Collecting as a Paradigm of Consumption

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Introduction

Why should the activity of collecting hold any interest for the economist? Collecting seems to reside only in the pores of consumer behaviour, beyond the rational and the useful, and so often prone to the passion of unrestraint and excess. Yet collecting reveals two important aspects of the act of choosing goods. The first is that goods are not single-purpose or single-end units, but complexes of multiple features. The second is that, though these features are internally ordered, new links and connections can be established and discovered among them. Among the multiple dimensions of goods functionality for use is only one. The humble tree trunk can provide a useful tool for sitting, yet from such trunks myriad stools, chairs of infinite forms, decorations, and colours, have been fashioned over the centuries. And with the evolution of chairs new relations have been established with other members of the family of furniture, and with the differently partitioned spaces they can occupy. Collecting exploits this multidimensionality of goods, decomposes its internal elements and recomposes them in innovative ways, establishing new relations both within a particular class of goods and with other goods, as when for example, a collection of chairs, grouped by colour and style, is made to hang from the ceiling.

Collecting in short answers questions that the economist usually declines even to ask: how do goods become goods? how are they organized in the consumption set? and how does the original set expand to include new goods?

In what follows, I shall focus on two main features of the activity of collecting. One is seriality, the fact that the material or immaterial objects of the collection are organized in a recognizable whole, in an ordered set of connections. The other is novelty, the fact that the set is open to discoverable new connections and links. Using these two features, I will argue a rather bold thesis, that collecting, far from being a form of idiosyncratic consumer behaviour, is its paradigmatic case.

How the consumption-collection set is selected and delimited, and how the set can be enlarged and varied in innovative ways will be dealt with in the first part of the paper, in which I offer a parallel discussion of these novelty-generating processes in both collecting and consuming. In the second part I ask whether, and
why, novelty might give pleasure and examine the implications for choice of a “taste” for novelty. Here I draw on a literature in experimental psychology on the “hedonic” dimension of novelty, complexity, and surprise.

1.

1.1. DISCOVERING THE COLLECTION SET

The first act of collecting, whatever its actual object, be it matchboxes or folk stories, is to define the collection set. This process of “narrowing down the field” involves a double decision.\(^1\) First, the would-be collector must delimit the boundaries of the collection – stamps of the same country, watches of the same period, records of the same singers. Second, there must be established the links that bind the elements of the collection together, be they contiguity in space or time, personal memories, or aesthetic qualities. This provides the (often tacit) rules of classification, of composition, and connection, so that the collection set becomes both recognizable and manageable.

These are the most visible, and most commonly stressed, aspects of collecting. What is less visible is that this is also an active, exploratory process. Identifying a set, imposing a pattern and establishing recurrences and differences, is not inscribed in the objects that comprise it, but must be discovered. For as part of a collection, an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and re-framed into new ones.\(^2\)

The fever for the New World and Far East exotica that filled the cabinets of curiosities in the 16th and 17th century Europe is an extreme example of this activity of re-framing. Selected with an eye to the canons of contemporary taste, the exotic, the precious, the rare became the chief constituents of many a collection: agates, ambers, perhaps replete with an encapsulated toad, eggs of rare birds, skulls, shells, all were displayed in orderly fashion in the precious Chinese lacquer cabinets, themselves objects of collection.\(^3\) The natural, artificial, and “supernatural” objects which crowded the encyclopaedic collections of the Renaissance were similarly selected with a view to forming a miniature replication of the universe in its infinite variety, a mirror of the world with all its mirabilia. The root mir, we should not be surprised to learn, is common to mirari, admirari, mirror, miraculous, marvelous.\(^4\)

In these cabinets however the novelty of the collection lies less in the rarity and uniqueness of the objects as much as in the contrast they provided with the already known. Detached from the original set of uses that defined their internal and external order, some of their features were selected to become the center of new connections. In this new set the unfamiliar was made more familiar. The over-detailed classification rules and catalogues, as well as the rules of visual arrangement, that accompanied the first universal collections are part of this process of “familiarization”.\(^5\)

Often, however, the discovery of a collection set takes the opposite direction, that of transforming the over-familiar, the overlooked, into a new object of wonder.
All the objects exhumed from the past and the ordinary items which inhabit the fleamarkets of every country are then recomposed as offerings of “Fifties” lamps, “Forties” ties, swizzle sticks, aquarium furniture, puzzles, costume jewellery, dug up old bottles, Indian arrow heads and so on. Collectors of discarded, broken pieces, who collect in order to produce from them art pieces, fashion clothes, furniture, quilts, etc., carry the process just one step further.

Kurt Schwitters, the German Dada experimentalist, collage-maker and inveterate trash hunter, provides us with a vivid instance of this. Schwitters collected as part of transforming the old and meaningless fragments of everyday life into the new order of an artistic composition. For years he hunted the streets of Hannover, his home city, in search of trash. Everything he found – streetcar tickets, scraps of newsprint, visiting cards, cigarette wrappers, corrugated paper, glossy paper, bills, envelopes (Schmalenbach, 1967, p. 118) – was removed from circulation, and recomposed in patterns which could take the final form of new aesthetic concoctions. In these the fragments, though concealed and mixed with the painted elements, still revealed the “bloody fingerprint of the murderer” (Dietrich, 1993, p. 108).

In this process of breaking the familiar into an unthought-of set of connections, creating contrasts, contrapositions, and unexpectedness are the new “ordering” rules.

1.2. Enlarging the Collection Set

As soon as a collection set has been “discovered” it starts to expand. It is this unrelenting aspect of collecting, by which the set seems never to be closed, that is so often seen as perverse, and causes collecting to be relegated to the realm of eccentric behaviour. The reason, however, seems to be simpler and not to require that we plunge into the psychology of addictive or pathological behaviour (though this may well be present, as argued in Musterberger, 1994). The key is to recognize that the process of discovery activated when the collection set is selected does not stop at that point; it is instead constantly renewed as the collection set expands. Any additional item provides new undetected links, saliences, variations, and contrasts within the elements composing the set. The whole set changes, acquiring both refinement of specification and greater completeness. As a result new subsets are bound to emerge, and these then take the form of autonomous new searches. The fascination with “completing” a set goes together with the necessity to modify it, to give rise to new cycles of explorable links.

This potential unboundedness of collecting can be illustrated by an almost infinite number of examples. One, chosen almost at random, is the history of antique coin and medallion collections. In the universal collections of the Renaissance these had a special place among the works of art made from naturalia. In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, when collections had become more specialized, medallions and coins comprised an autonomous object of collecting. In the first
half of eighteenth century France they enjoyed a period of special success. Though no more thought of as an expression of God's infinite power of creation, still their rarity, longlasting beauty, and preciousness provided the very source of variety which the collector delighted to explore. But the collecting of coins and medallions also revealed additional sources of novelty. Much of the interest for the eighteenth century collector came from the recognition and interpretation of the figure or scene represented on the medallions. The collector often took pains to acquire the historical and philological culture which would allow him to establish complex patterns of cross reference between the medallions and the surviving classical texts, and to discover new links and explanations between the two. The set therefore was open-ended.

As this and the earlier examples show, collecting is an active process of selection where novelty plays a decisive role. This opens a new way of looking at collecting as the activity of managing and producing novelty. It does so by exploiting the multidimensionality of goods. All the internal features of a good, as well as its external interrelations with other goods, are decomposed, isolated, and recomposed in different fashion. I shall come back to this point. First, however, I want to explore what can be said along similar lines when consumption decisions are involved.

1.3. Discovering the Consumption Set

The cases of the erudite medallion collector, and of the more profane and irreverent Schwitters, seem far removed from the ordinary consumer who has to deal on a daily basis with functional goods within strict constraints imposed by time and money. Still, despite the evident differences, there are many important analogies. Economists often think of consumer choice in terms of a choice within a preselected set of goods whose properties are known and prices given. They rarely ask why some goods and not others enter the consumption set. But, as my discussion of collecting has shown, prior to any choice within a set, the set itself has to be framed and discovered. How goods become goods, potentially pleasure-yielding objects, is in reality the first problem the consumer faces.

There is also another, interrelated problem: how goods interact with each other. As part of a set, goods are woven into a complex pattern of hierarchies, recurrences, and saliences, which change with use. To predict the relative subjective weight of goods on the basis of the distinct and decreasing marginal utility of each, as traditional economic theory suggests, can be quite misleading. As elements of a network of connections, additional goods-units may yield an increasing utility. Or, depending on the set within which it is framed, the good's desirableness may change and take on different values.

The creation of organization rules in consumption as a way of imposing an order on the originally unshaped world of goods' characteristics and combinations is, as collecting shows, both a learning, discovery process, and itself a matter of deliberation. Ordering rules, which locate goods both in use space and time,
as well as the creation of routines and habits, tend to provide familiarity in use and reduce complexity, so adding predictability to choice. In this process strictly functional properties are not the only guideline. Since functionality can be achieved — or denied — in many and competing ways, alternative rules may contribute to the perceived usefulness of goods. These rules may stem from style, fashion, morals, peer pressure, or personal history.

As the household’s collections expand, however, new functions within and among goods are created. This happens both endogenously, as when new synergies among goods are discovered by a consumer made more expert through experience, and when new goods appear on the market. Both changes occurred simultaneously, for example, in the breakdown of the multi-functional bedroom, the original core of the Renaissance house, into more specialized rooms, during the 17th century. Under the pressure of new and cheaper consumer durables, sitting and dining rooms, galleries and libraries, started to appear and to multiply the house’s functions, their number increasing with the income and heightened social position of the owner.

This last example alerts us to a third problem the consumer confronts: how to enlarge the consumption set, and how to combine any new goods selected with those belonging to the pre-existing set. This problem is made difficult by the fact that the ordering rules and hierarchy of preferences which prevailed in the old set cannot simply be transferred into the new one where new goods also import a new set of interrelations. To solve this problem requires, to an even higher degree, those learning capabilities which are involved in the selection of the consumption set itself. In producing these capabilities, however, the consumer is not alone. Emulation and imitation help in developing new consumption practices; they are also a result of constant interaction between consumers and the market.

1.4. Enlarging the Consumption Set

Marketing strategies, or the ability of the seller to sell, along with the good, suggestions as to how it might be used, have always accompanied goods at market. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, with international fairs and the first department stores, they made themselves felt on a grand scale. As has been increasingly remarked, the organization of the department stores which supplanted specialist retail stores was revolutionary. Goods were not simply put in piles by functional characteristics, but assembled and displayed in their multiple combinatorial relations and changing use possibilities. Completely furnished rooms, fabrics arranged by colour combination, clothing and accessories expressly complementing and completing each other, even art galleries and period furniture were shrewdly arranged in a profusion of light and mirrored walls.

Department stores had to overcome criticism, in particular that the spending they elicited was unnecessary, excessive, hence immoral. Yet they succeeded because they provided an answer to the problems consumers faced. They showed how choice should be organised according to rules of order and of change. On
display were ways both of discovering possible combinations, in the form of already assembled set of goods, and of breaking them down into new subsets and cross-set combinations, in the form of assemblable goods. As with today's stereos, or multi-use PCs, the suppliers of goods offered modules which could be freely assembled into systems (see Langlois and Robertson, 1992). Modules allowed an original set to be decomposed into more flexible subsets which, in their turn, could be recomposed in altered ways, at will.\textsuperscript{23}

In an assemblable world of goods new uses and characteristics can be constantly and innovatively generated. Sometimes this happens even through minute changes. For example, "old", well known goods can become new and appealing again by simply altering the hierarchy of their internal characteristics, as in the case of the colourful, disposable Swatch watches which are varied in a range of new models twice a year (Bianchi and De Marchi, 1996). Similarly, changes at the periphery of the set can cause changes in the whole, as when a flowered calico handkerchief, highly fashionable in the eighteenth century, was made an accompaniment of an ordinary and often severe suit (Bianchi, 1997b). Altering the temporal (or spatial) proximity of goods too can generate novelty, as when abandoned fashions become fashionable again or when goods of different cultures are mixed. Finally, different sets of uses can intermingle in unexpected ways, and goods can migrate across functional boundaries, as when medals provide subjects for paintings, and paintings in turn are transferred onto majolica plates. Needless to say, in producing such innovative moves, and in internalizing them, the consumer plays an active role.

As we have seen with collecting, then, so too in consumption: novelty, variety, and surprise can be generated in many ways by simply exploiting the open-ended network properties of the objects which are made part of the consumption, collection. This process appears to be a major reason for the success of many consumer goods, from Chanel suits to Hawaiian shirts, from Swatch watches to Staffordshire pottery, all of which became or have become collectibles in a short passage of time. In all these cases, the consumer could easily identify their characteristics (by reference to brand, fashion, quality) and "place" them in relation to the existing set of goods, but their variety of specifications provided also for the freedom of endless recombination.\textsuperscript{24}

If collecting and consumption appear so far apart, then, it is because the strategies we have seen operating in collecting have been assumed away or considered already solved when consumption is analyzed. Consumption starts, it is implied, where the motivations which seem to inform collecting leave off. What I have argued so far is that, on the contrary, the activity of collecting reveals a cognitive framework for organizing choice that operates also in consumption.\textsuperscript{25}
2.

2.1. Managing Novelty

I have concentrated on two main features of the activity of collecting: seriality, the fact that the elements of the collection are organized in a recognizable pattern or set; and variety, the fact that the collection set is expandable, it provides for new, more complex and varied links to be explored and discovered. Collecting, in this view, is an activity which creates a context, a frame of reference, for managing and producing novelty.

The first characteristic, seriality, has been the one most stressed. Analytically, it can be understood in terms of bounded rationality models of choice. Because of the seeming infinity of the choice set, as well as its variety and uncertainty, choice is too complex a process to be managed by limited human computational abilities. Some binding rules, in the form of habits and routines, as well as cognitive rules, need to be provided if choice is to be performed in a rational manner. In a similar way, both collecting and consumption must provide a binding set to order the infinite number and variety of the objects of choice. Unbounded variety is noisy, incomprehensible, unmanageable. Patterning, creating connections and contrasts, are strategies for reducing uncertainty and for economizing rational decision-making (Simon, 1988).

Once the binding order has been found, however, there begins a process within which novelty and surprise are constantly produced in the form of new and different combinatorial solutions. This is a difference with the models of bounded rationality and one evidentiated plainly in the activity of collecting. It is also most important for understanding consumption. As in collecting so in consumption the binding set has to be flexible enough to allow for both the internal and external recombinability of goods.

What I have described here, then, is a process of learning during which the consumer-collector develops two forms of strategy, one aiming at the reduction of uncertainty and disorder, the other at increasing it in the form of variation and complexity. Both strategies are innovative, as they involve a change in the given conditions of choice. Both are dynamic since learning is involved in different degrees, such as the simple recombination of the elements within the chosen set, but also in the exploration of new sets and new set connections. They are interrelated, the first providing the bounds within which novelty can occur, the second showing that these bounds are in fact fruitful in terms of being novelty-producing.

This is what seems to happen on the learning side of consumption-collecting. But why should one be attracted by novelty?

2.2. The Pleasure of Novelty

In the marketing literature that deals with the problem of innovative goods, often a distinction is advanced between consumers who are innovators and those who are adaptors.26 This is used to explain, on the basis of some recognizable personality
traits and definitions of innovativeness, different individual responses to new goods. These analyses and the analogous economic models of diffusion of the innovation in consumption, though they may well be important in explaining different responses to novelty, still leave completely unexplained why novelty should be considered pleasant at all.

That issue has been tackled by a succession of behavioural psychologists. Berlyne (1960, 1965, 1971) was among the first and most original (and Scitovsky (1992) was the first to draw the attention of economists to his work and to the problem). Berlyne coupled the psychological tradition of behaviourism and the more recent findings of the neurophysiology of motivational processes in order to establish an explanatory link between utility, or, as he called it, the hedonic value of various experiences, and the stimulus potential — such as novelty, unexpectedness, surprise — that is attached to those experiences. The link seems to be double. A moderate increase in the stimulus or, in his terms, the arousal potential of a situation, generates a positive increase in the pleasantness (utility) of a situation. This increase, however, if protracted, has a negative effect on pleasure. An inverted U-shaped curve — a re-interpretation of the Wundt curve (1874) — can be used to represent this dual possibility. Utility increases with the stimulus potential of a situation up to a point, then decreases, being replaced by disutility and displeasure. Novelty, in other words, is pleasant but within bounds: too low a degree is boring, too high a degree is threatening.

It is important to stress the dynamics of this pleasure-generating process. In this framework, hedonic values depend not on the level of arousal but on changes in its level. For arousal potential includes all the stimulus properties that are responsible for changes in arousal. Pleasure can therefore be activated in two ways, either through a moderate increase in arousal (arousal-boost mechanism) or a decrease in arousal when this has reached an uncomfortably high level (arousal-reduction mechanism). The appeal, reward, or pleasantness we derive from a specific experience is therefore linked to the interplay of these two mechanisms, the one tending to drive arousal upwards, the other tending to reduce it or to keep it within bounds.

2.3. NOVELTY AND THE TRADITIONAL THEORY OF CONSUMER CHOICE

This view of a range of hedonic values, from positive through to negative, seems to challenge the idea we are familiar with in modern economics of consumer behaviour and rewards. In the economic theory of choice the goal of the consumer, maximization of his utility, is reached when a balance has been found in the allocation of income among the various goods (no price-weighted marginal utility of a good should exceed that of any other). Unless there is an exogenous change in what is taken as given, the consumer has no incentive to change this equilibrium position.

There are two reasons implicit in the new behavioural approach, however, why this equilibrium position may not in fact represent a resting point for the consumer.
The first is that we do not know the degree of novelty or stimulus potential that is associated with the goods the consumer is experiencing in equilibrium. If the degree of novelty associated with these goods is perceived as too low or too high, this will give rise to actions tending to change the degree of stimulus, causing departure from the equilibrium position. The second is that even if the optimal choice were to coincide with the optimal level of arousal – where novelty is perceived as neither too low nor too high – the simple fact of repeating the same choice over time decreases its arousal potential and the corresponding hedonic value, thus giving rise to endogenous corrective actions. In both cases then, even without external change, there are reasons for expecting alterations from within in consumer choice.

The effect of these internal corrective actions will be that new goods, characteristics, and solutions will be looked for and discovered. This in turn will create new complementarities and relations among goods, as well as new non-substitutability and rivalries. As a consequence the hierarchy of preferences will be altered, giving way to orderings which appear as intransitivities and inconsistencies of behaviour, but which are, in the light of the newly created system of connections among goods, perfectly consistent. In brief, when one adds the dimension of novelty to the arguments of a supposed "utility function", this will start to violate all the so called "well-behaved" properties that have been assigned to it: monotonicity, convexity, and continuity.28

The two reasons given above, however, rest on a more fundamental point of difference between the two approaches. While in economic theory choice happens in a world either of certainty or of assessable uncertainty (in the form of subjective expected utility), in the model here presented the frame of action embodies a condition of non-assessable uncertainty. In Berlyne (1965) all the constituent elements of the stimulus properties that are responsible for the changes in arousal are in fact strictly connected to information problems. As components of the "arousal potential" we find, for example, apart from novelty, which signals a mismatch between present and past experience, ambiguity which can be thought of in terms of information deficiency; complexity which can be referred back to a lack of categorization; surprise and incongruity which reveal a gap between expectations and perception. Such information problems constitute the conditions for endogenous search processes which, by generating changes in the stimulus potential, might result in pleasurable and rewarding outcomes.29 Some (e.g., Nutting, 1973) go further in this direction and state that the very activity of producing change, of performing actively, and of exploring and learning, is itself a source of pleasure for the individual who is engaged in it.

It is not difficult to recognize in this pattern of behavioural responses and motivations some of the features of both collecting and consumer behaviour. The seriality that we have seen operating in collecting and the organizing rules that define the space of goods for the consumer can now be understood as those strategies essential for reducing too high a degree of novelty and uncertainty. These rules work both as a cognitive framework and as a means for reducing the unpleasantness of an
environment that is perceived as being too "noisy". In this phase it is the decrease of stimulus that is perceived as rewarding and pleasant.

At the same time, the variation that the consumer is able to generate within the chosen set, by playing both on the recombinatory properties of goods and by introducing new ones, can be read as an arousal-boost mechanism which keeps hedonic values from falling when a situation becomes too repetitive, too well known, too certain. Choice therefore is forever dynamic, never at rest. It is a learning/search process where emotions, in the form of failure and reward, pleasantness and unpleasantness, play a role.

All the questions that are difficult to answer in the traditional framework of economic choice now begin to be answerable: how goods are framed as goods; why new goods are looked for and anticipated; why passionate behavior is relevant in consumption. Tastes, preferences, the use of standards and routines, are meant to shape and orientate consumption in its double relationship with novelty: unpleasant if (too) unshaped, pleasant if (flexibly) organized and recognizable.

3. Conclusions

In an article written in 1925 in answer to some critics of utility theory, Jacob Viner mentioned collecting as one of those consumption activities which represent an exception to the law of diminishing desire (Viner, 1968, p. 130). For the collector who is completing a set of coins, stamps, or first editions, Viner suggested, the last unit of the good is as desirable as, or even more desirable than, the first unit. Viner added that this problem disappears if we take the proper unit of analysis to be the whole set. The law of decreasing desire, of diminishing marginal utility, though lost within the set, holds again between successive sets. Only the collector whose set is never closed is, like the miser who has an inextinguishable desire for gold, is in abrogation of this law. Viner concludes, reassuringly, that that is more a pathological than the normal case.

Unintentionally, Viner here captures well the reason why collecting, being a set of internally organized elements, does not allow the law of decreasing marginal utility to be applied to its successive units. We have noticed it in the course of the paper. We have noticed also however that the open-endedness of the collection set not only does not represent the exception in collecting, but seems to be the rule also in consumption. The key element is the recognition of the role that novelty plays in both activities. As a cognitive component of behaviour, novelty is what puts search, exploration and learning into motion. As a hedonic component of behaviour, novelty provides the stimulus potential for action and therefore for devising those strategies that are most novelty-inducing. In collecting and consumption both these aspects of novelty have been seen to operate. To consume is to learn to control and to produce novelty. To consume is also to enjoy the process.
Notes

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1. See the interview with Robert Opie, collector of food packaging, and founder of the Museum of Advertising and Packaging in Gloucester (England) in Elsner and Cardinal (1994, p. 31); on Opie, see also Susan Pearce (1995, p. 178).

2. Even the simple act of noticing and buying a book in a second-hand bookshop is a discovering of a specificity and a role that the book did not have in the indifferenitated bookshop display (Cardinal, 1994, p. 68). As part of a collection instead — literature, history, economics — the book is both displaced and replaced in a new frame of use and meaning (see Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my library", 1968). On the difficult, and often defeating, art of arranging books, see Perec’s delightful short story (1985).

3. See for example Thomas (1965, p. 76).


5. In the set of instructions for the ideal universal collection contained in Samuel Quicchebergh’s tract (first edition, 1565) the various collections, or classes, are hierarchically subdivided into art, art produced from natura, organic materials, inorganic materials, and so on. Each of these are further subdivided into “inscriptiones” — sacred objects, portraits, stone, wood and glass works, antique medals and coins, plants and animals, rocks, fossils. An historical analysis of this and other encyclopaedic writings produced north of the Alps from the 16th to the 18th century, is given by Eva Schulz (1990). In Italy, specialized collections of natural objects developed in the second half of the 16th century. Though more scientific and didactic methods of classification started to appear, the love for the rare, the bizarre and the exotic often obscured the study of the common (Olimi, 1985).

6. There are numerous guides to and celebrations of these special, imaginative, and anonymous collections. See for example Land-Weber, The Passionate Collector, 1980.

7. See Cardinal (1994). Speaking of the art he created during the First World War, Schwitters says: “Out of parsimony I took whatever I found... One can even shout out through refuse, and this is what I did, nailing and gluing it together... everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of the old fragments: and this is Mera”, the name Schwitters gave to his art. (Quoted in translation by Schmalenbach, 1967). However, as Cardinal notes (1994, p. 93), “exotica” appeared also in Schwitters’ art, like the tobacco-label from North Carolina in his collage “Duke’s Mixture” (1921).

8. Playing on the oppositions old-new, useful-useless, Schwitters, under his collage entitled “Fijurine” (1921) which represents a stylized woman dressed à la mode, placed a short text which reads “papier ist die grosse mode” (Elderfield, 1985, p. 79). Walter Benjamin’s collection of quotations also accrued from “what daily living and reading netted him”, from the forgotten eighteenth century love poem to the latest news from the daily press (Hannah Arendt, 1968, Introduction, pp. 45-46).

9. La Bruyère, whose Caractères first appeared in 1687, thought of collecting as of “a passion often so violent that it is only inferior to love and ambition in the pettiness of its aims” (cited in Rheims, 1961, p. 7).

10. Think of the writing of a book. While the project moves towards completion but before the set of explorable connections lying within the original conception have been exhausted, new ones are generated in the very process of research and even writing. In modern literature, the aspiration to create a book which never closes, which is potentially universal, unites writers as different as Gadda and Musil, Proust, Mallarmé, and Borges (see Calvino, 1993, pp. 121-131).

11. In the short story by Perec already cited (note 2), the protagonist allows a maximum number of 300 books in his library. But to allow for new books without having to throw out away old ones, he starts to redefine what a “book” is. A multiple volume set becomes a single book, many volumes on a single topic likewise, and so on. Perec’s passion for catalogs, his ability to multiply combinatorial variations on a single theme following (secret) mathematical algorithms, is described in a masterful way by Calvino (1993, p. 132).
12. The power of attraction of antique coins and medallion had always been strong. In the 16th century they were actively exchanged, and presented as gifts. Additionally, the splendidly crafted figures they represented provided a source of inspiration and models for painters, much more accessible and "portable" than antique sculptures (Cunnally, 1994).

13. See Pomian (1990, pp. 128–129). By the end of the 18th century medallion collections, with their embodied taste for erudition and the ancients, had become much fewer, replaced by the new Enlightenment love for science and truth. Natural history collections started to proliferate, and plants, insects, and flowers provided the variety, surprise, and expertise which once had belonged to medallion.


15. This is a process whose impropriance has started to be recognized and analysed (see e.g. Langlois and Cosgel, 1997).

16. Barbara Johnson’s album (Rothstein, 1987) which collects all the samples of her dress materials in a lifelong exercise – from 1746 to 1823 – shows well the desire to give choice a unifying, consistent character, and to represent it in the form of a collection, along recognizable lines: function, memory, fashion, novelty.

17. In de Bastide’s novel La petite maison (1763), all the treasured possessions of the house are arranged to be an instrument of constant and seducing wonder. Not before the end of the novel do we know whether the lady invited to see them will succumb, yielding up her virtue to the cunning artifice of the room by room display. On the same topic, see also Vivant Denon’s novel (1777).


20. The first to theorize the atmosphere of exoticism, the sense of abundance, leisure, and surprise that had to accompany the arrangements’ display was Frank Baum, who in 1897 founded the first magazine on store display, “Show Window”. This is the same Frank Baum who wrote the magical Land of Oz (Leach, 1993).

21. Marketing strategies, however, existed well before the industrial revolution and the creation of a mass market. In the second half of the seventeenth century, for example, with Louis XIV’s Paris emerging as the center of the world of fashion, Parisian mannequins called Pandora (bambole in Italian) completely dressed from underwear to wig, crossed foreign frontiers monthly, touring the European capitals without being stopped even by wars (see Frechenberger, 1963; p. 140; and McKendrick, 1982, p. 198).

22. See Horowitz (1985) for an account of the early twentieth century debates on the morality of spending.

23. For example, the “breaking” of a suit into separates (skirt and jacket, or pants, jacket, shirt), enables one to recombine them in multiple new combinations; the more “decomposable”, or modular, is the dress, the more room is left to individual imagination to create recombinations. Mobile and composable furniture offers analogous freedom of combinations. The Internet system, highly unspecified though it is, is open to endless new applications and uses.

24. One, deservedly famous, instance is Wedgwood pottery. The reasons for Wedgwood’s success have been recorded many times (McKendrick, 1982, p. 103; Wernick, 1991; Sontag, 1993; Pearce, 1995). Two things however are important to stress here. The constant and revolutionary technological improvements (such as Wedgwood’s invention of the pyrometer for measuring high temperatures) could be and were in fact copied. Wedgwood’s wares had, however, additional unique characteristics. On one side, they were able to create a recognizable style, such as the Etruria ware adapted to the new fascination with Roman antiquities, or as the various sets named after royal and noble customers (Queensware, Royal patterns, Russian patterns). But within this recognizable style, many variations as well as technical improvements were allowed, in the form of new glazes (green glaze, creamware, jasper and black basalt), new patterns, and new combinable goods, from cameos to fireplace inlays. The objects produced therefore were both constantly new and eliciting of a desire for further newness. In this way, ordinary goods were directly presented as collectibles, sharing in their rarity and exclusiveness. Conversely,
collectibles were presented as functional, as objects of daily life – the nobly-named, but widely affordable dinner service.

25. The process is not unlike choosing within a menu (see the interesting book of Lloyd Jones, 1991). Many examples of “serial consumption” can be found in Guerzoni and Trollo (1997).


27. But see also Crozier (1994).

28. For a more detailed analysis of this point, see Bianchi (1997b).

29. Relevant here is the distinction Berlyne draws between “specific” exploration, which gives access to additional information thus prolonging or intensifying a given stimulation, and “dif-fused” exploration, which introduces stimulation from every source that seems interesting or entertaining, when the situation lacks stimuli (1965, p. 244).

30. See also Levy (1997) who mentions collections as instances where the law of marginal utility fails.

References


Arendt, Hannah (1968) “Introduction” to Walter Benjamin Illuminations.


