. I saw Joseph,
prince of Egypt, and I laughed. Why dwell on them again? And why now? It falls to the storyteller to explain.  

Pediatricians describe a condition in infancy as "failure to thrive" and ascribe its causes to lack of stimulation by, and connection with, the environment. Psychologists report a higher death rate among heart patients who are tended by unfamiliar caretakers or in unfamiliar surroundings.  

From many disparate sources, then, comes the suggestion that "connectedness"—the ability to establish and maintain a stable context—is a central human quest. "Connectedness" might be a prerequisite for human well-being—so much so that deprivation of a sense of continuity might be as hazardous to health as deprivation of food or water. And how is "connectedness" related to our ability to see and touch the physical relics of our ancestors?

Assembling, organizing, and displaying a collection of symbols of the past has a dual purpose. On the one hand, as Berg observes, it helps to reach back into experience, and thereby reconstruct and connect events, faces, books, gestures. On the other, as Walker explains, it allows people to dispatch their "duty . . . as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children," to solidify familiarity, to create connectedness and continuity in a world of the unfamiliar and of change.

Museums represent a way to reach into the past in search of moorings against the winds of change; they also offer an opportunity to ponder some roadmaps for the future. By collecting, organizing, and displaying the relics of the past, museums create what John Kotre has termed a "symbol structure," or fundamental framework of values within which people might find their own proper social place.

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6 One crude index of the popular interest in personal past is the success of American novelist Ross Macdonald, who wrote over a dozen "mystery" novels in which the resolution of the mystery hangs on the protagonist's ability to untangle a convoluted family history, retracing, through odyssey and artifacts, the lives of forebears, and *recreating* the story of themselves by reinterpreting the realities of their ancestors, collecting them again for the sake of their children. Macdonald wrote some three dozen novels and short stories, featuring detective Lew Archer.
7 John Kotre, in *Outliving the Self*, describes two aspects of generativity—the desire to shape the future. First, says Kotre, there is the drive to have a specific skill or knowledge
Historical Society of Pennsylvania was born of John Fanning Watson's concern for "connectedness," of his fear that what had been meaningful in his lifetime was in danger of being dislodged from its moorings by a flood of new ways, new morals, new values. So Watson and his friends set about attempting to "reconstruct events, faces, and transcendences," so that the world his heirs inherited would not "throw away its geniuses."

Watson and his colleagues knew who their geniuses were and what they considered were the valuable traditions to be reconstructed. William Penn, the colony's idealistic founder, was one of its geniuses. Valuable traditions included Quakerism, patriotism, the dignity of fine craftsmanship, the excitement of scientific exploration and experimentation, the challenge of capitalist competition, the ideals of utopia, predictability, stability, and—if unavoidable—gradual transition. These were the values the early Society founders hoped to display, and by displaying them, to will them to its collective children. Hence, the paraphernalia of the Penn family's public and private life formed an early foundation of the Society's collecting. Written documents, sashes, medals and symbolic swords, portraits of significant buildings and their occupants—all recalled the milestones of public life. Shaving basins, porringers, forks, plates, and furniture recreated some aspects of the private lives of public figures, including their tastes and choices in the crafts and craftspeople of their day.

Memorabilia of public life, and of the private life of the city's leaders, were displayed in a context and sequence that reinforced those values, with evidences of the seamy, the ignoble, the distasteful or unhealthy or even the ambiguous omitted. But if the lives of such as Penn gave the Society's early collectors a window on the public and private ideals of the early leader, they also must have given those same collectors an acute sense of the power of change, even as demonstrated in the life of this one man. For Penn's own life was hardly a model of stability, or of health, optimism, or unspoiled nobility. Beginning his life as a military nobleman, Penn was con-

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survive, preserved intact from generation to generation. The other aspect of generativity he describes as the impulse to secure the survival of the spirit of, or interest in, a general perspective or value, even if the products of that perspective undergo major metamorphoses. Kotre, Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives (Baltimore, 1984), 12.
William Penn in armor, after the lost original by an unknown artist (ca. 1670), shows a young Penn in a way most Americans do not think of the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania.

Wampum belt, Lenape (ca. 1682-1750). This belt supposedly was presented to William Penn at the fabled friendship meeting of 1682 in Shackamaxon, but there is no proof the meeting ever happened.
verted to Quakerism with its professions of pacifism, restraint, and modesty, but then went on to become both landed gentleman and government-maker, then, finally, both debtor and invalid. Nor was Penn able to leave his dreams intact by way of his heirs. His sons eschewed his high-minded approach to Indian relations, and even by the time of the elder Penn’s death, not a few staunch Quakers had drifted into the Anglican church, where proscriptions against profits and war were less stringent.

Much of this departure from the ideal was filtered out of the Society’s early display and interpretation. The goal was to have the museum visitor take inspiration from the loftier goals and accomplishments of former leaders rather than find potential hopelessness in the seeming demise of great men. Watson and his friends, leery of the changes taking place in their world, were anxious to recall a simpler, safer time, when “honorable” behavior seemed less ambiguous, when the urban lower classes did not affect the postures or clothing of their “betters,” when neither women, nor Afro-Americans, nor common laborers, nor street riffians organized into strident groups and demanded—or willfully snatched—“their” share of urban wealth and status. So the emphasis of Watson’s narrative, and the Society’s exhibitions, was on the exemplary aspects of upper-class urban life.

Watson and his fellow collectors knew much about inspired leaders and about the fragility of their legacy, and they set about building a collection that would preserve and display its inspiration in its strongest light. That one of Benjamin Franklin’s sons supported the British side in the Revolution was less important than the fact that both

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Franklin and his heirs took active public positions in the shaping of public discourse. Franklin's daughter, Sarah Franklin Bache, threw her considerable influence and energy into gathering provisions for Washington's ill-equipped army, and her son, Benjamin Franklin Bache, carried the standard for radical freedom of the press. Hence, though Franklin's heirs did not adopt the patriarch's own perspective on public service, they nonetheless exhibited their connection to his heritage. The lives of Delaware Valley leaders, and the tools with which they built those lives, were the focus of the collections of Watson and his colleagues. So began the Historical Society's quest for "connectedness," for preserving its geniuses.

Maps and landscapes, cityscapes and portraits of significant buildings—all added substance to the aura of dignity and respectability with which early Society collectors hoped to arrest moral and social

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9 On Franklin and his children, see Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, 1986).
decay. Samplers embroidered with patriotic symbols, poems like the one by Hannah Griffitts, diaries like Elizabeth Drinker's eulogized the nostalgia of Philadelphia's and America's proud beginnings. Souvenir coins and dishes, too, took their place beside souvenirs of scientific explorations and inventive experimentation to symbolize the identity-building and increasing self-legitimation of the new country.

Although not originally conceived as a way to celebrate urban diversity, the Society's collections slowly and inevitably began to reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of urban life. Responding to noblesse oblige, Philadelphia's leaders created philanthropic institutions, some of the records of which eventually made their way into the Society's cabinets. Such records gained entry into the Society's doors through the influence of the Society's privileged members, to be sure, but such records coincidentally brought evidence for insight into the lives of the city's less-privileged. By the 1830s, a subscription to the antislavery press, watercolor prints of the almshouse, and transcriptions of Native American languages further diversified the contents of the Society's collections. These artifacts, however, entered the collection more as evidence of the social responsibility of philanthropists than as a result of deeply felt empathy or sympathy with those served by that philanthropy. It would remain for late twentieth-century interpreters to shift the focus by using these documents as vehicles by which the urban underclass also might reach its own "connectedness" between past and future.

Through merchant records and newspaper advertisements, it is possible to learn of the lives of slaves, and through documentation of leaders' high-quality furniture and furnishings, it is possible to learn something of the life, status, and fortunes of the city's middle-class artisan. The papers of nineteenth-century philanthropic institutions, preserved because the institutions' administrators were often among the guiding forces of the Society, relate the story of the indigent, the sick, the misfit. In the antebellum period of collecting, the Society's focus was mostly artifacts about, not by, Philadelphia's non-elite population, but the lower classes intruded into the Society's consciousness nonetheless. In the antebellum years, agitation by those who had been left out of the city's political and social life increased, and so did their alliance with some of the leaders of the Society. Hence, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Society's collections had expanded to include not only the papers of the Pennsylvania
A View of the House of Employment, Alms-House, Pennsylvania Hospital, & part of the City of Philadelphia, engraving (ca. 1767). Built in 1767, the new Almshouse was the largest in the American colonies. It suggested the underside of Philadelphia's mercantile prosperity.

Cinque, the Chief of the Amistad Captives, mezzotint engraving (1840), after Nathaniel Jocelyn's 1839 painting. The likeness of Cinque was commissioned by Robert Purvis, a leading Afro-American reformer in Philadelphia.
Presentation pitcher to David Paul Brown, 1841. A delegation of black Philadelphians presented this pitcher to Brown, an abolitionist lawyer, in recognition of his efforts on behalf of fugitive slaves.

Crazy Nora, oil on canvas by William Winner (ca. 1850). Honora Power (d. 1865) was an Irish Catholic immigrant who lived for many years at the Friends Almshouse and was a familiar street person.
Abolition Society, but also the papers of the Negro Historical Society—a group of Afro-Americans seeking to document their own history. Charles Willson Peale’s portrait of African Muslim slave Yarrow Mamout took its place in the collection alongside the short-lived nativist woman’s newspaper, *The American Woman*, and the children’s book on the *Great Panorama of Philadelphia City Characters* (1851), which depicts a fruitseller, a woman launderer, a street minstrel, a loafer, and a rag-picker—among others. An 1850 oil painting of “Crazy Nora,” an Irish Catholic, mentally ill wanderer, and an 1840 engraving of slave-mutiny leader Cinque joined forces with an 1840s lithograph on the evils of alcohol to corroborate the message that many and diverse stimuli acted on people in the “city of brotherly love.” Reformers—who came in all descriptions, from socially prominent actress-turned-abolitionist Fanny Kemble, to Afro-American feminist itinerant minister Jarena Lee, to peace Democrat Congressman Charles Biddle—rattled the city's serenity and left documents that further unbalanced the Society's early focus on morality and unity of purpose. But a diverse collection is not synonymous with a diverse interpretation. Symbolizing as they did the principles and dreams of the nation’s founders, the public and private objects of the city’s upper classes continued to dominate the display and interpretation of the city’s history well into the twentieth century.10

Recently, however, “connectedness” has begun to take on new meanings and new voices, for the modern historian now is just as likely to be interested in the maker of artifacts as in the users, in the peddlers as in the purchasers, in the music-makers as well as the ballroom guests, in the conflicts as in the unity. The modern historian finds in these collections invaluable information about the skills, networks, and tastes of the artifacts’ creators. Savery family woodworkers, Stretch family clockmakers, Richardson family metalworkers—all more-than-competent artist/artisans—acquired yet greater context when juxtaposed against remnants of political and ethnic riots,

against outspoken feminists, or against Afro-American artists, writers, and entrepreneurs such as painter David Bowser, composer Francis Johnson, war correspondent T. Morris Chester, or merchant/farmer Robert Purvis.

In its early years, the Society capitalized on the uniquely privileged position occupied by the city in the nation's development. Home not only to the most energetic and imaginative of political and social innovators, as also to some of the most vigorous economic and artistic experimenters, the concept of "generativity" acquired broad meaning in the Philadelphia setting. Philadelphia had numerous artisans who fulfilled both facets of generativity, and often their commitment to high-quality workmanship was amplified as their productions passed, revered, through several generations of Philadelphia leaders and/or their landmarks. Such a tradition is exemplified in the work of Peter Stretch, master clockmaker, who, having well learned his trade from his English uncle, Samuel, then passed it on to his son, Thomas, who distinguished himself by his creation of the state-house clock.

Similarly, the Richardson family, three generations of talented silversmiths, holds an honored place in the Society's collections, as their works appeared repeatedly in the homes of the most prestigious families of Philadelphia, including those of the Society's members. Such artisans then took their own places among the endowers and administration of the institutions created to oil the wheels of urban life. Joseph Richardson, for example, was a member of the committee established to bestow poor relief upon Cesar Ghiselin, a less-successful example of a multi-generational silversmithing family. The Society holds the document that records this transaction: silversmith Richardson as benefactor, silversmith Ghiselin as recipient.

Either undaunted or defiant, some Philadelphians organized alternative institutions inside the confines of urban "order." New immigrants started fire companies and "friendly societies," huddling inside these for familiarity in a hostile environment. Afro-Americans established separate schools and businesses, and a few, such as sailmaker James Forten, established economically powerful dynasties of their own, producing their own series of artifacts, some of which, by

11 On generativity, see note 7.
Spoon, attributed to Cesar Ghiselin, 1695. Ghiselin, a French Huguenot silversmith, settled in America in 1681. For three generations in Philadelphia the Ghiselins were silversmiths, but they did not prosper.

Relief roll from the Committee for Alleviating the Miseries of the Poor, 1762, shows the insecurity of artisan and working-class life, but also the connections between silversmiths. Philadelphia leaders, especially Quakers, formed this special committee to relieve distress during the bitter winter of 1761-1762.
the turn of the twentieth century, also found their way into the Historical Society's archives.

All manner of memorabilia flowed into the Society’s coffers, and with each new generation came also new perspectives and changing goals about how to juxtapose, display, and interpret these evidences of the past. Modern social historians reached for a broader, more inclusive interpretation.

Hence, the Historical Society joined its counterpart institutions in gradually casting its net wider, focusing some of its interpretive energy on people who differed in religion, gender, class, ethnicity, race, age, or political persuasion from the white male Anglo-Saxon-dominated perspective that had heretofore been held forth as the model of exemplary status. Materials generated by—and not simply about—Native Americans made their way to the display cases. Likewise, the papers and memoirs of women, Afro-Americans, Germans, Jews, Catholics, union leaders, agitators, and the mentally ill expanded the Society's mission—and its audience.

Surely, as we move forward with our attempts to understand who and what we are as Americans, the meaning of “connectedness” will
Infant coffin, maker unknown (ca. 1835-1842). Archaeologists excavated this coffin in 1984 from the long-buried cemetery of Philadelphia's First African Baptist Church. The Society received the coffin as a gift in 1984. The coffin attests to the high infant mortality rate among the poor in the nineteenth century, and also to the Society's collecting interests in the twentieth century.

change yet again. One hopes that we will gain greater understanding and tolerance of those Americans who once were not considered important enough, and in some cases who did not learn to think of themselves as "important enough," but who did not throw away their own geniuses. Michael Ettema suggests that as Americans have moved away from the early museum interpretations, they have been at a loss for a viable alternative to the "Victorian faith in the inherent ability of objects to communicate abstract values," that Americans have

. . . abandoned the Victorian lessons of aesthetic cultivation, moral uplift, and technological enthusiasm, [but] we have not replaced them with a historical understanding that serves contemporary social purposes.\textsuperscript{12}

It is true that Americans have not completed the process of establishing "connectedness" between the various diverse elements of American culture. Just as the United States has no national holiday that celebrates any Native American, any woman, any immigrant, or any person born west of the Mississippi River—and only recently one which honors an Afro-American—so Americans have not yet woven together the threads of their diverse, yet interlaced story.

\textsuperscript{12} Ettema, "History Museums and the Culture of Materialism," 70-72.
In musing about the "end" of the civil rights movement, Alice Walker wrote,

... if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever. It gave some of us bread, some of us shelter, some of us knowledge and pride, all of us comfort. It gave us our children, our husbands, our brothers, our fathers, as men reborn and with a purpose for living .... It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes, selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. Because we live, it can never die.\(^\text{13}\)

Thoughtful museum curatorship can do the same thing. It can help create a "symbol structure" that reinforces reverence for life in all its complexity. A good museum exhibition can "reach back into ... [our] experience, reconstruct and connect events, faces, books, gestures ... and transcendences ... to [re]define" what we "come to discover," "if necessary, bone by bone" so that we can know, with Elie Wiesel, why it is necessary to "dwell on them."

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\(^{13}\) Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" in \textit{In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens}, 128.