

Why We Collect

by Mike Prero

Collecting is a practice with a very old cultural history. In Mesopotamia, collecting practices have been noted among royalty and elites as far back as the 3rd millennium BC. The Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty collected books from all over the known world at the Library of Alexandria. The Medici family, in Renaissance Florence, made the first effort to collect art by private patronage; this way artists could be free for the first time from the money given by the Church and Kings; this citizenship tradition continues today with the work of private art collectors. Many of the world's popular museums—from the Metropolitan in New York City to the Thyssen in Madrid or the Franz Mayer in Mexico City—have collections formed by the collectors that donated them to be seen by the general public.

The collecting hobby is a modern descendant of the "cabinet of curiosities" which was common among scholars with the means and opportunities to acquire unusual items from the 16th century onwards. Planned collecting of ephemeral publications goes back at least to George Thomason in the reign of Charles I and Samuel Pepys in that of Charles II. Collecting engravings and other prints by those whose means did not allow them to buy original works of art also goes back many centuries. The progress in 18th-century Paris of collecting both works of art and of curiosité, dimly echoed in the English curios, and the origins in Paris, Amsterdam and London of the modern art market have been increasingly well documented and studied since the mid-19th century.

The involvement of larger numbers of people in collecting activities came with the prosperity and increased leisure for some in the later 19th century in industrial countries. That was when collecting such items as antique china, furniture and decorative items from oriental countries became established. The first price guide was the Stanley Gibbons catalogue issued in November 1865.

But, *why* do we collect? Psychological factors can play a role in both the motivation for keeping a collection and the impact it has on the collector's life. These factors can be positive or negative.

The hobby of collecting often goes hand-in-hand with an interest in the objects collected and what they rep-

resent, for example collecting postcards may reflect an interest in different places and cultures. For this reason, collecting can have educational benefits, and some collectors even become experts in their field.

Maintaining a collection can be a relaxing activity that counteracts the stress of life, while providing a purposeful pursuit which prevents boredom. The hobby can lead to social connections between people with similar interests and the development of new friendships. It has also been shown to be particularly common among academics.

Collecting for most people is a choice, but for some it can be a compulsion, sharing characteristics with obsessive hoarding. When collecting is passed between generations, it might sometimes be that children have inherited symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Collecting can sometimes reflect a fear of scarcity, or of discarding something then later regretting it.

It has been speculated that the widespread appeal of collecting is connected to the hunting and gathering that was once necessary for human survival. Collecting is also associated with memory by association and the need for the human brain to catalogue and organize information and give meaning to one's actions. [<https://www.ligo.co.uk/blog/the-impulse-of-collecting-why-do-people-collect-things/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology_of_collecting#:~:text=The%20collections%20allow%20people%20to,the%20thrill%20of%20the%20hunt.]

Collecting things is a wonderful hobby, and one that people adopt for many different reasons. Some people collect things simply because they like them, others because they are reminded of happy memories. Collecting stamps could remind you of your far-flung holidays around the world whilst Jim Shore figurines might remind you of a happy childhood, for example.

The kind of items you choose to collect reveals a lot about your personality and, no matter what your collection, collecting is incredibly good for your mental health. Here are just some of the reasons why building a collection can help to expand your mind, improve your mental capacity, and boost your mental health and overall wellbeing:

1. **Collecting Builds a Desire for Knowledge:** Thanks to the rise of the internet, it is now easier than ever to find a wealth of information on just about any subject, no matter how obscure. When you're an avid collector of something it is only natural that you will want to know as much about your specialist subject as possible. Whether that means reading books, conducting internet research, or even joining online forums and groups with other enthusiasts, your desire for knowledge will only continue to grow.

Knowing a lot about any one thing is a great way to build your self-esteem, and will also provide you with an instant conversation starter when talking to new people, which will only help you to grow your confidence.

2. **Collecting Inspires Creativity:** Collecting is sometimes viewed as something odd or geeky, but in reality many artists and writers choose to have collections. You will often find that creative people collect things that they find visually stimulating, or that increase their feelings of connection to the world around them.

Shelley Carson, a highly regarded creativity researcher, wrote that "Creativity is the act of taking bits of information—from your internal store of memories, knowledge, and skills or from the external environment—and combining and recombining them in novel and original ways to come up with a new

idea or product that serves a purpose.” Collecting can play a key role in this, helping to trigger memories and inspire new ideas.

3. **Collecting Improves Organizational Thinking:** When you have a large number of objects in your collection, it becomes important to sort and categorize your objects to give your collection some kind of cohesion. By having to do this, you are actually improving your organizational thinking, thinking outside the box about the themes of your collection, and enhancing your visual awareness. Why is this good for you? Because having lateral and organization thinking skills can translate into more productive thinking which will help you to conduct research for key projects at work or at school, and will also help to enhance your memory and therefore improve your test scores.

4. **Collecting Promotes Relaxation and Stress Reduction:** We live in an increasingly stressful environment. Not only can stress have a negative impact on your mental health, this also translates into a negative impact on your physical health. Stress can lead to an array of physical maladies. Finding a viable method of stress reduction that works for you is vital for both your mental and physical health and collecting is a great form of stress reduction.

Many collectors report that spending time with their collections leaves them feeling relaxed, less stressed, and better able to unwind. Collecting provides a safe space where you can abandon your worries and leave the stress of the world behind you.

5. **Collectors Gain Social Recognition:** Some collectors simply want to make their mark on the world. They want to be recognized, by their collecting peers and by wider society, for the value and quality of their collection. Owning something rare and unique can leave a collector feeling important by association, like the quality of their collection is a reflection of their own quality and worth. Baring this in mind, collecting can be great for building confidence and self-esteem.

For individuals who are shy, or struggle to relate with others on a social level, collecting can also encourage them to forge new social links and meet new people. You will talk to those who have similar collections to you, either in person or online, and acquiring new pieces to add to your collection also requires a certain amount of social engagement. As a result, collecting can lead to a reduction of social anxiety and any associated depression and other mental health issues.

6. **Collecting Builds Your Observational Skills:** When you are a collector, you are always on the lookout for new and rare objects that you can add to your collection. This means that you will be much more mindful of the world around you. Instead of walking around with your blinkers on, you will look in shop windows, on market stalls, and everywhere else, being keenly observant and always on the prowl for new objects to add to your collection. Your observational skills will be enviable, and you won't miss any details in the world around you.

You'll also quickly become a pro at looking for the details in the objects that you collect. In collecting matchcovers, for example, you may become incredibly fast and savvy at scanning covers looking at type, condition, manumark, and so on. These excellent observational skills will serve you well, helping you to become a better finder and seeker in general and making you more aware of the little details in the world around you. In a professional capacity, this means that you'll more readily notice errors in reports or missing information.

7. **Collecting is a Lifelong Skill:** A passion for collecting is often something that is developed in childhood. Some children are content to own just one or two toy animals, whilst others will want to own

every animal released by a certain brand or in a certain design. If you develop an interest in collecting things in childhood, if the thought of owning things makes you feel special and important, then this is something that will stay with you for life, though that passion for plastic animals may port into something more sophisticated as you enter adulthood.

Anything that reminds us of the comfort of a happy childhood is good for our mental health. Even as adults, many of us have one of our feet anchored in our childhoods: this is where we come from, it forges who we are. Childhood memories are vital for healthy adult development. By continuing a passion for collection we will build on these happy memories while simultaneously developing new passions and new coping strategies that will help us to become happy and well-adjusted adults.

8. Collecting Makes You Happy: Finally, the power of happiness should not be underestimated, and most collectors choose to collect simply because it makes them happy! Happier people are healthier people. They're more productive, have higher energy levels, and are much more likely to feel good about themselves and about their achievements. Researchers at Harvard University have even found that individuals who have a happier and more positive outlook on life are less likely to develop life-threatening illnesses.

Life is too short to spend your days feeling sad, disappointed or lonely. If there is a particular object that makes you smile to look at it, or think of it, then why not start a collection? It really is a salve for the soul, and you might be surprised by just how much it enriches your life....but, of course, you already know that! [<https://www.hisandhersmag.co.uk/collecting/>]

Psychologists have often taken a Freudian perspective when describing why people collect. They highlight the controlling and impulsive dark side to collecting, the need for people to have "an object of desire." This desire, and hence the innate propensity to collect, begins at birth. The infant first desires the emotional and physical comfort of the nourishing breast, then the familiar baby blanket the child clings to for comfort and security. Stuffed animals, favorite toys are taken to bed and provide the emotional security needed to fall asleep.

A sense of ownership and control is facilitated through possession of these items for the vulnerable child. Freud himself took a more extreme position on the origins of collecting. Not surprisingly, he postulated that all collecting stems from unresolved toilet training conflict. Freud took the stance that the loss of bowel control was a traumatic experience, and the product from the bowels was disgusting and frightening to the child.

Therefore, the collector is trying to gain back control of their bowels as well as their "possessions" which were long flushed down the toilet. Where Freud linked object fixation to the anal-retentive stage in childhood, Muensterberger, in his perspective paper "Unruly Passion" believes collecting to be a "need-driven compensatory behavior where every new object effectively gives the notion of fantasized omnipotence." Jung had his own theories about why people become collectors. He touted the influence of archetypes on behavior. These universal symbols are embedded in what he termed our collective unconscious. Using this logic, collecting and completing sets have as their archetypal antecedents the collecting of "nuts and berries" once needed for survival by our early ancestors. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology_of_collecting]

So....Have you found any interesting nuts and berries lately?!