

Which is it?

1. Collecting is a symptom of mental or emotional instability?
2. Collecting is a form of creativity?
3. Both?
4. Something else entirely?

How ill or how creative are those of us who collect stuff? At what point do we become diagnosed as clinical hoarders? Are we there yet?

Many youngsters are enrapt by their newly discovered world of objects, fascinated by never before seen shapes and sights, colors, textures, arrangements, odors and sounds. They learn and test, observe and absorb, touch and integrate. For many, those early formative experiences remain in their brains, sometimes buried under layers of oncoming experiences, disappointments, adult expectations, embarrassments and things forbidden. It seems to me that both the process of creating objects and collecting them are means for us to better learn and know about our material and immaterial world, and that our conscious and unconscious selves feed and direct that which we express and that which we gather as adults.

Our childhood, the experiences, the learning, feelings and early formative thoughts, suggest to me to be the source of intuitions and gut reactions. There is unconscious learning and direction that goes on, as well as genetic dispositions that we barely understand. As adults we often, perhaps much too often, cover up the characteristics that made us open, sponge like, fresh, vital and creative.

I am often reminded of this quote from the novel, *Boy's Life* by Robert R. McGammon:

*"See, this is my opinion: we all start out knowing magic. We are born with whirlwinds, forest fires, and comets inside us. We are born able to sing to birds and read the clouds and see our destiny in grains of sand. But then we get the magic educated right out of our souls. We get it church-ed out, spanked out, and combed out. We get put on the straight and narrow and told to be responsible. Told to act our age. Told to grow up, for God's sake."*

There are cultures and subcultures that will run the extremes, either encouraging the acquisition of objects and extolling those who collect, and the opposite cultures in which amassing material goods is frowned upon. Whatever the case, it has always been true that today's historical record of former and remote material worlds is the result of objects which were rescued from oblivion by persons of various intentions and means. Museums are filled with objects gathered by the astute collectors and hoarders who had the ability and opportunity to acquire, for whatever their individual good or bad reasons.

*"Art collecting becomes an expression of self...It's a form of self-portraiture."* said Allan Schwartzman, an art adviser who helped create the notable Rachofsky House in Dallas and the Inhotim Center for Contemporary Art in a Brazilian forest. (See the New York Times online article, ["Welcome to the Museum of My Stuff"](#), Feb. 18, 2007 by Carol Kino.)

I have given up trying to analyze my own reasons for collecting, though if pressed I might have something to say that could make sense. I only know that like so many others throughout history and across cultures, objects have been a source of fascination, learning and delight. It so happens that three dimensional art objects confront and engage me as a fellow physical presence on Earth. They are full round, in the flesh, not created to fool one into believing they are 3D objects on a 2D ground. They have bulk, weight, material substance, and the invisible force of gravity weighs them down like it does my body. Sculpture usually gets my attention first.

In fact, as a sculptor myself, I have found my response to found three dimensional objects of extreme importance. I do not want to mimic them, copy them, or learn from them by merely drawing or painting reproductions of them. I am only aesthetically satisfied when I can lift, touch, and actually employ them in arrangements, in association with one another as assemblages. Their evolved conditions and realities are more revealing to me than paintings of them. My years spent as an antique dealer was a result of interest in objects, not because I loved business, and collecting sculpture is an extension of that potentially compulsive interest in tangible artifacts.

Because my range of travel and spending money has been limited throughout my life, I have tended to acquire art that is within my personal geographic and monetary reach. This means that art which I encounter in Wisconsin is the sort I acquire from time to time. That in turn suggests that most of the artists in my collection are from Wisconsin.

In terms of numbers, there are over 120 sculptures in and around my small home. Outside there are a few large corten steel geometric forms, and inside there are small sculptures of ceramic, metal, wood and plastic. When I sit in my living room easy chair, I am entirely embraced by 3D objects, and by the artists who gave their energies and ideas so these sculptures could emerge from their fertile brains and skilled hands.

Hanging directly down from the ceiling above these sculptures are a few large paintings that will not fit on my crowded walls. From up there a Maxime Banks nude, early Jerome Krause mystical woodland and a Janet Roberts gestural landscape look downward. Two large paintings, one by Terry Coffman, another by Kenn Kwint, cover the better part of two walls, and elsewhere paintings cover most wall space, nooks and crannies. I look about and see the sculptural work of John Balsley, Estherly Allen, Bob Curtis, Gene Galazan, Rudy Rotter, Robert Hurdlebrink, O.V. Shafer, Hilary Goldblatt, Kent Ipsen, Bruce Niemi, Tom Eddington, Albert Zahn, Josie Osbourne, Tom Lidtke, James LaMalfa, Gerhard Kroll...and many more you will not likely know.

These are names that many Wisconsin art collectors will not be familiar with for a variety of reasons ranging from lack of documentation of Wisconsin sculptors, to the fact that some have passed away, perhaps moved out of state and/or have not found or chosen opportunities to exhibit. Then there is the possibility that sculpture is more ignored than painting.

I have gathered my humble collection from several sources, including resale and antique shops, auctions, and many directly from artists or their dealers. The most fun arrives when a desirable sculpture appears in a resale shop and I manage to have the good timing to find it, hopefully undervalued. Some few pieces have arrived thru direct trades with artists, but practically none as gifts. I would be uncomfortable if I could not reward the artist with some form of compensation, though I admit to being selfishly pleased when a piece turns up on the second hand market very inexpensively.

I'll mention a few instances when I have found inexpensive personal treasures to add to my collection. One multiple find was a group of small sculptures by a little known sculptor from West Allis, Joseph Puccetti. Some of you have seen his large metal Family Group in front of the West Allis City Hall on Mitchell St. Years ago someone in his family decided to sell many of his small hand made one of a kind figural sculptures thru a resale shop. Over the course of a week I returned to purchase all of them. Then there were the Robert Hurdlebrink sculptures that had for a few decades been in the hands of artist/gallerist, Charles Dix, always not for sale. I happened to walk in just at the time he decided to sell them. Hurdlebrink was a highly respected sculptor from Milwaukee who died an early death, and who is sadly hardly known today. There are other personal small success stories, like the chance finding of a wooden weathervane made by the mythical creator of Bird Park in Bailey's Harbor, Albert Zahn. While he did not sign his work, his designs and methods were uniquely his. I happened to recognize it, and took it to his now elderly grandson who confirmed it was indeed made by his grandfather.

The limits to collectors are not unlike those imposed on producing artists. These limits include money, space and time...and of course, talent and skill. Few of us will have the funding to acquire all we really would like, nor do we have space to display and store it all. (For example, I am not in a position to add on to my two bedroom 1950's home in order to exhibit an expanding collection.)

So many of us must make do with what is affordable and with what we can fit into our physical space. It may be that we will eventually reach the end of our collecting as a result of dwindling room for display and storage, and it may be that I have personally come close to that point.

One bothersome aspect of collecting that occurs to me often is due to this collection being cloistered away and unavailable for others to see and enjoy. While I can benefit from seeing these things every day, the works and the artists themselves receive no more recognition once the pieces settle into my space. I would love to share, for selfish and unselfish reasons, these works with a broader public. It seems to me that the artists who made them, who I know to be talented, should be more acknowledged, appreciated and exhibited.

In one small way I have found a partial solution to that concern. The Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend will be exhibiting part of my Wisconsin sculpture collection in September of 07. This is due to the museum's commitment to and understanding of our regional art culture, and to the quality artists who reside here.

Getting some of these pieces out on display from my collection will be a small and temporary fix to my concerns about hoarding away art work that should be seen by many. I will selfishly gain some personal exposure thru this exhibit, but so will many of the artists whose works sit here in my small home. Instead of just one pair of eyes to enjoy them, perhaps the museum can reach some hundreds more.

The conclusion to my collecting will someday arrive, probably not willingly and probably unexpectedly. Due to a physical inability to deal with the collection, or personal disability preventing me from doing so, the sculptures and paintings will pass on to my children, to friends, strangers or museums.

After all is said and done, we are mere caretakers and then only for a brief while. That is something very important to remember when dealing with art, our culture, our children, and the Earth.