



Collecting the past

Collecting is something everyone has experienced at some point in their life. But for passionate tribal art collector Arthur Wall, it is more than the enjoyment of objects, collecting is a way of connecting to the past and expressing who we are and how we want the world to see us.

Why do people collect? Is it the love of musty old shops? A curiosity for art, religion, taboos, logic, the ceremonies, the madness, the rituals? The desire to be the keeper of the secrets, the collector of a country? To preserve and cherish and protect the past? The excitement of the find? The urge and the impulse to buy and sell until you have only the very best?

People collect for so many reasons. Many people collect firstly because they really love something. Some people collect for the prestige, some because they like to show off their knowledge and passion and others for economic gain – the government gives great tax incentives to philanthropists.

As human beings we are a constant work in progress. In a world that is constantly changing, we can never think of ourselves as being complete. Maybe this is why collecting, at least for me, is very reassuring and comforting. It says to the world who I am and where I fit in. I believe collecting is a comment on your own biography. It is a desire to categorise and reshape; a curiosity for old, new and different things and it is the excitement of the chase.

It is a way of expressing who we are and how we want the world to see us, making a comment on our lives as it is now and as it was then.

It doesn't matter what it is you collect, whether its matchbox tops, radios or umbrellas, butterflies or primitive art, I believe collecting goes to the core of a person. I think something happens when you decide to collect a particular thing. The object triggers a connection that is inside you and you are projecting yourself into the piece. I think this is why everyone reacts differently to the same object. Aesthetics has nothing to do with collecting. Like art, it is more about personal taste than the appreciation of beauty or ugliness.

For me, collecting is like seeing a mirror of yourself, the same way the person who made the piece saw a reflection of themselves in its creation.

Objects we collect can show us how we have improved or gone backwards intellectually and spiritually in art, architecture and science. We get to hold and keep timelines that enable us to judge how things have changed – for better or worse.

Collecting can give the collector spiritual, material and intellectual benefit. These objects can evoke a fascination of past times and past energies. The translucent power of a piece coming from one place to another, one time to another, one culture to another is a marriage between the present and the past transported by timeless energy into another world.

By collecting these objects, we are seeking other worlds and other identifications and acknowledging their existence. When I collect something I want to know every piece of information on it – its significance, its history, its owner, its maker. In a way, the object is an historical document, the material culture of the time that was made in a particular context, time and space.

A personal vista

I personally began collecting as a child, as most children do. It began with shells, rocks, minerals and fossils. Later I took an interest in Native American art, perhaps due to my partial Cherokee ancestry, and then while at the University of New Mexico I started collecting Native American artefacts. Today, from my bases in Sydney and New York, I continue to find wonderful artefacts – and the thrill of the find is as strong as ever.

My collection now covers Native American textiles and jewellery and apparel including eagle feather war bonnets, moccasins, vests, war shirts and weapons; ceramics from 600 AD to the present; Inuit (Eskimo) stone carvings; Aboriginal boomerangs; ancient and contemporary paintings; totems from New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and hundreds of masks all unique and amazingly different.

“Collecting is a comment on your own biography. A desire to categorise and reshape; a curiosity for old, new and different things and it is the excitement of the chase.”





I think the personal adornments of these ancient peoples are wondrous. They used a multitude of materials including teeth from humans, dogs, rats and possums, sometimes interwoven with split bush vine that has an enchanting visual effect that is not out of place in the world of magic and the occult.

Being the custodian of such beauty that actually is never truly owned, only borrowed, is a spiritual experience for me. Living day to day amongst the art gives me a sense of connection to the ancient tribes and people who created them. Behind every piece there is an aura, a story, a spirit. In my own imagination I am there with them.

There are many oceanic languages that have no word for art or artist. Every man was or could be

an artist. The art forms were often consumed and disregarded. The creative process was often more important than the finished object and it sometimes had no life beyond the moment of use or the ceremony it was created for. These objects were not made to be bought, sold or preserved in public or private collections and so they were sadly and often neglected.

In addition, the majority of native art is made from natural products found within the area it was created in. New Guinea wood art, for example, deteriorates in the tropics at a frightening rate. Their creators deliberately destroyed them often as an important part of the ceremony and so much of it has been discarded or lost to the elements. Even further, the

indoctrination of religious beliefs has raped and pillaged these cultures and often burnt and destroyed their primitive places of worship and their gods. This makes collecting primitive art so special.

So collecting makes us participants in a human drama that lies far beyond the limitations of written history. It is these tantalising mysteries that ignite the mind and fire the connections we have with our cousin-world of humanity.

In this way, simple feeling, like the love of musty old shops, can open up the mind to a curiosity for art, religion, taboos, logic rituals and ceremonies – the very things that have for an eternity guided civilisations towards one another in clashes and in mutual creativity.



The adrenal rush I feel when I am at an auction and I find a rare treasure that nobody else recognises or wants is an exciting moment. It is like an addiction. Recently I attended a neighbourhood fete and bought a nineteenth century Solomon Island canoe prow for \$12. Some are valued at over a quarter of a million dollars. With collecting you have to be in the right place at the right time or the right time and the right place.

Primitive art is totally undervalued because there is such a limited source of supply and material. An interesting comparison is the difference between a three-thousand-year-old Chinese vase of which there are tens of thousands and a beautiful eighteenth century Australian boomerang, of which there are a handful.

Because of my collecting passion, people describe me as somewhat eccentric. I don't mind this title at all. I will travel far and wide to find the piece I want. Since my personal collection became so large I have

had to trade-up and sell lesser quality pieces. This is also necessary as your tastes change over the years and your collector's eye gets better as you learn more.

As a result of my collecting, I am constantly meeting extraordinary people and I am always learning something new. I often loan my objects to exhibitions, including a recent one at The National Museum of Australia in Canberra, to in-turn share what I've collected and open up new windows for people to view.

Why do I collect primitive art? I love the colour and the movement of it. It is very surreal. For so long people had the concept of it not being worth anything. It was only thought of as natural history specimens and nothing more. This gave them very little value. It has now escaped from its natural history ghetto and nowadays it is becoming more recognised with the opening of a new primitive art wing at The De Young Museum in San Francisco and the Musée de Quai in

Paris. You only have to look at the prices now to see how things have changed.

Academic Joost Daalder said, 'when monetary values are assigned to the things that one loves the people who love purely from the heart and not from the wallet are always upset'. I didn't ever begin collecting because I thought I would make a lot of money. It was a need in me that I had to fulfil. The objects I collect evoke a time and a space which can be a remembrance of the past. I question where they have come from and why they were made and because they were often made for spiritual reasons, not monetary gain, it makes me think about my own spiritual journey.

The other marvellous thing about collecting is that it can be done at any time any place. It can take you all around the world. You can always be swotting up on your subject with a book on holiday.

The value of collecting

In most collections, provenance and signed pieces are important. When something is signed, you don't have to judge it on its own merits. Scholars and collectors often transferred European criteria to non-European art forms. An art form had market value. It could be preserved and it satisfied Western aesthetic concepts. The average collector finds more importance in the antiquity of the object and its uniqueness than its function in the religious or social life of the community.

But I am always searching for the unusual, the unique and the classic and always for the most beautiful. I collect primitive art because I look at the spirit of the nature within it, the wondrous power of its creativity. Each piece has a timeless appeal and a personality. An attitude. A negative and positive space. It almost feels as though it's observing us in the now. Making a comment on our life as it is now and as it was then.

Picasso had his own tribal art collection and was very inspired by it. Images of these objects he owned are seen reproduced in many of his paintings, such as *Woman of Algiers* in which the women have faces of African masks. Many other famous artists such as Matisse, Mogdigliani, Brancuzzii and Braque were likewise inspired.

As for some of my Aboriginal collection, I take great pride in knowing that I have acquired things that had the last contact with people who thought they could fly. The old initiated aboriginals believed they could fly with the Mimi spirits. It is so far from this modern mechanical world.

That, to me, is the true value in collecting primitive art. It helps my understanding, it speaks to me about the trials and tribulations of humanity and the joys of its finest hopes realised.

