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The Antiquities Men

J. Paul Getty hoped his collection might turn his barbaric countrymen into cultured citizens.



The Palazzo Massimo alle Terme's 'Sleeping Hermaphrodite,' a second-century Roman copy of a Greek original. *PHOTO: DE AGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES*

By **WILLARD SPIEGELMAN**

July 1, 2016 9:10 a.m. ET

‘Collecting is a curious behavior.’ With this unassailable thesis, Erin L. Thompson begins her riveting investigation of “The Curious History of Private Collectors from Antiquity to the Present.” Everyone knows people who have collections—rich folks who buy paintings, ordinary ones who gather matchbook covers, hoarders who amass everything—and the psychology of compulsive stockpiling is deep and varied. Of some collectors we know a great deal, of others only the fact that they collected. Freud was a tantalizing example of someone with mysterious motives. He left no record of why he

held on to his little pieces of ancient art, talismans he called his “old and grubby gods.” A psychoanalyst might have explanations: fear of death, an inferiority complex, countless others.

Ms. Thompson’s treatment is more limited than the subtitle of “Possession” might suggest. A professor of art crime at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, she is concerned with only one kind of collector: those who accumulate Greco-Roman antiquities. Of these there have been many, starting in ancient Greece with the Attalid kings (third century B.C.), who wanted to assure their status by presenting themselves as the legitimate successors of Alexander the Great.

POSSESSION

By Erin L. Thompson
(Yale, 224 pages, \$30)

Then came the Romans. By the first century B.C., the city had plenty of connoisseurs who bought or pillaged, restored or forged ancient Greek statues (others of their countrymen despised such art, which they thought encouraged the decay of the Roman

Republic’s high ethical standards). The emperors Tiberius and Nero, Ms. Thompson writes, “stripped art from public collections to adorn their private palaces, while Vespasian dismantled these collections and rededicated the works in public sanctuaries.” Self-aggrandizement and public display went hand in hand.

Does collecting communicate one’s legitimate self-image to others, or is it a façade for a person’s self-deceiving, self-created identity? Both, of course. The *bovattieri*, 14th-century Roman bankers and merchants who bought rural estates and raised cattle (hence their name), dug up artwork from the fields of ancient villas. The activity helped to fabricate a family lineage. In the 18th century, English noblemen had their portraits done in Roman garb or among ancient ruins to assert their spiritual identification with the classical world. Some collectors had political motives. Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-89) wanted to “reconcile her masculine soul with her feminine body” and used ancient models like the goddess Athena and the muse Melpomene to craft her public image.

Ms. Thompson’s fascinating chapter on “Restoration and Manipulation” offers delicious examples proving her claim that “antiquities have rough afterlives.” The juiciest is that of Henry Blundell (1724-1810) and his sculpture of a hermaphrodite, which in 1793 became “by means of a little castration” (his term), a sleeping Venus, “as pleasing a figure as any in this Collection.” Another piece, a pregnant woman, was restored as Sabina, the wife of the Emperor Hadrian, but then identified by a scholar (and re-restored) as a male Egyptian prophet. Blundell thought he could see the “real” character in each of his works. But he also bought forgeries, and he could seldom distinguish

between the ancient and the restored portions of other pieces. So much for authenticity.

The urge to beautify, to correct or to improve is of long standing. As late as the 1930s, Ms. Thompson notes, the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum were scrubbed with wire brushes to maintain the whiteness long associated with the glory that was Greece. Other intriguing sections in this treasure trove of a book include “Irresistible Forgeries,” which deals with an enterprise for which the rewards are high and the punishments low. Ancient Romans forged works by the Greeks, attributing them to Myron and Praxiteles, the first sculptural name brands. More curious are collectors like the eighth Earl of Pembroke or Prince Stanislas Poniatowski, who were perfectly happy with fakes, “manipulating the past to use it to support their self-conception.”

Consider, too, the sheer eroticism of collecting. Tiberius placed a life-sized bronze statue of a nude athlete, the Apoxyomenos, in his bedroom. Peggy Guggenheim modeled her sexual activity on the frescoes at Pompeii. For many people, mere tactility is all-important. Who among us has not touched something in a museum when a guard has conveniently turned away? Spirituality and sensuality are twins.

Of the modern figures dealt with here, the most absorbing and bizarre is J. Paul Getty. He loved his antiquities, even more than his five wives and many mistresses. He treated art as both a business and a noble illness: “Having been infected by the virus, I proved to have a chronic disease.” Getty believed in self-improvement, loathed American cultural illiteracy and hoped his collection might turn his countrymen from barbarians into members of a cultivated society. But he also considered himself a reincarnation of the emperor Hadrian and thought collecting might bring him a form of immortality.

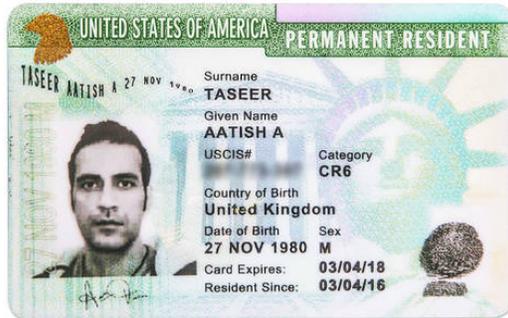
“Possession” is more than an antiquarian romp. The age of collecting ancient artifacts may be coming to an end, as it becomes more difficult to discover, acquire and even to display them. Ms. Thompson concludes with an examination of the ethical and legal questions that dog the collecting of antiquities. Who should own masterworks? Should they remain on home soil if they are endangered there? Should they go to foreign museums to be cared for by enlightened people? For years, Greece has been demanding the return of those Parthenon marbles that Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, brought to England in the early 19th century. Looted objects are now routinely repatriated to their countries of origin.

More important, looting and even judicious excavation can ruin major archaeological sites. The very act of digging spoils objects that have little aesthetic value, but that give evidence of the daily activities of ancient people (what they ate, what they wore, how

they died). What captivates archaeologists may hold no charm for antiquarians and aesthetes, but it can tell us as much about the ancient world as the most beautiful of statues. Collecting destroys as well as preserves.

—Mr. Spiegelman’s “Senior Pleasures: Looking Back, Looking Ahead” will be published in September.

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