

Collecting and Empires

An Historical and Global Perspective

Eds Maia Wellington Gahtan and Eva-Maria Troelenberg

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The study of collecting practices, in conjunction with Museum Studies, are among the sectors of Art History that, in recent times, have benefited most, and at an international level, from a growing interest on the part of the scientific community, confirmed by their consolidated presence also in the curricula of the Social Sciences and the Humanities. These studies have had important political and social repercussions, beyond the borders and academic cultural dynamics, in the definition of national and supranational identities, at the interface of organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), but also within the framework of regional and national policies for the redevelopment of urban profiles, at a global level (think for example of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain).

In close analogy with the international affirmation of the study of collecting practices and Museum Studies, the study of empires, too, within the analysis of transnational or global networks and forms of 'connected histories,' is currently one of the more expanding fields of historical analysis in university curricula.

The evident merit of the sumptuous volume edited by the art historians Maia Wellington Gahtan (Lorenzo de' Medici Institute, Florence) and Eva-Maria Troelenberg (Utrecht University) is to have brought together and integrated these three disciplinary fields of historical enquiry – the History of collecting practices, Museum Studies and the History of Empires – by taking into consideration a very broad diachrony, from Antiquity to the twentieth century, in a global geographical framework.

The volume has its origins in the research activities coordinated by the curators at three institutes located in Florence, the Lorenzo de' Medici - The Italian International Institute, the Florentine branch of the Marist College and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, which resulted in a conference that was carried out in 2017 also with the support and within the framework of the Max Planck

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Research Group 'Objects in the Contact Zone. The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things' (2012-2018).

Eighteen essays, written by an international group of renowned specialists, preceded by a substantial theoretical and historiographical introduction ('Collecting and Empires: An Historical and Global Perspective') traced by the two curators and followed by an 'afterword,' 'The Imperial Style of Collecting,' by Krzysztof Pomian (Director of the Scientific Committee of the Museum of Europe, Brussels, and emeritus research director at the CNRS), guide the reader on a path that unfolds from antiquity to the twentieth century.

For the ancient period, the practices of amassing and collecting artefacts in the Near Eastern World (Alain Schnapp), in the empires of Mesopotamia (Zainab Bahrani), in the context of the imperial expansion in Western Han China (Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens) and the Roman Empire (Caroline Vout), are taken into consideration. The medieval period is addressed through the study of the emblematic collections of Latin epigrams in Papal Rome and the Holy Roman Empire (Nadia Cannata and Maia Wellington Gahtan). The Mexica Empire (Enrique Florescano), the Mughal Empire (Ebba Koch), the Habsburg Empire (Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann) and the Dutch colonial empire (Michael North), all together draw an impressive picture of the plural forms of collecting in four imperial contexts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

The foundation of the Musée Napoléon (the Louvre) as an imperial project (Dominique Poulot), the cross-cultural collecting in early colonial India (Tapati Guha-Thakurta), the foundation of the Swiss Cottage Museum, Osborne House, the royal children's private world during the Victorian rule (Ruth B. Phillips), a critical reassessment of the foundation of the Ottoman 'Museum' inaugurated in 1891, forming what is now known as the Istanbul Archeological Museums (Edhem Eldem), the forms of imperial collecting in the Russian Empire, the attempts of their systematic destruction in the revolutionary framework, followed by projects for their museumization (Katia Dianina), and the foundation of Berlin as a major hub of museums, in competition with London, Vienna and Paris (Eva Maria Troelenberg) define an equally rich portrayal of the plural forms of collecting and their transformation into museums, eventually, in five coeval imperial contexts, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

In the concluding part, the volume takes into consideration some more recent forms of Art collecting, firstly in the Third Reich, including the raiding of the so-called 'Degenerate Art' by the Nazi regime (Christoph Zuschlag), then in post-colonial France, in relation to the definition of the Other, since 1960 onward (Daniel J. Sherman), finally the development of Islamic Art museums, from their foundation within the frameworks of the European Imperialisms to the current 'global empire of capital' (Wendy Shaw).

The scope and eclecticism of the themes dealt with in this volume are happily balanced by a common sensitivity towards ‘de-centering’ the analysis from a strictly Eurocentric perspective to spatial and cultural areas that encompass the whole world, by integrating the nation-state perspective with that of the empires as well as other supranational scales of analysis. Furthermore, in writing their essays, the eighteen authors followed a common intellectual grid that includes the following four clusters of questions: 1. How and in what political contexts did objects travel across the empire? What kind of objects? What constitutes a collection? 2. What is the relationship between objects, power, and knowledge in the empire? 3. What were the most important secondary results/collateral effects resulting from the collections formed and disbanded in the empire? 4. What is the legacy of the collecting practices in the empire with respect to contemporary society and its imperial tendencies, considering both direct/indirect impact and possible parallels? This structure, recognisable in most of the interventions, facilitates readers in the construction of a complex and in-depth comparative framework.

Alongside the unquestionable scientific merits of the volume, made evident by the heuristic breadth of the topics analysed, three further fields of analysis, integrated with each other, could have further enriched it: the analysis of the forms of collecting in the context of the Spanish and Portuguese empires (the first two empires of a literally global reach), the collecting of *naturalia* and the foundation of institutions aimed at their fruition and development, in particular, the botanical gardens. The case of the Iberian empires is exemplary for articulating forms of collecting that did not give rise to the foundation of museums, but which, precisely through the collection of *naturalia*, greatly contributed to the expansion of botanical gardens, in Europe and in the colonies or former colonies in South America. Furthermore, it would be promising to reconsider a well-known and studied case, that of the Medici collecting from the time of the *Principato*, and the subsequent creation in Florence of specific loci of aggregation and exhibition of the collections, in relation to coeval imperial projects. From this perspective, one could study the mutual reverberations between different practices and tastes of collecting at different political scales, from the very lowercase one, but with moments of absolute excellence in Florence, to the much greater political scales of the Spanish, French or Ottoman courts and empires. Through these lenses, the possible osmosis between collecting practices in imperial contexts and those developed in local political realities and vice versa could be observed and analysed. Far from being a criticism to the splendid volume *Collecting and Empires*, this observation is more intended to identify an area of expansion and development for future research in this promising field of enquiry. From a material point of view, the work has a very elegant graphic design, also accompanied by 115 black-and-white images that make it an editorial product of great value and aesthetic impact, which gracefully matches with the scientific one.