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Review of *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*

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Comments

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Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, eds. *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 392 pp.; 12 color and 65 black-and-white illustrations. \$49.95.

In *Collecting Across Cultures*, editors Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall offer an important compendium of research into collecting practices that connected Europe with the larger Atlantic world (and well beyond) during the long early modern period from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. This stimulating volume contains essays written by historians, art historians, anthropologists, and curators about European engagement in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, complementing a wealth of recent interdisciplinary scholarship on the histories of collecting and science. In the introduction the editors frame their volume by noting that scholarship on museums and collecting has focused “almost exclusively on European spaces and figures” and that the essays’ authors instead “push the analytical framework farther through a focus on collecting across cultures” (4). While generally true (most work on the history of collecting *is* Eurocentric), this ignores the extant and growing literature on reciprocal informational and material exchange in the early modern world—think of the recent popularity of “borders” and “boundaries”—and slightly mischaracterizes some of the contributions in the current volume, which remain largely Eurocentric in emphasis. This minor quibble notwithstanding, *Collecting Across Cultures* is a very welcome and informative compendium that will find a place on the reading lists of early modern scholars of all stripes.

Both Malcolm Baker’s preface and the editors’ introduction situate *Collecting Across Cultures* in the lineage of scholarship on the European *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* tradition, established by Julius von Schlosser in 1908 and brought back to currency in Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor’s foundational *Origins of Museums* of 1985, and scholars—especially Anglophone, German, and Italian ones—have been building the literature ever since.¹ The point to be made here is that Bleichmar and Mancall’s volume is interesting precisely because it destabilizes our notion of early modern collections, even if not always consciously so. These collections are an important touchstone for the majority of the authors—all but four bring up *Kunstkammern*, *Wunderkammern*,

¹ Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinets of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

and/or curiosity cabinets—yet very few contend directly with collecting by European princes, or, for that matter, with material collections. “Paper museums,” prints, photographs and texts, even collections of data, are the subjects of many of the chapters.

The fourteen essays are eclectic in a productive way, tracing the gathering and movement of ideas, regimes of value, material artifacts, images, and human bodies into and out of Europe. We encounter, among many other things, Spanish still lifes, New England palm trees and parasols, Javanese palm leaf manuscripts, Mexican *cartes de visites* in French albums, and European telescopes in the Siamese court, making the book a virtual *Wunderkammer* in its own right. One of the conceptual threads tying the book together is the emphasis in many of the essays—for example, those by Daniela Bleichmar, Benjamin Schmidt, Carina L. Johnson, and Robert Batchelor—on the destabilization of meaning and function that follows upon the dislocation of objects and images. Bleichmar interrogates the terminological and classificatory flux relating to “exotica” in early modern collections, Schmidt looks at the unmooring of the parasol from cultural specificity, and Johnson examines colonial Mexican featherwork in Europe as it shifts from an index of secular territorial hegemony to a symbol of evangelical success. Robert Batchelor starts with a sensationalist pamphlet decrying murder of English merchants by a Javanese man wielding a ceremonial *keris* in order to trace the semantic slippages leading to the event and shaping its juridical aftermath. In other cases, the material collected is anything but destabilized and is instead directed toward very specific purposes. For example, Cécile Fromont, in her excellent study of Capuchin missionary drawings from central Africa, explains how early missionaries gathered data on local customs and nature, filtered them through preexisting conceptual frameworks, and sent them back for use in training future missionaries.

Lisa Trever and Joanne Pillsbury’s astute essay highlights the mechanisms at play in amassing an eighteenth-century collection for the Bourbon crown, revealing how local social networks in Trujillo, Peru, enabled the process. This attention to the mechanics of collecting, in fact, allows many of the authors to discuss the multitextured dimensions of collecting as a social, political, and institutional practice. This permits them to discuss the variety of agents—local artists, merchants, patrons, travelers, scholars, and disciplines—needed for artifacts, natural specimens, and knowledge to be gathered, transported, displayed, and utilized by various audiences. Megan

O’Neil’s essay examines two nineteenth-century French albums of Mexican travels to interrogate the interplay between personal and collective identities. Looking at eighteenth-century collections of Americana, Paz Cabello Carro traces the provenance of the objects and the desires of patrons to explicate the process of institutional compilation. Similarly, José Ramón Marcaida and Juan Pimentel’s contribution reveals how early modern aesthetics aligned with scientific observation. Pascale Rivial explores the nineteenth-century disciplinary formation of anthropology and archaeology in response to lithographs illustrating European travel narratives of Latin America. Alain Schnapp looks to the correlation of ancient and American archaeology with European antiquarianism as a precursor to the disciplinary development of comparative ethnology.

The question of living humans as collectibles is an important corollary to collections of objects and images. Trevor Burnard’s study of African and Afro-Caribbean slaves in Jamaica contrasts their invisibility within narrative descriptions of the island with the attention paid to listing these humans as collectible commodities. Likewise, Peter Mancall’s essay describes the long history of European collecting of Native Americans, from Columbus to NAGPRA, to show how living Native Americans become reified as natural specimens, leading to devastating results.

Sarah Benson’s essay on the Court of Siam is unique among the essays in taking up “collecting across cultures” in regard to European objects as “exotica,” specifically the Siamese monarch’s collecting of European technology from the court of Louis XIV. This essay helps round the discussion to consider transcultural collecting within a different ideological system.

Current scholarship in the history of collecting, with renewed attention to the anthropology of art, is moving toward issues of intermediality, to the resistance of objects to redefinition and repurposing, to how particular actors produced knowledge about the world in very contradictory ways. *Collecting Across Cultures* is a valuable step forward within this literature, providing the kinds of case studies that form a significant point of departure for future scholars.

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