

# Collecting and Curating

## Background Notes

Dr Victoria Preston – 13 December 2017



Image 1, Cabinet of Curiosities



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Winchester Art History Group  
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## INTRODUCTION

People have collected interesting and curious objects since the beginning of time and have found the need to house these objects in a safe place. They have taken great pleasure in arranging and categorising these objects. This is the beginning of collecting and curating. The word curating comes from the Latin “curare”, meaning “to take care of”.

Over time this process of collecting and curating became more formalised, and we see all over Europe the birth of the Cabinet of Curiosities or “Wunderkammer”. Interestingly there was no differentiation between artworks, artefacts or objects from the natural world, (Image 1). The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford displays objects in a similar style to these early Cabinets of Curiosities.

## COLLECTING & THE BIRTH OF THE MUSEUM

Collectors have chosen to share their collections not only with their friends but with the wider public. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford opened 1683 as the world's first university art museum. Its first building was built 1678–1683 to display the cabinet of curiosities that the avid collector, Elias Ashmole, gave Oxford University in 1677.

Museums came to represent the “sole” source of knowledge, and it was even contended that all knowledge could be captured and stored in a physical building - an idea that is unthinkable today. Monumental architectural developed to promote this idea. The imposing steps and Doric columns of the British Museum shown in Image 2, for example, were intended to inspire a sense of reverence and awe in the visitor.



Image 2, The British Museum

Over time, ideas about the museum changed, with this didactic approach to knowledge transfer being replaced by a more participatory style of learning, where viewers are encouraged to engage with the objects on display and to form their own opinions. Tate 2 Learning Centre would be a good example of this.

## CURATING

The objects on display in museums are taken care of by the curator, though the job goes way beyond the simple task of deciding where to place objects. At the heart of their work is the development of a curatorial narrative. We see this for example in the case of the British Museum, which has shifted its position over time from being a celebration of Britain's imperial past, to representing some of the multiracial characteristics of British society.

The plethora of special exhibitions in many museums, and the movement of art outside the physical confines of the museum has widened the possibilities of the role of the curator. Whereas curators were originally just responsible for the collection, care, research, and exhibition of art or artefacts, this definition was widened in the 1990s to include the notion of curators as “conceptors”, facilitators, enablers and creative organisers.

## CURATING IN THE MUSEUM

2005 was the Bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar and the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth wanted to raise its profile by inviting contemporary artists into the museum to make new work in response to the collection. I curated an intervention entitled “The Nelson Touch” by commissioning new work by Helen Maurer (Image 3) and Sarah Woodfine (Image 4).



Image 3, Helen Maurer, *Turn a Blind Eye*, (2005)



Image 4, Sarah Woodfine, *Battle* (2005)

## CURATING IN THE PUBLIC REALM

Public sculpture has traditionally been placed outside in town squares and in the forecourts of museums commemorating royalty, political figures and military heroes. The Fourth Plinth project in Trafalgar Square illustrates how contemporary commissions can play with our traditional notions of public sculpture. The context in which an artwork is situated can alter its meaning as the American conceptual artist Michael Asher demonstrated when he moved a sculpture of George Washington *inside* the Art Institute of Chicago and placed it in a room displaying 19<sup>th</sup> century furniture and paintings.



Image 5, Michael Asher, George Washington displaced  
Art Institute of Chicago (1979)

Recently the same concepts of participation and interactivity that were mentioned with respect to art in galleries can be seen in the domain of public sculpture. In 2004, I curated a project at the Gloucester Primary School in Peckham inviting the Iranian artist, Shirazeh Houshiary and the British sculptor Pip Horne to create an interactive sculpture in the playground, (Image 6).

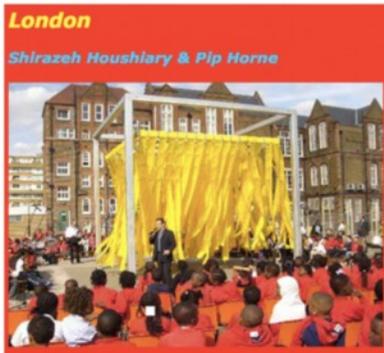


Image 6, Shirazeh Houshiary & Pip Horne,  
*The Sunlight Cube* (2004)

## CURATING IN THE HOME

We are all natural curators in the home - the way in which we arrange and re-arrange objects, furnishings, paintings and so on, to reflect our own particular style and taste. We can think of these objects as being in dialogue with one another. When we buy or introduce something new the conversation changes, and we find ourselves re-arranging the objects once more.

In 2005, I bought a contemporary apartment on the lake of Geneva and turned it into an art gallery. I appropriated the idea of the salon, which was first developed in Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and which became popular throughout Europe until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which

the host would invite friends to enjoy an evening of culture, usually music or poetry recitals. I applied this approach to art and invited young international artists to display their work in my home. I called the initiative “Wings Projects” - indicating ideas that take flight. Running it like a professional art centre, with catalogues, press and publicity, educational talks and so, my aim was to get proper gallery representation for the artists exhibited. I have documented this on the archive site: <http://wingsprojects.net>

## CURATING PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

I began collecting contemporary art in 1996, about the same time I set up the Art Advisory Department of Swiss Bank Corporation in Basel. The first piece I purchased was *No Comment* (1996) by the German Artist Hans Persinger. It characterises the shift from the analogue to the digital world. I also bought many of the artists displayed on the Wings Projects site, including four paintings by the American artist, Justin Richel, whose work pokes fun at the abuse of power by US political institutions and at excessive consumption.

After working as Deputy Director of the Contemporary Art Centre in Geneva for two years, I set up an art advisory firm called Cultural Capital Consultancy Ltd. Together with a colleague from the Goldsmiths MA Curating programme, we provide curatorial and collection management services to private and corporate clients. We primarily help private collectors navigate the opaque art market and develop collection strategies that reflect their tastes, but that are also historically important and financially sound. We take care of all aspects of the collection, including coordinating restoration, reframing and scientific testing, and organising insurance and storage, implementing the digitisation of all collection-related documentation on an online arts management system. We also carry out provenance research, art historical research and lend the artworks to museums. You can find out more about what we do on this link: <https://culturalcapitalconsultancy.com>

## FURTHER READING

Altshuler, Bruce (ed.) (2005), *Collecting the New - Museums and Contemporary Art*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

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