

Fifty Years of Collecting: Curatorial Philosophy at the National Museum of American History

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Remington Kellogg, director of the United States National Museum (USNM), explained the why and how of museum collecting in his introduction to the museum's 1952 *Annual Report*. "In the National Museum," he wrote, "research naturally enough starts with the assembling of great collections." Curators built these collections based on their research and for their research with an absolute "freedom of inquiry." Kellogg, curator of mammals at the Museum of Natural History before he became director of the USNM, believed that it was wrong to judge a curator's collecting or manage his work. "The essence of professionalism," he wrote,

is to be found in the strong sense of high purpose and personal responsibility and the strict intellectual integrity that motivate the individual and guide him in the use of his specialized knowledge. These qualities . . . mark the museum curator and are the measure of his stature. As a professional he is a stronghold of individual initiative and responsibility in a world threatened by the ant heap of collectivism.¹



Rendering of the north front of the new Museum of History and Technology by Elliot Glushak in 1961. The basement and the fourth and fifth floors included areas for collections storage.

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¹ United States National Museum, *United States National Museum Annual Report 1952* ([Washington]: Smithsonian Institution, 1952), 1, 6.

Curators, and their right to form the collections they thought best, as bulwarks against Communism—the curator as John Galt—might seem a bit extreme. But the notion of curators taking complete responsibility for the building of their own collections, based on their own expertise, and designed for their own research needs, has long held sway at the Smithsonian.



Remington Kellogg, director of the U.S. National Museum, speaks at the opening of the Adams-Clement Collection in the West Hall of the Arts and Industries Building, 1951.

Indeed, curator-research-driven collecting is a tradition as old as the Smithsonian itself. It was based, a recent report noted, on “a philosophical position originating with Secretary [Joseph] Henry that the fundamental mission of the Smithsonian was research, collections existed to support research, and therefore it was the responsibility of individual curators and researchers to make collections-related decisions.”² This philosophy continues to shape Smithsonian collecting.

This paper describes the trajectory of that philosophy at the National Museum of American History (NMAH).³ It argues that this philosophy no longer meets the needs of that museum, if indeed it ever did, and offers some suggestions on how curatorial work might change to meet current needs and take advantage of new technological possibilities.

The museum that is today NMAH opened 50 years ago, but it was built on more than a century of collecting. What did the museum staff bring with them from the Arts and Industry building and the Museum of Natural History? What objects, of course, but also what ideas about collecting?

² Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, *Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2005), 346.

³ The museum was founded as the Museum of History of Technology. The name was changed to the National Museum of History of Technology in 1969, and the National Museum of American History in 1980. For a history of the museum’s founding and early years see William S. Walker, *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), especially 2; for a history of the museum through 1980, see Marilyn Sara Cohen, “American Civilization in Three Dimensions: The Evolution of the Museum of History and Technology of the Smithsonian Institution” (Ph.D. diss., The George Washington University, 1980); for a behind-the-scenes look at the personalities of the curators and managers, see Robert C. Post, *Who Owns America’s Past?: The Smithsonian and the Problem of History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

The Smithsonian's 1964 *Annual Report* summarizes the collections shoehorned into the new museum. There were 75,000 items under the heading "science and technology," 150,000 in "arts and manufacture," 51,000 in armed forces history, and about 70,000 items of political and cultural history. There were also about 10 million stamps and 165,000 coins. The new museum started with a dowry—or, depending on how you look at it, a millstone—of about 350,000 artifacts, and many, many, stamps and coins.⁴

The collection had been built over many years, from many sources, and with many different philosophies of collecting.⁵ It had been shaped by donations, wholesale collecting from expeditions and expositions, and from the requirements of curatorial research and exhibition projects. Laurence Coleman's 1939 *The Museum in America* noted the change from what he called "omnigathering" toward research-focused collecting, and Smithsonian collecting followed that pattern.⁶ Technology and engineering curators looked to the needs of industry.⁷ History curators had looked for artifacts that were "memorials of historical events or of eminent Americans."⁸ Graphic arts and photography focused on technological history, collecting work that showed particular techniques.⁹ Horology looked first to technological types, then to industrial production.¹⁰ Medical curators had started by collecting *material medica*, and then the "healing arts," pharmaceuticals, and public health.¹¹ The Smithsonian's early curators

⁴ United States National Museum, *United States National Museum Annual Report 1962* ([Washington]: Smithsonian Institution, 1962), 31; United States National Museum, *United States National Museum Annual Report 1964* ([Washington]: Smithsonian Institution, 1964), 31–32. Some ethnographic items may be included in this total.

⁵ For a history of collecting at the Smithsonian see Steven D. Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick, *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the National Museum of American History, 2001); on collecting in the history of science and technology at the National Museum, see Pamela M. Henson, "'Objects of Curious Research': The History of Science and Technology at the Smithsonian," *ISIS: Journal of the History of Science in Society* 90 (Mar. 1999): S249.

⁶ Laurence Vail Coleman, *The Museum in America: A Critical Study* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1939); Walker, *A Living Exhibition*.

⁷ Eric Nystrom, "'Your Name Would Be Conspicuously Present': Curators, Companies, and the Contents of Exhibits at the Smithsonian," March 2006 presentation at the Organization of American Historians.

⁸ Joanne M. Gernstein London, "A Modest Show of Arms: Exhibiting the Armed Forces and the Smithsonian Institution, 1945–1976" (Ph.D. diss., The George Washington University, 2000), 115.

⁹ Helena Wright, "150 Years of the National Print Collection," <http://americanhistory.si.edu/prints/index.htm> (accessed July 16, 2014), Helena Wright, ed., *History of Photography*, Vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000).

¹⁰ Carlene E. Stephens, "From Little Machines to Big Themes: Thinking About Clocks, Watches, and Time at the National Museum of American History," *Material History Review*, no. 52 (June 2000): 44–58.

¹¹ Ramunas Kondratas, "Introduction: 150 Years of Collecting Medical History at the Smithsonian Institution," *CADUCEUS: A Humanities Journal for Medicine and the Health Sciences* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 2–12.

tried to collect the world, both natural and human, based on their personal interests, research needs, and connections. The result, in historian Robert Post's apt description of the technological collections, was "nothing if not haphazard."¹²

Along with the artifacts came a philosophy. Director Kellogg summed it up in his introduction to the 1952 *Annual Report*. The purpose of the National Museum, he wrote, is "to make available to the Nation the collections entrusted to it for safekeeping. This it does by exhibiting selected items and by organizing the remaining, and vastly larger, part of the collections into a great reference library of material objects." Research shaped collections, and collections shaped research. "In the National Museum," he continued, "research naturally enough starts with the assembling of great collections."¹³ Just how thoroughly this research focus for collections permeated the Smithsonian curators' psyches might be seen in a single sentence from the Institution's 1964 budget justification. "It is well known," the Bureau of the Budget was told, "that museum collections not used for research deteriorate."¹⁴

Research and collecting was the work of curators, working with very little direction. Curatorial autonomy was written into the Civil Service Commission's (CSC) 1962 "Position Classification Standard for Museum Curator Series," the classification standard that still, astonishingly, controls the work of federal curators today. The CSC, presumably on the advice of the Smithsonian, made research the centerpiece of curatorial work. It had a hard time defining good collecting, and so, like Kellogg, left it pretty much up to the curator. The term the CSC used to evaluate the work of the curator in building collections was "balanced." That meant "meaningful as a source of information for scholars and laymen," as well as "balancing the needs for expansion and disposal." It required "knowledge, professional judgments and imagination in selectivity and location of sources" to build the collection, and "considerable knowledge, taste and judgment in problems of selective disposal of collection material."¹⁵

Balance, knowledge, imagination, taste, judgment, all based on research: these words are ways of saying that the CSC didn't really know how to judge the work

¹² Robert C. Post, "A Corner of the Nation's Attic," *Technology and Culture* 42, no. 3 (July 2001): 521.

¹³ United States National Museum, *United States National Museum Annual Report 1952*, 1.

¹⁴ The remark was in the context of a (failed) attempt to defend the Bureau of American Ethnology. Smithsonian Institution and United States Bureau of the Budget, "Smithsonian Institution Fiscal Year . . . Justification of Estimates of Appropriations to the Bureau of the Budget. Congress (1964)," 1963, Bureau of American Ethnology, p. 6, <http://si-pddr.si.edu/dspace/handle/10088/19310> (accessed Oct. 10, 2014).

¹⁵ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Position Classification Standard for Museum Curator Series, GS-1015," February 1962, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/standards/1000/gs1015.pdf> (accessed Oct. 10, 2014).

of curators. That attitude was reflected in the work of managers at the museum as well. Robert Multhauf, chairman of the museum's Department of Science and Technology and later its director, wrote in 1965 that

we have judged it best to forego the search for the mastermind, liberating the slaves each to function (hopefully) as a minor Leonardo in his special sphere. Our exhibitions represent primarily the judgment of the curator-in-charge as to the best method of dealing with his subject.¹⁶

Or, as another insider, Robert Post, put it: "Throughout its history, the Smithsonian has remained a malleable institution, the course taken by its various departments and bureaus often determined by the zeal of strong-willed individuals."¹⁷ No one knew how to manage curatorial work.

And so curators collected what they wanted to. The 1968 guide to the Museum of History and Technology noted that new acquisitions "are requested or accepted by the curators to implement their department's specific plans and projects." "Each curator," the guide continued, "had pretty much first and final say regarding the collection process."¹⁸

The curators' collecting logic went something like this: The Smithsonian must focus on research; museum research relied on collections; collections were for research; and the curator was the person who did that work. And he (or, very infrequently, she) should do it without much oversight. And while that might have made sense for natural history collections, it never worked very well for history and technology: curatorial research collections were, generally, too narrow to answer big historical questions or support exhibitions of interest to the general public.

Collecting at the New Museum

Even as the new building was being built, the curators were busy collecting. In 1961 the curators brought in some 20,000 objects, excluding stamps.¹⁹ It is hard to read the lists as anything but a hodgepodge—a combination of what was available and what individual curators found interesting—but the adjectives used

¹⁶ Robert P. Multhauf, "A Museum Case History: The Department of Science and Technology of the United States Museum of History and Technology," *Technology and Culture* 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1965): 52.

¹⁷ Post, "A Corner of the Nation's Attic," 522.

¹⁸ Curators of the Museum, *Exhibits in the Museum of History and Technology* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968).

¹⁹ United States National Museum, *United States National Museum Annual Report 1962*, 37.

to describe those accessions selected as worthy of mention in the *Annual Report* suggest what curators were looking for. Curators in Science and Technology, for example, collected things described as “earliest extant,” “an experimental model of,” “earliest,” “pioneering,” and, most often, “important.” Likewise, the Department of Manufactures was all about firsts, from “the first practical device” to “one of the earliest known” to “pioneer work.” Technological curators, then, were interested in innovation. Their colleagues in the Arts and Manufactures, on the other hand, took their cues from the world of collectors. They were more interested in “beautiful,” “fine,” “rare,” “valuable,” “unusual,” and “magnificent.” Both Civil History and Armed Forces history curators looked for “important,” “unique,” “rare,” “important,” and “early.” Numismatics, its enormous collection already approaching completeness, was after “rare” coins of “exceptional artistic merit.”

It is possible to get a sense of what curators collected, and what they thought about their collections, from their publications. In the 1960s and 1970s, curators and researchers at the museum published several dozen official Smithsonian publications about the collections. Reading the prefaces and introductions, one senses frustration. Authors complain about the number and quality and care of the collections. W. E. Knowles Middleton, writing about the meteorological instruments, noted that they “were assembled largely by chance.”²⁰ Others

complain that the collections don’t tell the important stories: John Schlebecker, curator of agriculture, writes that “Museums must collect and exhibit the tools, implements, and machines which farmers use in their business. These items, however, seldom make up the core of real agricultural activity.”²¹ Otto Mayr, curator of engineering, found that the collection of feedback devices



Military history storage, United States National Museum, early 1900s.

²⁰ W. E. Knowles, Smithsonian Institution Middleton, *Catalog of Meteorological Instruments in the Museum of History and Technology* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1969), 3.

²¹ John T. Schlebecker, *Agricultural Implements and Machines in the Collection of the National Museum of History and Technology*, Smithsonian Studies in History and Technology, no. 17 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 1–2.

was incomplete and uneven.²² Collections built up over generations, it seems, were not meeting the needs of modern curators.

They were also not meeting the needs of society. The Museum of History and Technology had never, for example, collected artifacts of the African American experience, and by the 1960s this was beginning to be a serious concern. Curator Keith Melder, assigned a small exhibition on the topic, told a *Washington Post* reporter that the museum lacked suitable objects, and appealed for donations. The editor of the *Washington Afro-American* blasted the museum:

It is as if, having made the momentous and belated decision to move in this area, the Smithsonian proposes to slap together a jerry built exhibit. . . . It is inconceivable that an institution of the Smithsonian's status would lower its prestige by even suggesting that it has to appeal to the public for items to fill this exhibit. Such an appeal carries with it the idea that the Smithsonian knows so little about Negro History that it is ready to take anything and everything, junk or relics of value, just as long as it has something—anything—to do with Negro History.²³

The concern might well have been justified. A few years later, eager to display a black tenant farmer's house, the museum rushed the building into an exhibition with out doing sufficient research on authenticity, appearance, or use, and made serious mistakes in the presentation.²⁴

The difficulties with collecting African American history reflected a deeper problem. As long as curatorial research interest determined collecting, it would be scattershot, and focused, for the most part, on the kind of artifacts useful for a good scholarly monograph, and not necessarily those that would tell a larger story. This was increasingly the case as the museum hired curators based on

²² Otto Mayr, *Feedback Mechanisms in the Historical Collections of the National Museum of History and Technology*, Smithsonian Studies in History and Technology, No. 12 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), viii.

²³ The story is told in Michele Alicia Gates Moresi, "Exhibiting Race, Creating Nation: Representations of Black History and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution, 1895–1976" (Ph.D. diss., The George Washington University, 2003), 119–20.

²⁴ George W. McDaniel, "Introduction: The Farm Tenant House at the Smithsonian Institution: 'You've Got It Backwards,'" in *Hearth and Home: Preserving a People's Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); See also Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 161–62.

academic credentials, who adopted their academic colleagues' standards. The limitations of collections became clear with Director Daniel Boorstin's attempt to tell a larger, more thematic history of America in the 1976 exhibition *Nation of Nations*. Curators protested that the exhibit "was too 'gimmicky,' relied too heavily on exhibit techniques, and failed to draw on the unique strength of the museum—its own collections."²⁵ *Nation of Nations* succeeded, drawing heavily on new collecting, but it was another sign that the museum needed to rethink collecting and collections.

That was the conclusion Marilyn Cohen reached in 1980 in her history of the museum. (Cohen, who had worked on a range of projects at the Smithsonian, including a trial computerization project, was one of the first full-time Smithsonian evaluation staff.) Curator-driven collecting, she wrote, led "to collections that were not correlated, not collated, not subjected to the highest quality research, and were of necessity, a jumble of artifacts of American history and culture." Based on the "predilections" of curators, and "not following a scheme that relates to the purpose of the institution," the collections grew "unbalanced, specialized and idiosyncratic." She blamed the curators and the museum management: the museum had needed, she said, a "curatorial modernization program" to match its exhibits modernization program in the 1950s and 1960s, and better training for new curators.²⁶

Rethinking Collections

Collections remained important, but beginning in the 1970s they no longer seemed as useful as they once had. Demands for social inclusion and for new kinds of exhibits challenged the centrality of collections to the museum's work. More and more, they would come to seem as not the museum's unique strength—the product of research, and thus the basis of curatorial work and exhibitions—but as a burden and something of a problem.

The Smithsonian administration was beginning to ask questions about the costs and benefits of the collections.²⁷ High-profile thefts raised congressional ire.²⁸ "The magnitude of the task of assimilating the millions of objects already at

²⁵ Gates Moresi, "Exhibiting Race, Creating Nation," 192; On Boorstin's exhibits more generally, see Post, *Who Owns America's Past?*, chap. 5.

²⁶ Cohen, "American Civilization in Three Dimensions," 321–26; Personal communication, Marilyn Yakowitz to author, Mar. 16, 2014.

²⁷ Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, *Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections*, 341.

²⁸ Personal communication, Martha Morris to author, Mar. 11, 2014.

hand, and not satisfactorily recorded,” new director Brooke Hindle wrote, “has no obvious solution.”²⁹ There were so many of them, there was no good catalog, they took up so much room, and just what use were they, anyway?

The museum’s collections crisis would lead to new ways to deal with the collections. Smithsonian and museum management hired registrars and collections managers to increase physical and intellectual control over the collections and hired new staff to find new ways of doing museum-based history. Curators would respond to the crisis, and to management’s response, by looking for new ways to use artifacts and, eventually, a new kind of collecting.

The first reaction of the Smithsonian administration to the collections crisis of the 1970s was the creation of a new collections bureaucracy. *A Report on the Management of Collections in the Museums of the Smithsonian Institution*, issued in 1977, paid the usual lip service to the importance of collections:

Collecting and preserving are fundamental and indivisible aspects of a museum’s function. They are the cornerstones of a museum’s contributions to scholarship and the measure of its success in enriching the educational opportunities for this and future generations.

It went on, though, to raise questions about them: what good are they, and what are we going to do with them?

The importance of the Institution’s collections is matched by the burden and responsibility of housing them adequately so that they can be enjoyed and studied and can fulfill their potential of contributing to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”³⁰

Rather than rethink collecting, it took the easy way out. It urged that the Smithsonian build a new building to store what it already had and plan for vastly increased collecting in the future.

Smithsonian management responded by planning construction of the Museum Support Center to house the collections and by creating new bureaucracies to

²⁹ Brooke Hindle, “How Much Is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?” in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. Quimby (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 18.

³⁰ Smithsonian Institution, *A Report on the Management of Collections in the Museums of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1977), 1.

control them. Paul Perrot, the Smithsonian's assistant director for Museum Programs, mandated the establishment of both a central Smithsonian and a National Museum of History and Technology Registrar's Office to track collections, and a collections committee to focus them and to provide oversight. Armed with new legal rules, ethical standards, and computer systems, registrars and collections managers challenged the notion that collections were solely the domain of curators. Curators lost control of their catalogs and of collections in offsite storage. Under orders from the central Smithsonian, the museum wrote its first collections policy.

The new collections regime would not restrain curatorial prerogatives very much, at least not immediately. Collecting, NMHT administrators declared, would continue to "rely on the work and research of individual curators." They continued, almost defiantly: "There is no formal statement of goals for this museum, although certain things are clearly understood." Each curator would apply that "understanding" in his or her own way. "There was no formal directive telling what had to be done. It was assumed that each curator understood the needs and that adjustments could be made through established administrative processes." "Planning," the museum reported, "is provided for only by implication."³¹

The new collections committee took small steps. It asked curators to provide information on potential research and exhibit use of new collections, and "other historical context, as appropriate, that makes clear why this object is deserving of inclusion in the collections." An object should "possess potential for research and scholarship and/or be useful for exhibition purposes, now or in the future" or "be significant in itself so that it merits inclusion." Significance was interpreted widely, and essentially left up to the curator: "Technological, social and historical factors should be weighed. Association, aesthetic merit, rarity, and status in its own particular category should be considered." The



Smithsonian Museum Support Center, 1981. In the background are older offsite storage facilities.

³¹ Ibid., B-17, 27-32.

curator decided what desiderata were important for his or her own areas of collecting.³²

The 1970s and early 1980s saw the rise of material culture studies as an answer to the question: what good are all these collections? We might read this against the grain, not as a celebration of the value of collections, but rather, as a deeply seated worry about their worth. When NMAH Director Brooke Hindle famously asked in the title of his 1978 article “How much is a piece of the cross worth?” he was worrying about the value of those museums collections he was responsible for.³³ Artifacts, he continued, “must be accorded a degree of sanctity to preserve them against assault.”³⁴ Who was assaulting them?

The concern over the value of the collections came both from within the Smithsonian and from academics and other museum experts who might have been expected to appreciate them most. Cary Carson, from Colonial Williamsburg, stated bluntly what others would not: “No matter what standard measure objective scholars use they can hardly avoid the conclusion that the study of artifacts has contributed to developing the main themes of American history almost not at all.”³⁵ Scholars connected with the museum, but not in the curatorial ranks, asked harder questions. In 1968 Wilcomb Washburn had asked, “Are Museums Necessary?” Now he suggested that they consider the cost of collections storage and the need for contemporary collecting, and collect information, not objects.³⁶ Hindle quotes with surprising approval a letter from historian of technology Cyril Stanley Smith:

The more difficult question is how to decide what should be preserved. Obviously everything cannot be. . . . What should be saved? One suggestion, not really a counsel of despair, is to make an absolutely random collection, assuming that there is no means of knowing what to preserve and what to discard.

But no: back to the curator’s magic judgment. Hindle wrote: “The only recourse is to use the best possible present judgment as to what to preserve and what to discard” —sentiments not too different from Remington Kellogg’s 25 years earlier, or the language of the Civil Service Commission.³⁷

³² *Ibid.*, B–17.

³³ Hindle, “How Much Is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?” 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ Cary Carson, “Doing History with Material Culture,” in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. Quimby (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 42.

³⁶ Wilcomb E. Washburn, “Are Museums Necessary?” *Museum News* 47, no. 2 (October 1968): 9–19; Wilcomb E. Washburn, “Collecting Information, Not Objects,” *Museum News* 62, no. 3 (Feb. 1984): 5–15.

³⁷ Hindle, “How Much Is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?” 18.

From Research Collecting to Interpretive Collecting

But slowly over the next decade, collecting and the use of collections did change. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the social history movement and the creation of a new kind of collecting, interpretive collecting, that used objects to tell stories. Historians, and the general public, became interested in stories about a broader range of Americans. Curators started to look in the “unexplored corners of the vault” to find objects that told new stories,³⁸ and even undertook an early example of crowd-sourced collecting that brought in “a fine collection ranging from toasters and egg beaters to stoves and washing machines.”³⁹ The museum started several projects to “index” the collections, to determine what stories they could tell about, for example, African Americans and Jews, with existing collections.⁴⁰ New staff, often with titles other than curator, and without collections responsibilities, took on exhibitions. New kinds of projects, including the Program in Black American Culture, and the African American Communities Project, and a much-expanded program of performances and hands-on activities run by professional museum educators offered ways to teach history without artifacts. Professional archivists brought a new focus on archives.⁴¹

Concerns about the value of collections, lack of space, new controls, and especially new approaches to history, led curators to develop a new kind of collecting. In the 1980s and 1990s, as the museum looked to social history, curators came to believe that objects should tell stories. A good curator was one who could find an artifact to illustrate an important historical point. Sometimes those were objects already in the collection. Some were new acquisitions. The Common Agenda for History Museums conference, held at the NMAH in 1987, highlighted the transition from typological to interpretive collecting.⁴²

³⁸ Karen Lee, “Remembering Dr. Richard G. Doty: He Gave Overlooked Numismatic Stories New Shine,” <http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/2013/07/remembering-dr-richard-doty-he-gave-overlooked-numismatic-stories-new-shine.html> (accessed July 17, 2014).

³⁹ *Smithsonian Year: Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ended 30 June 1972* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 92.

⁴⁰ Smithsonian Institution, *Smithsonian Year: Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ended Sept. 30, 1985* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 26.

⁴¹ Spencer R. Crew and John A. Fleckner, “Archival Sources for Business History at the National Museum of American History,” *Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (Sept. 1986): 474; Robert Friedel, “Review of Guide to Manuscript Collections in the National Museum of History and Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 21, no. 3 (July 1980): 509–12.

⁴² Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, *Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections*, 152; Lonn Taylor, ed., *A Common Agenda for History Museums: Conference Proceedings, February 19–20, 1987* (Nashville, Tenn.: Washington, DC: American Association for State and Local History; Smithsonian Institution, 1987).

So too did new writing on collecting by museum curators. Technology curators wrote that they wanted “interesting” objects: “By *interesting* we mean that it allows us to tell a good story,” they wrote, and to tell those stories, they wanted to collect groups of artifacts and the information to go along with them.⁴³ A medical curator made a similar point about her collections, noting that she was now looking for artifacts that told patients’ stories.⁴⁴ Interpretive collecting was intensive, not extensive, collecting, appropriate for an institution running out of space, and one newly focused on American history, not “history and technology.”

The museum looked to directed collecting to solve its problems. “Collections planning,” wrote James Gardner, the museum’s associate director for Curatorial Affairs, in an article co-authored with Elizabeth Merritt of the American Association of Museums, is “among the rarest of museum activities.” But it was time for museums to write collections plans, and to follow them, to make the tough choices that needed to be made about what to acquire and what to remove from the collection. NMAH collections, they said, were “idiosyncratic”—the parts didn’t add up to a whole. We “cannot assume,” Gardner and Merritt wrote, “that its current collecting approach will meet its future responsibilities.”⁴⁵

And so they urged the formation of an intellectual framework for collecting. New collections should be based not on the curator’s research, but rather on the museum’s interpretive focus on “What has it meant to be an American?” The new plan would guide decision making, be helpful in determining when there is “enough” in a given category, and help to match collecting work with available resources.⁴⁶



Curator Herbert Collins in the political history storage area of the Museum of History and Technology, 1976.

⁴³ Steven Lubar and Peter Liebhold, “What Do We Keep?” *American Heritage of Invention & Technology* 14, no. 4 (Apr. 1999): 28.

⁴⁴ Judy M. Chelnick and Ramunas Kondratas, “150 Years of Collecting Medical History at the Smithsonian Institution,” *Caduceus: A Humanities Journal for Medicine & the Health Sciences* 13, no. 3 (Apr. 1997): 19.

⁴⁵ James B. Gardner and Elizabeth Merritt, “Collections Planning: Pinning Down a Strategy,” *Museum News*, Aug. 2002, 30, 61.

⁴⁶ James B. Gardner and Elizabeth Merritt, *The AAM Guide to Collections Planning* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2004); James B. Gardner, “Collections Planning Initiative,” Oct. 3, 2002.

Looking Ahead

In the first years of the 21st century, the Smithsonian saw another of its periodic collections crises. Once again, it seemed that the museums were running out of space to store things and staff to catalog and care for them. As important, it urgently needed a rationale that made collections seem worthy of support.

As usual, museum administrators commissioned a report, and the Smithsonian mounted its largest-ever review of collections. Like its predecessors, the 2005 *Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections* focused first on measuring the scale of the problem. The National Museum of American History now had some 3 million artifacts stored in some 250,000 square feet, with much of the storage not up to museum standards. Collections management systems were a mess: only 19 percent of artifacts had good electronic records, and almost none—.12 percent—had records available to the public.⁴⁷

The report found widespread problems, and blamed not only insufficient managerial oversight but, more profoundly, institutional culture. “Many of the Smithsonian’s collections management weaknesses,” wrote the analysts of the Office of Policy and Analysis, “stem from a professional culture ill-suited to present realities.” They faulted “the dominance of departments’ scholarship and research roles relative to their stewardship and access roles” and the curators’ “greater influence over collections management decision making than other collections management personnel.”⁴⁸ The concept that collecting and collections supported the research work of curators was, the report acknowledged, still deeply ingrained in the Smithsonian psyche. Director Kellogg’s notion of curators as a “stronghold of individual initiative and responsibility in a world threatened by the ant heap of collectivism” still resonated 60 years later.

This last large-scale Smithsonian investigation of the crisis in collecting occurred about a decade ago. That is too soon, in the Smithsonian time-scale, to know if the long list of recommendations—better digital access, improved inventories, collecting plans based on each museum’s mission and strategic plan, and most important, increased managerial oversight—has been addressed, though it is clear that progress has been made.

But it is not to soon to look back, and to look ahead, and see if understanding the history of the National Museum of American History’s collecting, and the history of the curatorial ideology that drove it, can help improve its future.

⁴⁷ Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, *Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections*, 417.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

Looking back, it seems that the museum has been too bound by an ideology of collecting as a good in its own right. Its collecting model, originating in the research needs of natural history scholarship and developed by curators eager to preserve their independence as researchers, was not coordinated. Combined with the lack of managerial control of curatorial work, no clear way to measure success in collecting, and uncertain strategic direction, this meant that the museum was never able to make sense of its collections. Each curator would collect based on his or her own research interests, take things that came in over the transom, and do occasional collecting for exhibits, and hope that, in the aggregate, the museum's collections would somehow represent America.⁴⁹ The museum depended on its collections to support good historical work, underlie good public education, and produce important exhibits. All too often, it found that the collections did not support planned projects and the history it wanted to tell.

Looking ahead, how might that change? It is easy to be pessimistic. Decades of crises, many reports, and many plans have not made much difference. Collections have increased, and the backlog of collections documentation and care is enormous. It seems likely that the museum will be less able to deal with the collections problem during a time of contraction than a time of expansion. (There are, by one count, fewer than half as many curators now as there were in 1990.)⁵⁰ And it is harder to make a case for collecting now. Not only are there those 3 million artifacts to be taken care of; there is also a sense that artifacts are less important than they once were. Historian Stephen Conn notes that museums display far fewer objects now than they did a century ago, and that artifacts have “lost some of the visual and epistemological power” they once had. The title of his book raises a provocative question: *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*⁵¹

It is easy to answer Conn's question in the negative, given the long history of too many objects with too little use at the Smithsonian, and an increasing reliance on non-artifact modes of teaching in museums. But it is important for museums to make the case for collections. Not only are collections one of the things that distinguishes museums from other educational institutions, but the museum has 3 million artifacts: it needs to figure out how best to use them. That means not

⁴⁹ Ibid., 250–78. This is the general conclusion reached by the 2005 *Concern at the Core* report.

⁵⁰ Allison Marsh and Lizzie Wade, “Collective Forgetting: Inside the Smithsonian's Curatorial Crisis,” chap. 2, <http://thinkwritepublish.org/the-narratives/collective-forgetting> (accessed July 17, 2014). Because of reclassifications, a direct comparison is difficult.

⁵¹ Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 22, 56.

just caring for them and making them available, but developing the collection for a new era. Even 30 years ago, Wilcomb Washburn noted that the Smithsonian was neglecting recent history: “Who is to say that the objects being spawned in ever-mounting numbers should be collected with less intensity than the objects of the past?”⁵² Allison Marsh and Lizzie Wade have recently called attention to a “curatorial crisis” of “orphaned collections,” and “vast swaths of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” that pass uncollected by the museum.⁵³

How might the museum do a better job of collecting? And how might the museum take advantage of the collections it already owns? One way to address these challenges is to look for ways to change the problematic curatorial culture that is the root of the collections problem. This is especially important as curatorial numbers decline and as the challenges of reaching increasingly diverse and far-flung audiences increase. Because curators were the dominant employees at Smithsonian museums, many museum functions were collapsed into that one position. Pulling those diverse job duties apart, and seeing how they might be better distributed to staff with specialized skills, makes sense. Some suggestions:

1. The museum might reconsider the proper connection between collecting and research. Explicitly collecting based on museum-wide collecting plans, and not on the more traditional grounds of a curator’s research interests—a change the museum has moved toward in recent years—will make new collections more useful.
2. The museum should be more transparent about collecting, and explain it better. New acquisitions should be posted on the museum’s website, with an explanation of why they were collected. Museum curators already write explanations of their reasons for collecting many artifacts the museum acquires. These should be made public, not only as a way of teaching the public about history and the museum, but also because increased transparency about collecting will encourage better collecting.
3. The museum might reconsider and broaden the connections between collecting and exhibitions. Many museums build separate collections for educational purposes, and the NMAH has recently begun to experiment with this, bringing in the stars of the History channel’s television show *American*

⁵² Washburn, “Collecting Information, Not Objects,” 10.

⁵³ Marsh and Wade, “Collective Forgetting: Inside the Smithsonian’s Curatorial Crisis,” Chapter 2.

Pickers to collect artifacts not for the permanent collections, but for an exhibition called “Object Project.”⁵⁴ Now specialists in collecting and experts in museum learning, rather than curators, are creating displays based on research interests often shaped by neither collecting or public interest.

4. The museum has moved to professional collections managers in recent years, and this might be increased. While quick and convenient curatorial access to collections is ideal, off-site storage has made that increasingly difficult. Further, most curators are not trained in the care of collections; conservators and collections managers can do that better. Curators once served as the guardians of collections by controlling access to storage rooms; that work is better done by specialists.

With specialized staff taking care of some of the job functions that were once considered curatorial work, curators will be able to reinvent their work. In particular, they will be able to take advantage of new technologies to connect the public with collections. In some ways, this is a return to the ideals of 19th-century curator and museum philosopher George Brown Goode, first director of the United States National Museum, who wrote in “The Museum of the Future” in 1889:

The museum of the past must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts. . . . The people’s museum should be much more than a house full of specimens in glass cases. It should be a house full of ideas.⁵⁵

How might new technologies transform cemeteries of bric-a-brac larger than Goode could have imagined? What might a nursery of living thoughts look like in the Information Age? Public access provided by putting collections and exhibitions online offer opportunities for modern curators to rethink their relationship with collections and with the public, and to make new connections between research, collections, and the public. When collections were locked away, guarded by curators, they were not a

⁵⁴ “Major Gift to Fund Education Initiatives and Learning Space at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (SI Press Release SI-428-2014),” Sept. 4, 2014, <http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/major-gift-fund-education-initiatives-and-learning-space-smithsonian-s-national-museum-amer> (accessed Oct. 11, 2014).

⁵⁵ George Brown Goode, “The Museums of the Future,” in *A Memorial of George Brown Goode: Together with a Selection of His Papers on Museums and on the History of Science in America*, ed. S. P. Langley (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), 243.

public good, in and of themselves; they were for the curators to use, either for their own research, or in support of research by specialists, or (infrequently) for exhibition. But when collections are available online, they become a public good, and they need interpreters. That is a role that curators should eagerly seek out. What kinds of interpretation can connect historical expertise, collections, and the public? How might curators use their historical and teaching expertise, and access to all of the collections, online, to increase learning opportunities for the public?

Online access can change the curator's role from artifact guardian and gatekeeper to artifact explainer. Object descriptions are only the beginning. Curators can make connections between artifacts and history. They can work in a range of formats and kinds of presentation, and on a range of scales, from single-object stories to more comprehensive online exhibitions, and at many educational levels, and have conversations with a much broader public than was ever possible before. Short videos, say, of curators discussing objects in their collections—talking about why they were collected, what they mean, how they relate to important issues in history and our own time—might allow for direct connections between curators and the public, connecting curatorial research at last both to artifacts *and* to the public. Making these connections two-way will require curators to be more accessible to the public, not simply making the artifacts accessible to the public. George Brown Goode wrote in “The Principles of Museum Administration” in 1895 that “No man is fitted to be a museum officer who is disposed to repel students or inquirers or to place obstacles in the way of access to the material under his charge.”⁵⁶ A new approach to online interactions with the public about the collections might remove obstacles in a profound way.

Accessibility and this increased public educational role will enhance the value both of artifacts and curators, allowing museums to make the case for better funding. And with collections open to all, at least virtually, and with a serious commitment to online interpretation, they might serve the purposes that a century-and-a-half of Smithsonian curators should have been collecting them for all along—not for their own research, but for the good of everyone who is interested in them, for the good of the nation and the world.

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⁵⁶ George Brown Goode, “The Principles of Museum Administration,” in *A Memorial of George Brown Goode*, ed. S. P. Langley, 206.