

Philipp Blom

"Wry history . . . Blom's formidable research is an example of the collector's art in itself."

—*The New York Times Book Review*



*To Have  
and To Hold*

AN INTIMATE HISTORY  
OF COLLECTORS AND COLLECTING



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## Acknowledgements

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The idea of collecting, the simple question what drives people to amassing things, often of no use, has always fascinated me but it was not until 1998 that I had the opportunity of committing some of my ideas to paper in an article for Elisabeth Bauschmid at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. I did not think that many people would be interested in a closer look at this strange and beautiful obsession until I told my agent Victoria Hobbs about it, who showed true flair and insight when she pounced on my idea and then helped me develop it. I was fortunate to find a kindred spirit and eagle-eyed editor in Stuart Proffitt. Sara Fisher also deserves my deepest thanks.

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P  
Paris, 200

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Every passion borders on chaos, that of the collector on the chaos of memory.

Walter Benjamin, 'Ich packe meine Bibliothek au

## *Three Old Men*

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When, as a child, I had trouble going to sleep at night, afraid of witches or demons under my bed, took comfort in imagining my great-grandfather, sitting in his armchair and reading, as I had seen him do and as my mother, who had grown up in his house in Leiden, in the Netherlands, had always described him to me. In my mind's eye he is still sitting there, impeccably dressed in 1940s fashion in a three-piece suit, with a tuft of white hair above his forehead and a trim half inch around the sides of his head, a little brush of moustache underneath his nose (a fashion he had not renounced despite the unloved Austrian who had also sported it). He was dressed correctly rather than elegantly. His suits were old but serviceable and, like his shirts, worn out at the cuffs and collars, testaments to their owner's parsimonious living and Calvinist ideals. He was surrounded by the spines of thousands of books on shelves climbing the wall up to the ceiling.

How much of this image is really memory (he died, aged ninety-four, when I was four), and how much had reconstituted itself in my head out of stories and photographs is impossible to say, but my admiration for his curiosity and learning was such that I never let go of it. It was an image of immense authority and kindness, and I was sure no demon could possibly have the daring to challenge him. He had been, so I had been told time and again, a great collector of books and works of art, a self-made man of immense erudition, and I was intensely proud of him.

Willem Eldert Blom had started life as a carpenter's apprentice and died a rich man – not in financial terms, but having had a life full of improbable adventures and learning, which had led him to master seventeen languages, receive a doctorate in Russian at the age of eighty-five (after which he set out to learn Chinese), and amass a library of some thirty thousand volumes. Some relics of this treasure trove had found their way into our house: old, heavy bibles in stiff leather bindings large as tombstones, classics in Greek and Latin, medical books from the eighteenth century, a wooden traverse flute, which he had played and had taught me to play a little, and some paintings and prints including one sheet by Rembrandt, which now hangs near my desk. This was the first collection, the memory of a collection, that I remember.

His life, it appears to me now, bears much resemblance to those of other collectors, whose interests in life allowed them to overcome the limitations of their time and upbringing. Having studied Latin, Greek and ancient languages at night, after finishing his day at the carpenter's shop, he became a translator, and then went to New York – as a tea taster, of all things. He returned to the Netherlands to become successively a stockbroker, a manager, a biscuit manufacturer, a stockbroker again, and a feeder of swans. This last innocent occupation was a cunning cover. After retiring from his job, he would leave the house every morning carrying a bag of bread crusts. 'Mother, I'm going to feed the swans,' he would say to his wife, Godefrieda, take a bus to the train station, Leiden Centraal, and from there a train to Amsterdam, where he had an antique shop, De Geelfinck. Godefrieda would have never approved of a man of his position entering into trade, and he had never been keen on domestic arguments. The deception was only discovered years later, when his shop had been burgled and she read about it in the paper.

De Geelfinck, The Yellow Finch, was by all accounts less of a shop than a personal indulgence, a place in which Willem amassed curiosities, works of art and books, which were also for sale, subsidizing his passion for more and rarer items. Those pieces that he did not want to sell he would take home. A photograph from about 1965 shows him in the door of his shop, slightly below ground

level, surrounded by things of great value and others of no value at all, bearing testimony both to his collecting passion and to his inscrutable sense of humour: huge keys (nobody knows what to), the back tooth of an elephant (a card affixed to it reads: *Replaces an entire set of dentures*), cardboard messages in verse in touchingly not-quite-colloquial English (*Step in old man/ (Don't call me 'old man')/ Into this jolly old antiques shop/ Old girl (Don't call me 'old') and when/ You've looked around from floor to top/ You'll find it such a jolly old shop/ Where old jolly things in legion abound. Old Man, Old Girl, look freely around./ (Don't call me old, or I'll call the hound)*). He himself stands next to the *pièce de résistance*: a real Egyptian sarcophagus, which later went to a museum. Inside the shop were hundreds of books ranging from the sixteenth century (bibles a speciality) to modern paperback thrillers, Russian icons and oil paintings, pieces of porcelain, Javanese dolls, African masks, Dutch pewter, Delft tiles, vases, necklaces, antique kitchen utensils, Japanese lacquer and gramophone records. Today the basement where his burrow once was houses a shop for Chinese cooking utensils. The shop to the left sells souvenirs (windmills, painted wooden clogs and gold coloured plastic Eiffel Towers), the one to the right flowers. In season, the entire space is filled with brightly coloured tulips.

The aura of Willem Blom and his lifelong search for enlightenment in books and old treasure was transferred not just to my parents' shelves and walls; most of his library went to the University of Leiden.

During my school years, my disinclination for sports and woodwork allowed me to spend time in the realm of another collector. The school that I attended was a very odd institution indeed, run according to the principles of that most eccentric of turn-of-the-century sages, Rudolf Steiner, the architect of an assortment of borrowed theories and *idées fixes* which he called anthroposophy, in the grounds of a small castle surrounded by woodland. The castle and land had once been owned by a mysterious man who could still be seen walking up and down the main street of this little community on two crutches, clad in green loden coat and hat, his neck protruding out of the coat almost horizontally, an ancient turtle-like figure. As children we called him simply the 'Erbprinz', the Heir Apparent, an enigmatic name to a young boy. He was, in fact, Georg Moritz, erstwhile heir to the duchy of Saxony-Altenburg. History had overtaken his father, Ernst II, the last ruling duke of Germany, who abdicated on 11 November 1918. Ernst had been granted the castle, an unromantic building in the middle of Westphalia, as compensation for giving up his seat in Altenburg and its spectacular family palace, and his son, Georg Moritz, who had come under Steiner's spell, had transformed it and the adjacent agricultural estate into a school.

When I came to know the Erbprinz he was well into his eighties, and I discovered to my delight that the two rooms in the castle which he still inhabited (the rest he had donated to the school where he had also taught) were furnished with antiques and filled with books on history, philosophy and art, a haven from the noise of the boarding school. He gave me a free run of his library, and I spent many happy sports lessons there, much to the chagrin of the PE teacher, who felt powerless to intervene.

In front of his apartment was a small landing, a neutral space between two worlds. There was the smell of boarding school, of lino, wood polish and washing powder, the hideous pot plants and the atrocious anthroposophic watercolours (plenty of primary colours and swirling shapes). But there was also a fine Biedermeier writing desk crowned by the bust of Ernst, the last duke himself, an austere classicist work in alabaster which frightened me every time I set eyes upon it.

By the time I came to know him, Mr Altenburg, as he was officially called, rarely left his room, which smelled distinctly of old man. There he would sit in his empire bed, propped up by pillows, h

translucent skin resembling the complexion of his father's bust. He talked to me about books, about his life and about history. It amused him to have a little young company: he had, after all, spent most of his life among schoolchildren. I lapped up his stories with a sense of wonder but little understanding, for he was truly a messenger from a different time, from a Germany very unlike the one I knew. He had been made a Lieutenant of the Guard in his father's regiment on his fourteenth birthday and had received the education of a future head of state. Occasionally, as his hands were not too uncertain for him to write comfortably, he would also dictate letters to me. These missives were sent to countess this and prince that, with the odd professor thrown in for light relief. A urine bottle hung by the bedside while on a side table his last meal waited to be collected. His bedroom was filled with stacks of books, which made navigating difficult for a lanky teenager.

The other room, the library, seemed large yet intimate, filled with volumes smelling sweetly of old paper and infinite riches. The crowning glory was a morocco-leather armchair with a brass-and-mahogany reading stand set into the left armrest. The chair seemed immense; it would swallow me up entirely while I sat there, devouring biographies or histories, many of which I was too young to understand, or simply looking out of the window at the old trees outside, wishing that I lived in such a room, in such a castle, that I possessed these wonderful books, and was able to read all day without having to think up excuses for missing my lessons.

I can still remember quite acutely when I first realized that collecting could have more powerful and darker connotations than I had witnessed in the collections of my childhood. I had met Wolf Stein in Amsterdam, during synagogue service, which I, not being Jewish, had attended simply out of interest. We began to talk and he invited me to his house for a meal. He spoke Dutch with a slight but unmistakable German intonation. When I arrived at his address, not far from the Rembrandtplein, he welcomed me warmly and asked me to excuse the state of his house. The living room, he explained, was being renovated, a long-term project, as he did everything himself and was not particularly adept at decorating. What I had noticed, however, was not the tools lying about, but the books spreading everywhere like moss on wet stones. Piles of books lined the entire hallway and more were sitting on every step of the staircase leading up to the first floor. Books were creeping up the walls and occupying every inch of free space on the floor, on tables, chairs and other furniture. The rooms were accessible only through narrow canals winding through a mountainous landscape of reading matter of all shapes and sizes. He showed me around the house. There were books surrounding his bed, books on shelves above it, books in front of the bathtub, and books in his study, which also contained a special treasure – his violin, which he said he had not played for many years but always wanted to take up again.

The only room free of this growth of books was the kitchen, a desolate place not only because it was bare in contrast to the other rooms, but also because it was almost devoid of food. The meal we had together was meagre, but Wolf proved wonderfully engaging company and I forgot the sardines, sandwiches and tepid tea with which I was trying to placate an adolescent stomach. He was a curious figure: small and kindly, in his early sixties perhaps, dressed conservatively but somewhat shabbily. His every movement had about it an air of apology, as if he wanted to communicate that he did not mean it like this, that things had just come out this way and that he hoped they might be made up for by his smile and his wit.

He talked about his mother, who was living in an old-people's home and still making great demands on him, and about his medical studies. Was he still studying? I asked him. Yes, he said, he had been studying on and off for the last thirty years, unable to finish, giving up completely

periodically and then starting again with new energy. An apologetic smile appeared again. You must understand, he said, I was in hiding for most of the war, here in Amsterdam. When they picked me up I was fourteen and I went straight to Bergen-Belsen. What I saw there made me want to become a doctor, to help people. But, on the other hand, when I see someone with a cut thumb suffering terribly I cannot help but think back to the mountains of bodies and I simply cannot take the patient seriously. Then I lose all faith in ever finishing.

I learned during that dinner that Wolf Stein had the dubious distinction of having had a fate similar to that of Anne Frank, the difference being that he survived the experience with no diary to show for it. Like the Franks, his parents came from Germany, from Schweinfurt, fleeing to the Netherlands in the hope of finding a bearable life there. Like the Franks, they went into hiding, and, like them, were discovered and deported 'to the East'. Unlike Anne, Wolf came through the hell of the concentration camp. When he was liberated, aged seventeen, life refused to make sense, and ever after he had been trying to make a whole out of the pieces he could gather, tried to gain strength from his life before the catastrophe, from a perfectly normal childhood. His books were part of this project. I asked him why he had accumulated thousands of volumes, some in languages he did not read.

It is stupid, I know, he smiled, but I didn't have much of a formal education in my youth and always hope I may make up for it if I read all these.



# Part I

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## A Parliament of Monsters

And God said to Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gofer wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch ... And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. Of birds after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after its kind, two of every sort shall come to thee, to keep them alive.

Genesis 6.13–14, 19–20

# The Dragon and the Tartar Lamb

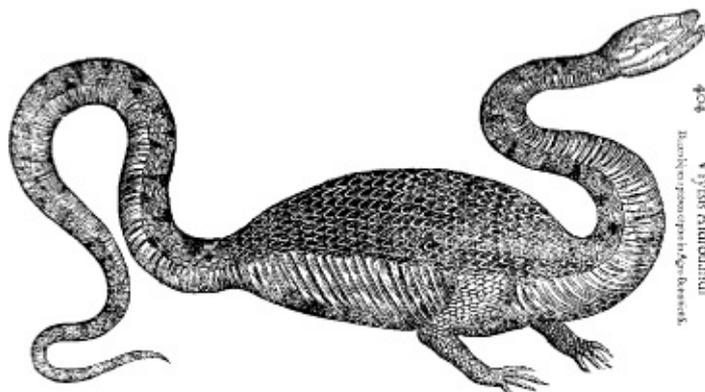
Dragons have always crawled out from their lairs deep in the beginnings of time to test the virtue and the faith of humankind. In legend, they appear before the city gates devouring innocent blood and challenging the greatest and the most pious warriors to defend the order of things by pitting sword against fiery breath.

When a 'fearsome dragon' was sighted in the marshes near Bologna in 1572 it might have stirred these ancient fears. This time, however, the hero of the hour was no knight in shining armour on his way to canonization, but a portly, balding scholar with nothing but a heroic name, Ulisse, to show his way of warlike credentials.

Despite the fact that the pope himself was visiting the city, the Church did not lay claim to what would have been seen only a century before as a victory of Christianity over the devil. Now a collector and scientist, the renowned Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), was thought competent to deal with strange creatures. The deadpan tone in which he relates the capture of the animal is in itself significant:

The dragon was first seen on May 13, 1572, hissing like a snake. He had been hiding on the small estate of Master Petronius near Dosius in a place called Malonolta. At five in the afternoon, he was caught on a public highway by a herdsman named Baptista of Camaldulus, near the hedge of a private farm, a mile from the remote city outskirts of Bologna. Baptista was following his ox cart home when he noticed the oxen suddenly come to a stop. He kicked them and shouted at them, but they refused to move and went down on their knees rather than move forward. At this point, the herdsman noticed the hissing sound and was startled to see this strange little dragon ahead of him. Trembling he struck it on the head with his rod and killed it.<sup>1</sup>

A simple bop on the head with a walking stick was all it took. What exactly this creature was was impossible to say. A large and rare lizard perhaps. Aldrovandi did what a man in his position was expected to do: he had the dragon preserved and set about writing a *Dracologia*, a Latin history of the dragon in seven volumes. It is a scientific treatise, attempting to explain the phenomenon before him as a natural occurrence, not in terms of metaphysics or religion. The animal, he wrote, was still immature, as shown by its incompletely developed claws and teeth. It had moved, he believed, by slithering along the ground like a snake, aided by its two legs. The corpse had a thick torso and a long tail and measured some two feet in all.



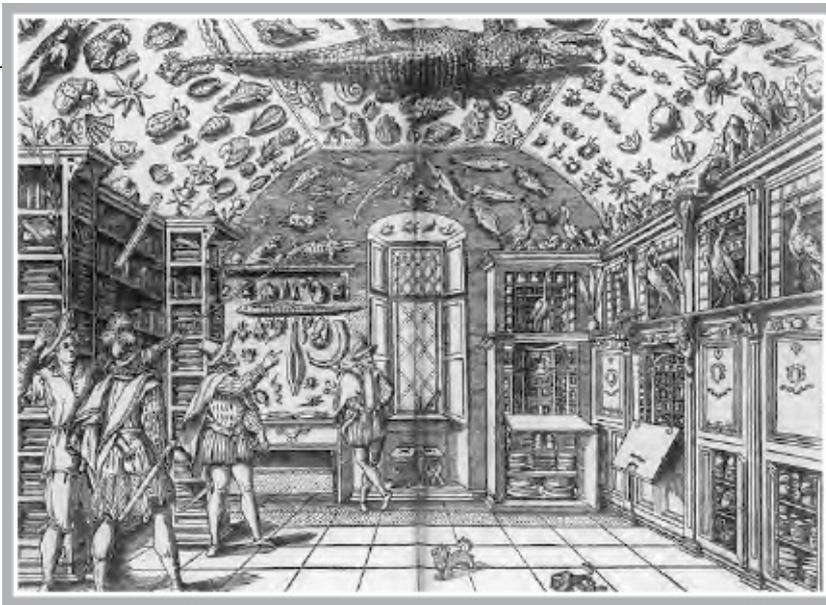
Parts of Aldrovandi's museum have survived to our day and are now housed in Bologna's Museo di Storia Naturale in the Palazzo Poggia. Few tourists find their way in here and the wood-paneled rooms with their white cabinets are left in relative silence for much of the time. Two dried crocodiles mounted on the wall are watching over the birds' eggs, strange horns, stone samples, plants and learned tomes. Only the fluorescent lighting serves as a reminder that four centuries have passed. The dragon, which is now lost, had once been part of this display.

Scholars from all over Italy came to visit his collection to see the dragon for themselves. In its heyday the collection attracted scores of visitors, both learned and curious, and Aldrovandi kept an elaborate guest book, which was regularly inventoried and updated. Among those invited to sign the guest book were 907 scholars, 118 nobles, 11 archbishops, 26 'famous men' and 1 single woman. More women had given the great man the honour of a visit, but even Caterina Sforza, the nearest thing Italy had to a queen, who had arrived with an entourage of 'fourteen or fifteen coaches and carriages containing fifty Gentlewomen, the flower of the first families of the city, accompanied by more than 150 Gentlemen',<sup>2</sup> was not thought of sufficient intellectual stature to be asked to sign.

Aldrovandi was at the vanguard of an explosion of scientific and collecting activity in the sixteenth century that emanated from Italy. He saw himself as the new Aristotle and it was his intention to finish what Aristotle and Pliny had started: a complete encyclopaedia of nature. To achieve this he needed facts, and the size of his collection became as much of an obsession to him as the gathering and description of the specimens. The museum held 13,000 items in 1577, 18,000 in 1595 and some 20,000 around the turn of the century.

Many Italian cities around this time had their own great collectors: men like Michele Mercati in Rome, Francesco Calceolari in Verona, Carlo Ruzzini in Venice, Aldrovandi and later Ferdinand Cospì in Bologna, and Athanasius Kircher in the Vatican compiled collections that, classified and catalogued, were instruments of scholarship and realizations of encyclopaedic knowledge. The cabinets of the richest collectors boasted the horns of unicorns, dried dragons with outlandish and fearsome shapes, skulls of strange birds and jaws of gigantic fish, stuffed birds of the most extraordinary colours, and parts of other, as yet unidentified, creatures that seemed to hover between reality and myth, between the hope of rational explanation and the fear of hell. Nor were the collections uniform in their content and orientation. The Veronese Mapheus Cusanus, for example, was known to have a curious predilection for 'Egyptian Idols taken out of the Mummies, divers sorts of petrified shells, petrified cheese, cinnamon, sponge, and Mushromes'.<sup>3</sup>

This new spirit of Renaissance inquiry was driven by scholars and amateurs, not priests or ancient philosophers, and for the first time it became accepted that a fish market may be a better place to gather wisdom than a library. Fishermen were more likely to have caught in their nets rare and wonderful specimens and to be able to tell of their habits and their names than could any number of Latin manuscripts. It was no longer enough to sit at a desk in a monastery. Aldrovandi himself toured the fish markets for new finds and talked to the fishermen, just as Descartes would make observations about animal anatomy in a Paris butcher's shop a century later.



It would have been anathema to collectors even a century before to seek out objects in places such as these, for until the sixteenth century collecting had been the prerogative of princes, whose interests concentrated on objects that were both beautiful and precious, thus reinforcing their wealth and power. Tut Ankh Amon had collected fine ceramics while Pharaoh Amenhotep III was known for his love of blue enamels, and sanctuaries from Solomon's Temple to the Akropolis as well as the courts of noblemen had always held famous treasures.<sup>4</sup> Ancient Rome had seen a brief blossoming of a culture of collecting, mainly of Greek works of art, but with the empire that, too, vanished.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages princes of the Church and secular rulers accumulated great hoards of relics, luxurious vessels, jewellery and objects such as horns of unicorns (narwhales) or other legendary creatures.<sup>6</sup> Out of these treasuries developed a more private form of appreciation, the *studiolo*, a purpose-built chamber filled with antiquities, gemstones and sculptures, popular in Italy among men of both means and learning from the fourteenth century onwards.<sup>7</sup> Oliviero Forza of Treviso is thought to have had the earliest recorded *studiolo* in 1335. Collecting works of art and objects crafted from precious metals and stones became a pastime of princes, a diversion that could border on an all-consuming passion.



One day he may simply want for his pleasure to let his eye pass along these volumes [which he has bought and copied for him] to while away the time and give recreation to the eye. The next day ... so I am told, he will take out some of the effigies and images of the Emperors and Worthies of the past, some made of gold, some of silver, some of bronze, of precious stones or of marble and of other materials which are wonderful to behold ... The next day he would look at his jewels and precious stones of which he had a marvellous quantity of great value, some engraved, others not. He takes great pleasure and delight in looking at these and in discussing their various excellencies. The next day perhaps, he will inspect his vases of gold and silver and other precious material ... All in all then it is a matter of acquiring worth or strange objects – he does not look at the price.<sup>8</sup>

The collector so engrossed in his treasures, Piero de' Medici, known as the Gouty (1416–69), could not afford not to worry about the cost of the objects he was acquiring and commissioning wherever he could find them. Several of his descendants, most notably Francesco and Lorenzo the Magnificent, were also swept up in this passion. Francesco had a *studiolo* built and painted with panels depicting the twelve months and twelve orders of books that were to be found in his library.

There is, however, a world of difference between these 'armories for precious things' and Ulysse Aldrovandi's museum some 100 years later. Antonio Averlino Filarete, who observed Piero de' Medici in his *studiolo*, notes the kinds of possessions assembled here: antiquities, gems and works of art, as well as a few 'noteworthy and strange objects'.<sup>9</sup> The significant distinction between the medieval treasuries and the new *studioli* was the privacy inherent in the idea of a study. In the programme and structure, however, little had changed. The walls that both shut out and represented the outside world with their symbolic order of things still resonated with the memory of plainchant and the vibrancy of heraldic emblems. The *studiolo* with its statues, painted panels and gems from antiquity expressed a love of art and beauty, and with beauty came virtue, faith, and what Umberto Eco called 'a kind of ontological humility before the primacy of nature'.<sup>10</sup> The overwhelming curiosity that made collectors hunt not for what was beautiful and emblematic but strange and incomprehensible, that made them pit their wits and their erudition against that of the authors

antiquity, was still far away.

How, the French Huguenot pastor and America traveller Jean de Léry had asked in 1578, could he ask his French readers to 'believe what can only be seen two thousand leagues from where they live things never known (much less written about) by the Ancients'?<sup>11</sup> *Things never known by the Ancients* – this phrase would echo throughout Europe until it had shaken its very intellectual foundation. With the exploration of new continents, of the planetary macrocosm and the microcosm of the smaller things, Europe was stepping out of the shadow of antiquity and its authors which had circumscribed what was known for more than 1,000 years. During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance it had been thought certain there was no natural phenomenon, no culture, no animal and no sensation that had not already been dealt with conclusively by Aristotle and Pliny, by Cicero or Pythagoras. The rest, so the scholastics had asserted, was merely commentary and reinterpretation in the light of the gospels.

Now, however, a century after the discovery of America, new discoveries on earth and in the skies kept pouring in seemingly every day. Knowledge exploded as age-old horizons were expanded beyond all that had been thought possible. 'Neither Aristotle nor any other philosopher and ancient or modern naturalist has ever observed or known [these things],'<sup>12</sup> Francesco Stelluri exclaimed confidently after observing a bee under a microscope; another, Federico Cesi, wondered aloud what Pliny might have said had he had a chance to see 'the lion-maned, multy-tongued, hairy-eyed bee'.<sup>13</sup> Collectors in Italy reacted to this change with an insistence on the empirical study of nature. Across the Alps, others did not feel that this paradigm offered them everything they hoped to know and went a different path combining scientific, Aristotelian concepts with occult traditions.<sup>14</sup>

With the increasingly scientific spirit of the Renaissance in the second half of the sixteenth century came a profusion of collections seeking to explore and represent the world as it was then seen to be. The *studiolo* could no longer answer the need to understand the sheer profusion of the new in all its alien forms. 'It would ... be disgraceful,' wrote Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* in 1620 'mankind, if, after such tracts of the material world have been laid open which were unknown in former times – so many seas traversed – so many countries explored – so many stars discovered – philosophy or the intelligible world, should be circumscribed by the same boundaries as before.'<sup>15</sup>

Those interested in maintaining these boundaries had put up considerable resistance. Already Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas were wary about where curiosity might lead the faithful. Bernhart of Clairvaux railed passionately against those more interested in things unknown to them on earth than in the heavens.

Why do the monks who should be devoted to their studies have to face such ridiculous monstrosities? What is the point of this deformed beauty, this elegant deformity? Those loutish apes? The savage lions? The monstrous centaurs? The half men? The spotted tigers? You can see a head with many bodies, or a body with many heads. Here we espy an animal with a serpent's tail, there a fish with an animal's head. There we have a beast with a horse in front and a shegoat behind; and here a horned animal followed with hind-quarters like a horse ... In the name of God! If we are not ashamed at our foolishness, why at least are we not angry at the expense?<sup>16</sup>

Well aware of what curiosity could do to cats, the theologians were none too sure that faith would fare any better. Curiosity, they decided, was a bad thing and those who were reluctant to listen to the

message could find it reinforced by excommunication and by burnings at the stake.<sup>17</sup> Even Michel de Montaigne, whose insight into human nature was not hidebound by Church teachings, was no friend to too much inquisitiveness. Having met a man who had lived in the New World, Montaigne was unimpressed: 'I am afraid our eyes are bigger than our bellies, and that we have more curiosity than capacity; for we grasp at all, but catch nothing but wind.'<sup>18</sup> Men who spent their lives investigating obscure questions without properly knowing themselves were fools, he thought.

Montaigne's opposition to curiosity as an intellectual form of escapism had a very different motivation to the theologians', who feared that their entire world might be turned upside down. They were right, of course, as some 300 years later collections of curiosities proved a veritable engine of secularization. Collections of *naturalia*, of animals, plants and minerals, mushroomed around Europe, each one a small encyclopaedia of nature, of knowledge not dependent on the Church. Between 1550 and 1560, the Dutch collector Hubert Goltzius itemized 968 collections known to him in the Low Countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and Italy, while a century later another collector Pierre Borel, boasted of having seen 63 collections. The Venetian Republic alone had more than 70 notable collections within its borders.<sup>19</sup>

Why was it during the sixteenth century that Europe experienced its first explosion of collecting activity, indeed the first collecting activity not limited to a handful of people known since Roman times?

The answer, it seems, lies partly in this world and partly in the next. The worldly explanation is that the expansion of knowledge in the sixteenth century necessitated new responses, new approaches to new phenomena. Scholars across Europe explored the macrocosm through the telescope and the smallest things through the microscope. Technological innovations, such as the printing press and advances in ship building and navigation facilitated trade across the globe and brought more and cheaper wares to Europe. At home, a more sophisticated banking system smoothed the exchange of goods. With trading empires such as the Dutch and Venetian republics came unprecedented wealth, another crucial factor for a flourishing collecting culture. In order to take objects out of circulation and to devote oneself to finding useless things, one has to be able to afford the time and resources to do so. Indeed, collections flourished wherever commerce did.

Together with these earthly revolutions, though, another, less palpable, one was occurring, a change in the perception of death and the material world.<sup>20</sup> Medieval Christians were forced to choose either to love the physical world and the pleasures in it and suffer eternal damnation, or to renounce it in favour of heaven – for little it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul, as the gospel put it. From the perspective of the faithful, death was a transition, a moment of reckoning marked by public spectacle and common ritual. Even for those few able to afford it, accumulating objects without immediate use was acceptable only if they were in accordance with this conception of the world: relics and works of beauty, glorifying God. We do not know of any collection of plants, stones or animals during this time, though individual pieces with seemingly otherworldly properties such as 'dragon bones', usually fossils, often found their way into the treasuries of Church and nobility.

By the increasingly secular and capitalist 1500s attitudes to mortality and to worldly goods had changed. A heightened awareness of the impending end dominated poetry and art, as witnessed by the innumerable *vanitas* still lifes that were part of every wealthy home. In every one of them, the seductive beauty of the here and now is contrasted with its inherent decay. Every blossom was seen

contain the germ of putrefaction, and on every canvas the passage of time was counted down by hourglasses, skulls or burning candles among the sumptuous displays of fruit, precious objects and beautiful flowers. There was no delicate bud without a beetle crawling over it, waiting for it to wither and die. The Elizabethan poet Robert Herrick (1591–1633) encapsulated this sentiment of futility by appealing to his readers to seize the day:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying:  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.<sup>21</sup>

Death is only frightening if it really is the end, and if the dying of the flowers suddenly no longer signifies the eternal cycle of God's creation but irreparable loss. In a world in which death was looming larger, attention was now directed towards the rosebuds themselves, to the material world and to those who inhabited it. Portraiture asserted itself at the same time as the still life. It was this new conception of life that made collecting possible as it was transformed from an indulgence in *avaritia*, one of the seven deadly sins, and from the rejection of eternal life into a search for God through his creation, into practical theology. For men like Aldrovandi, the awareness of the mortality of the world's splendours only spurred them on to make their collections a testament to future generations.



The new breed of collectors had ceased to appeal to the authority of the Church. As cardinals and bishops flocked to see Aldrovandi's dragon and the other wonders he had assembled in his house, they tacitly acknowledged the validity of his secular approach to nature, and one of the most important collections of this time, that of the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, was housed in the Vatican. Nature and the arts had broken free from their theological shackles, and the princes of the Church were eager to be part of the excitement, marvelling at the intricacies of human anatomy during dissections, at the mysteries of magnetism and at beautifully woven garments made of asbestos which would not burn even in the hottest fire – all phenomena their teachings had nothing to teach about.

There were, of course, still the great princely collections, immense treasures such as those owned by August, the Elector of Saxony, by Ferdinand II on Castle Ambras near Innsbruck, and of the great royal houses. Beginning during the 1550s, however, a network of scholarly collections spread throughout Europe, as recorded by the Dutch collector Hubert Goltzius. These scholars were in regul

correspondence with each other and carried on their arguments about the purpose and order of the collections in learned books.<sup>22</sup> Ole Worm in Denmark, universities such as Leiden in the Netherlands, Oxford, the city museum in Basel, Switzerland, and Pierre Borel in Paris all participated in the exchange of ideas and in the hunt for items that were strange, precious and unknown, ranging from bizarrely formed tree trunks to exotic fruits, nautilus shells and fragments of dragons and mermaids.

With the dissemination of collecting as a serious pursuit another phenomenon appeared: collecting became popular among people who had neither great means nor great scholarly ambitions; ordinary people who had a little bit to spare. The Netherlands were an interesting special case. In this republic living from its access to the wider world and off its trading connections reaching from the East Indies to the Baltic Sea, the harbours of Amsterdam and Rotterdam were full of wonderful and exotic things. Captains were under instruction from merchants and collectors to note down and purchase everything they thought worth taking home, and sailors commonly increased their wages by hawking stuffed animals, shells or foreign artefacts around.<sup>23</sup>

In a society without aristocracy many people could partake of this plenty and buy objects that they could store in their cabinets and display to friends, evidence of the wonders beyond the waves and the staggering success their own small and marshy country had made of necessity by turning the hostile sea into its marketplace. There were dealers who specialized in such exotic wares, and apothecaries would commonly store items of curiosity such as Egyptian mummies and dried foreign fish, often leaving it up to chance whether they were to be powdered and taken as medicine or so intact to become part of a collection. When the Leiden apothecary Christiaan Porret died in 1628, the auction catalogue of his shop itemized a cornucopia that would not have been out of place in any cabinet of its time: 'curiosities or rarities and selected delights of Indian and other outlandish shells, horns, shells from the dry land and from the sea, minerals and also strange creatures, as well as some artificially made objects and paintings'.<sup>24</sup>

Long before the famous and fevered speculation on tulips made and broke fortunes on the stock exchange, the admiration of colourful exotica was already established, and the cabinet of curiosities, initially a piece of furniture in which such items could be stored, became a great fashion among the burghers of Dutch cities, so much so that even dolls' houses were not thought complete without their own miniaturized collectors' cabinets complete with tiny sea shells and carvings in drawers no larger than a thumb.<sup>25</sup>



In Amsterdam alone, just under 100 private cabinets of curiosities were recorded between 1600 and

1740, testament to the great prestige collections had acquired and to the availability of objects to fit according to inclination and purse, individual drawers or entire rooms.<sup>26</sup> The cabinet became an integral part of the Dutch interior, beginning with the mahogany cupboard crowned by orient porcelain that can still be found in Dutch houses, and culminating in the famous private museums of amateurs such as Nicolaes Witsen, Bernadus Paludanus or Frederik Ruysch. These cabinets really were microcosms behind doors: while poor weather and Calvinist principle meant that wealth could not and would not be displayed in the street, be it on the façade of houses or in dress, the same restrictions did not apply to drawing rooms, where objects of interest, fine furniture, carpets and of course paintings defined their owners' status and taste.<sup>27</sup>

When an admirer wrote about the famous collection of Bernadus Paludanus that it contained specimens 'Ut alle hoecken clær, des werelts' ('From all corners of the world'), he did not just use a figure of speech.<sup>28</sup> The sheer variety of items collected as early as the seventeenth century is astonishing and reflects the extent of the Dutch trading empire: from Japanese arms, porcelain and calligraphy, items recorded in Dutch cabinets have their origin in outposts of a mercantile world stretching across China and India, Indonesia, Australia, African regions as diverse as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Angola, the Malaccan Islands, the Caribbean, North and South America, Egypt, the Middle East and right up to Greenland and Siberia. This profusion of exotica, and the manner in which it was transported, often brought back by seamen unconcerned about the intricacies of preservation, had curious side effects, such as the long-running debate on whether or not birds of paradise had legs (inspiring the beautiful and tragic legend that they were condemned to keep flying until they died) and colibris were thought to drill their beaks into trees and stay fixed there if they needed rest), as the overwhelming number of specimens to reach Europe consisted only of the body, usually even without tail and head. Shells and coins, being easy to preserve and store, and decorative to boot, were especially sought-after.



While many of these rarities were used for diversion and display, other collectors applied themselves to methodical study and used their collections as repositories of knowledge, comparison and as an encyclopaedia. Jan Jacobsz. Swammerdam (1606–78) wrote a monograph on 'bloedeloo dierkens' ('bloodless little animals' or insects), which appeared sixty years after his death under the title *Bybel der natuure (Bible of Nature)*, a daring phrase in a pious country. Apart from some 3,000 insects, his collection also contained specimens that were right at the borders of current knowledge.

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