THE HISTORIES OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND COLLECTING, 1700–1950

Women and the Art and Science of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century Europe

EDITED BY ARLENE LEIS
AND KACIE L. WILLS

ROUTLEDGE

Women and the Art and Science of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century Europe

Through both longer essays and shorter case studies, this book examines the relationship of European women from various countries and backgrounds to collecting, in order to explore the social practices and material and visual cultures of collecting in eighteenth-century Europe.

It recovers their lives and examines their interests, their methodologies, and their collections and objects—some of which have rarely been studied before. The book also considers women's role as producers, that is, creators of objects that were collected. Detailed examination of the artefacts—both visually, and in relation to their historical contexts—exposes new ways of thinking about collecting in relation to the arts and sciences in eighteenth-century Europe. The book is interdisciplinary in its makeup and brings together scholars from a wide range of fields.

It will be of interest to those working in art history, material and visual culture, history of collecting, history of science, literary studies, women's studies, gender studies, and art conservation.

Arlene Leis is an independent art historian who received her PhD from University of York.

Kacie L. Wills received her PhD in English from the University of California, Riverside, and is Assistant Professor of English at Illinois College.

Cover image: Bartolomeo Bimbi, *Portrait of Citrus Fruit*, 1727. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Dell-Università degli Studi di Firenze.

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We dedicate this book to our families

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Ragusa: A Bridge between Tokyo and Palermo (Palazzo Sant'Elia, Palermo 2017); and *O'Tama: Migration of Styles* (Royal Palace, Palermo, 2019–2020).

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The editors of this book would like to thank all the researchers who have contributed to this volume. We've enjoyed learning about your research, and feel you have all brought many interesting topics to light that are ripe for further inquiry. We have enjoyed editing your chapters and watching this book develop over the last year into what you see here. Thank you to our series editor, Stacey Pierson, who helped us to shape this project. From the beginning, Stacey provided direction and recognized the potential for this book. Thank you to our commissioning editor, Isabella Vitti, for guidance through this process, and to Katie Armstrong for checking in and making the publishing process go smoothly. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of our proposal. Their insightful comments and suggestions helped to make this book what it is. It has been wonderful working with Routledge publishing, and every part of this process ran smoothly because of the professionalism of everyone involved.

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Introduction: Women and the Cultures of Collecting

Arlene Leis and Kacie L. Wills

Going once, going twice, third and final call: Sold! Around two o'clock on Wednesday morning, 17 May 1893, a sale of fine exotic and European porcelain began at Christie's, London. The accompanying auction catalogue makes known that seventy-nine lots of predominantly 'old Chinese', 'old Nankin', and 'old Japanese' porcelain were offered for sale; these were followed by more lots exemplifying superior English and European wares, some produced by well-known manufacturers, including Minton, Crown Derby, Sèvres, and Dresden.[1] Other sales took place that morning with items like furniture. Piled on top of tables and arranged in cases were decorative art objects, textiles, rare relics, and enamels, amongst other things. Studying the annotated catalogue housed in the Christie's library today, the auction appears to have attracted a large, mixed crowd of potential buyers, including Arthur Liberty, founder of Liberty department store, and the politician and art patron, Lord Battersea—with both men bidding and buying voraciously. The competition was fierce. Women were also purchasing wares, and a Mrs. Radcliffe spent £15 on a seemingly fantastic, tall vase, 'painted with fabulous birds and trees, foliage [in blue and flowers in colour], red and gold borders on the shoulder'. Public auctions were favorite meeting places, and sales were frequent. As exciting sites offering a type of polite entertainment, auctions also attracted visitors from other countries, like the Australian impressionist artist, John Peter Russell, who appears to have travelled all the way from France to London to attend the event. During the nineteenth century, Impressionist artists were particularly inspired by Orientalism and the accompanying material culture, and they often collected a range of items as points of reference for their work, especially porcelain wares.

The Christie's catalogue briefly describes the contents of each lot offered in this sale. For example, listed under 'Old Chinese porcelain', is Lot 80, 'A pear-shaped bottle, enamelled [sic] with kylins and ornaments in colours-10 ½ in. high' that sold for £10. Other lots fetched higher prices, like Lot 121, listed under 'Old Nankin porcelain', 'A Tall Beaker, the body painted with subjects of mandarins with their attendants, clouds, trees and birds, the upper part with warriors in a landscape, rocks and trees—30 in. high', sold for £45 to a Mr. Larking. The sale catalogue stipulates that all Oriental porcelain on sale had been 'imported by the late Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society', who had accompanied James Cook on his first South Pacific voyage. However, the collection really belonged to the famous botanist and explorer's wife, Lady Dorothea Banks.

Without an accompanying catalogue or record of the collection, Christie's oversight in the attribution of Lady Banks's collection might be explained by a lack of knowledge of her collecting career. Indeed, Lady Banks's marital position strategically enabled her

to capitalize on her husband's contacts with the East India Company and botanist travellers to help build her collection of exotica. It is also possible that they advertised the porcelain wares as Sir Joseph's with hopes of tempting prospective buyers. If so, the strategy seems to have been effective, as all the items offered for auction sold. The pair of egg-shelled vases that the aforementioned John Peter Russell purchased for £14 made for a significant souvenir marking his London trip. To touch something that had been in bodily contact with someone in the past can be a moving experience. As someone originally from the Australian colony, Russell may have been interested in owning an object from Sir Joseph's (also known as 'the father of Australia') collection.

Christie's dismissiveness of the fact that this was Lady Banks's porcelain collection is not unique. Having never published work on her collection, perhaps Christie's had no knowledge of Lady Banks's prominent role in its assemblage. Importantly, however, recent research demonstrates that Lady Banks's porcelain collection and her husband's botanical collections were meaningfully interconnected but also distinct.[2] When Sir Joseph Banks died, he bestowed his extensive collection of botanicals to the British Museum, where they now form part of the Natural History Museum's foundational collection. When Lady Banks's sister-in-law, Sarah Sophia Banks, who assembled a significant collection of coins, tokens and ephemera, died, Sir Joseph donated part of the coin collection to the Royal Mint, and Lady Banks bestowed the rest of her collections of coins and ephemera to the British Museum, where they form part of the foundational collections of both the Prints and Drawings and Coins and Medals departments.[3] When Sir Joseph died, Lady Banks made sure his collections were gifted to the British museum, according to his wishes. However, when Lady Banks died in 1828, with no children of her own, her porcelain collection was passed along to her close nephew Sir Edward Knatchbull, ninth Baronet.[4] Instead of bequeathing the collection to a museum or library, he kept it. Perhaps it held sentimental value, or he took personal enjoyment in her collection of wares. Alternatively, he may not have appreciated the scientific expertise that went into assembling the collection or its cultural value, so he never bothered to offer it to a public institution. In turn, he passed the collection to his son, Lord Brabourne, and shortly after Brabourne's death, the collection was offered at auction. Giving the credit for building a large and important collection of wares like this to a man is yet another example of how during the nineteenth century, the significance of women's work and the relevance of women's contributions—in this case collecting—were becoming diminished, and women's legacies, whether intentionally or not, were lost.

Women and the Gendered Constructs of Collecting

The case of Lady Banks is revealing. It exemplifies one of the many ways in which women are absent from formal collecting records, and the ways that collecting—an activity seen as dominated by men—was propelled from one century into another. Identifying the contributions women made to the cultures of collecting during the eighteenth-century is no easy task as many women's roles and their collections have been forgotten or lost. However, this is changing as more scholars become interested in the topic of women's collecting and more private and public archives are searched. For example, through studying institutional records held in museums and auction houses like in the previous example, Karen Attar focuses her studies on library collections, noting that men dominated the activity; indeed, collections were gifted predominately by men, which is not surprising, as with a few exceptions, most eighteenth-century men legally held the purse strings.[5] However, Attar also brings to light numerous exceptions to the rule, showing

that, like men, women also collected a wide range of objects and paper items now housed in institutions, including extensive collections of books on subjects like food and drink, devotional books, children's books, books about women by women authors, ephemera, extra-illustration, musical scores, and popular music sheets.[6] Research carried out at the Victoria and Albert museum has also demonstrated that women played a prominent role in collecting, both numerically and as influencers. Catherine King and Dianne Sachko Macleod have brought to light numerous contributions women have made to private and public institutions, and they show that since the nineteenth century, those numbers are steadily increasing.[7] In contemporary collecting practices, as many women as men (if not more) collect. This compendium represents an interrogation into women's histories that will hopefully with continued research reveal the collecting practices of women from an even broader range of social categories including underrepresented groups.

The authors of this volume demonstrate that eighteenth-century collections have survived in many ways, even if, as in the case of the aforementioned Lady Banks, a collection's physical presence is no longer completely intact. Recently, Beth Tobin demonstrated convincingly, in her study of the Duchess of Portland's shell collection that is no longer extant, that textual evidence in the form of drawings, catalogues, letters, and diaries, amongst other items, are important evidence that attest to the social practices and the material and culture of natural history collecting.[8] On record, men have established more private museums than women or bestowed their homes and collections to nations more than women have. However, one of the problems with the ways collecting has been thought of is that women's collections and their collecting practices have so often been measured and valued in relation to the contents, methodologies, and collecting practices of men. As Kim Sloan makes clear in her edited work, *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, during that time period a number of women had managed to enter what was usually considered a predominately male preserve, and she demonstrates that both women's and men's collecting contributions helped form the British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery.[9] Furthermore, Robert Huxley's essay elaborates on this point, and he argues that the reasons for collecting at that time were not always academic and men and women 'amateurs' built substantial private collections that form today's vast 'database'.[10] Some of the collections discussed in this compendium were bestowed directly to public institutions, while others were gifted to family members. Some of what remains survives in the forms that Tobin has uncovered. Where women have been instrumental in preserving the past assembled by their male relatives, this book also considers the fate of a collection when women passed their collections down to the men in their families. As the authors here show, women were not always absent from formal acquisition records, and when they are absent, it does not signal their insignificance.

Perhaps the genesis of this misconception lies in how the history of collecting is tied to the notion of European religious tradition, and to two Biblical male figures in particular: Noah and Adam. As John Elsner, Roger Cardinal, and others have demonstrated, Noah is often thought of as the first collector, and Adam as the one who classified the creatures God made.[11] The Garden of Eden and the universe were thought to be created by God, but the Ark marked man's first attempt to create his own world, as such, the Ark was considered the greatest construct of pure knowledge. Collectors such as Johann Kentmann, John Tradescant, and Anthanasius Kircher often incorporated the myth of Noah into their collecting methodology, referring to their own collections as 'arks', and this continued with artists and collectors well into the eighteenth century.[12] According to the myth of Noah, the collecting process, in which he gathers all animals that were doomed to die in the flood, becomes inseparable from the creation of a new and better world. As Elsner and Cardinal write, 'Noah is the ur-collector, who

successfully gathered and completed sets of animals, and his actions resonate with all the themes of collecting itself: desire and nostalgia, preservation and loss, permanence and the construction of complete systems that go against the destructiveness of time'.[13] This collecting origin story and its gendered implications of course excludes woman, Eve. As opposed to Adam, Eve is a figure of blame, lambasted for the fall of man. In conceiving this book, we have tried to shed light on the significant contributions to knowledge that women's relationships to collecting have made possible. We have done this in an effort to re-imagine the origins of collecting, the traditional histories that associate male collecting with Noah and his Ark. The chapters in this book take a position of inclusion, acknowledging and celebrating the roles women have played in the gathering and distribution of knowledge through art and science.

Another factor placing women at a disadvantage to their male counterparts in the history of collecting is the notion of 'princely collecting' and its association with 'princely rule': that is, that the notion of 'magnificence' was inseparable from the idea of 'good government' and concepts of kingship.[14] In response to this dominant concept, the authors of the important edited volume *Women Patrons and Collectors* take as their focus elite women from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and challenge the idea that 'princely collections' and 'princely rule' were synonymous.[15] Their volume makes a significant contribution, demonstrating that over diverse periods, aristocratic women have resisted this discrimination and built substantially elegant collections of their own, and like their male counterparts, strategically used the act of collecting to their own advantages. Women, too, formed exquisite collections of fine and decorative arts that were installed in elegant buildings and luxurious interiors. In addition to this broad ranging research, are more studies on eighteenth-century royal and aristocratic women and the important role their collections played in demonstrations of power.[16] In examining collections like those of Catherine II, Maria Carolina of Austria, and Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici, our volume continues to showcase the range and significance of women's acts of collecting in a 'princely tradition'. These women used their collections to garner authority, express sentiment, bestow a legacy, and showcase a range of taste that extended beyond gender expectations. Anna Maria Luisa, for instance, though known for her jewellery collection, is shown in this book to have also collected paintings of citrus fruits. This aspect of her collection showcases an interest in the intersections of visual art and natural science and shows how Anna Maria Luisa's collecting interests reached beyond expectations we may have of women's collections. Additionally, as the objects found in such 'princely' collections often blurred the line between art and science, so do many of the women's collections in this volume.

More recently, popular culture has situated the topic of art, science, and collecting within a gendered dichotomy that further cements these concepts as separate. For example, in *The Collector*, John Fowles's book about power, class, and control, the protagonist, Frederick Clegg, a working-class man who has recently come into money, is an amateur collector of butterflies who loves science. He has a desire to collect and preserve rare species. He uses his new money to build a butterfly collection and a dungeon, in which he captures, keeps, and ultimately kills his new specimen of desire, posh art student Miranda Grey. During one of their conversations, Miranda expresses her opposition to Frederick's love of science and collecting:

> I hate scientists, she said. I hate people who collect things, and classify things and give them names and then forget all about them. That's what people are always doing in art. They call a painter an impressionist or a cubist or something and then they put him in a drawer and don't see him as a living individual painter any more.[17]