Collecting as Identity Creation and Memory Preservation

Isabelle Adams

Student, Agnes Scott College, Class of 2025

Abstract: Adams considers collecting as tools of memory, storytelling, and individual identity. Through the lens of individual identity, memory preservation, and storytelling, collecting becomes a vital part of the human experience.

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Reflective Essay

A few years ago, my mother and I set for ourselves the monumental challenge of cleaning and reorganizing all her dishes. While this might not seem like it would be that difficult, we spent upwards of seven hours just washing dishes. This does not even include the time it took to organize them all. There is absolutely no reason why any household would ever need this many sets of china, but my mother inherited these collections from my grandmother and one of my great aunts. While china is not particularly one of my mother’s passions, she has taken care of the collections in memory of my grandma and aunt, and with the knowledge that one day she will pass them on to me and my sisters. Each time we use the dishes, we are also reminded of our family members, and it is rare that we do not hear a new anecdote about how much they loved visiting garage sales or exhaustively searching for each part of a china set. Similarly, one of my sisters has a veritable jungle of plants that she has collected over the years. Unlike my mother’s inherited collection, my sister has found or grown each plant and takes care of them diligently. Not only is her own room full of plants, but they have spilled out across the entire house so that anyone who visits our house can see her passion for tending plants. Her notorious green thumb is a core part of her identity and if anyone ever is struggling with a birthday or Christmas gift for her, we all know that the safest bet is to get her a new plant.

For as long as there have been people, we have been collecting things. Pretty rocks or shells, dried flowers, and even animal bones made up the collections of our ancestors. Now people collect any number of things from more traditional items such as paintings or rare books to more modern items such as PEZ dispensers, Lego sets, and vinyl records. Some people even collect things digitally through Spotify playlists, GoodReads accounts, and photo albums. While it is very easy to take all these collections at face value, they are not just pretty objects or interesting items. But rather they serve as receptacles of memory, storytelling, and individual identity. There are two main reasons that people collect things: to build their unique identity and to preserve history. My mother and sister are two examples of the difference between them. My mother participates
in archival collecting and my sister uses it to develop her self-definition. This paper uses the ideas of individual and cultural identity as well as memory preservation and storytelling to look at why people choose to build collections of various artifacts and ephemera.

In a chapter of Contemporary Collecting, a book of essays compiled by David Banash and Kevin Moist, Dr. Robert DeChaine says that “every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”1 “KonMarimasu,” a story told in Karen Tei Yamashita’s latest book Sansei and Sensibility, tells the tale of a woman who tries to declutter her life through the KonMari method, only to realize that the ‘junk’ she wants to get rid of is actually steeped in family history and she cannot bring herself to throw away the reminders of her past. The story is particularly interesting because it makes a direct reference to the KonMari method, a system developed by Marie Kondo that is designed to completely declutter a home. Recently the idea of minimalism and decluttering has come into vogue but often at the expense of many people’s collections and family heirlooms. People like Karen Tei Yamashita along with many other authors are pushing back against this trend by reminding people how valuable objects can be in storing memories.

Museums are of course the most well know archival collectors, however, individuals and families also can play a role in preserving specific histories and cultures, and my family is an example of this. In 1895, my great-grandfather was one of the first Presbyterian missionaries to return to Korea. Ever since then, members of my family have lived in Korea and worked in Korean schools and churches. Because of this, there are over a hundred years’ worth of documents and letters that detail their lives and the history they experienced while there including a harrowing evacuation during the Korean War. Multiple family members have taken it upon themselves to serve as collectors of these documents, including my father. Several of my aunts and uncles have donated some of their collections to the Presbyterian Mission Museum, but more of them either want to keep these documents in the family or send them to Korea. This is a great example of a very interesting history that for the most part is only significant to my family, or people doing research on Presbyterian missionaries in Korea. But that does not make it any less valuable or worth preserving, at the very least for future generations of my family.

However, because of the specificity of the topic, it is up to us to preserve what we find important. Countless families throughout history have participated in this work of preserving history by collecting artifacts from their relatives. For some people, these collections may never be viewed by people other than family members, but for others, these collections become invaluable remnants of cultures that are fading away. As globalization continues to endanger cultures and languages, the work of individuals preserving history has become increasingly important not only for academic purposes but for other members of their cultural community. If even one person makes the decision to collect artifacts of a family or culture, it can keep them from being forgotten by the rest of the world. Additionally, Werner Muensterberger, in his book Collecting: An Unruly Passion, defines “collecting simply as the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value.”2 He also goes on to say that for people who choose to collect, the “objects contribute to their sense of identity and function as a source of self-definition.”3 In this day and age where

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1 Moist and Banash 2013.
2 Muensterberger 2014.
3 Ibid.
people often struggle to find their own identity, collecting serves as a way for people to differentiate themselves in a unique way while also fulfilling their own passions.

Through a study of artwork in class, we learned that objects can be so much more than simply something nice to look at. The materials it is made of as well as who views it can completely change a piece’s significance. This idea is equally applicable to the fields of collecting. To the average person, a Lego Minifigure might just be a plastic children’s toy, but to an avid collector, it is a valuable item with an interesting back story and fun facts about it. It is this level of subjectivity that makes collecting so ideal as a means of expressing identity. People often consider objects that are rare to be of greater value. Any number of people collect rare cars, unique pieces of art, or expensive furniture. But that says less about their identity and more about their personal finances. Collecting items that are not inherently valuable but rather have a greater personal significance instead serves as an expression of some detail of a person’s identity.

In recent years, vintage items have become extremely popular along with vintage clothes and antique furniture. Gen Z, in particular, has developed a love of vintage clothing, with many people almost exclusively shopping at thrift stores and building collections of many different clothing items. People do not choose to buy vintage clothing because it is inherently valuable or worth more than clothes from a standard store. Rather they choose to incorporate their sartorial choices into their identity. This example is particularly relevant because not only is this one of the more easily observable collections, but it says a lot about the person. They not only have a good sense of fashion, but they care about the environment and are conscious of their consumption of disposable items. A group with even more incentive to discover their own identity is children. They are still too young to have enough life experience to draw on to form a concrete identity, so they look to other means to do so. Collecting becomes one of the best ways for children to do so with “up to 90 percent of children collecting objects of some kind during childhood”.

This is possibly the purest example of collecting simply for the value that individuals give to objects. It removes financial gain from the equation as children do not have the resources to collect traditionally valuable items, rather they collect what is truly important to them.

A significant set of memories from my time in elementary school surround Silly Bandz. These rubber bracelets were the currency of our school with each person vying to accumulate not only the greatest number of bracelets but the most unique collection of shapes. Trades were carefully organized deals and collections were either displayed by wearing them or if the person had enough, protected by hiding them in their desk. Of course, these bracelets had no real value. Each one was worth at most about 50 cents. But to us, they were of great importance and gave us a feeling of accomplishment whenever we were able to expand our collection. Not only can collecting help a person establish their identity, but it can help them convey it to others. Much like artists who use their work to tell a story, a collection can serve as a physical representation of memories or stories about a person. When displayed in a home or office, these collections can serve as conversation starters. At this point the object becomes worth so much more than it would be on its own, devoid of any emotional connection. Frequent travelers often engage in this type of collecting. They may choose a specific type of object to acquire in every place they go that reminds them of their trip. Many people collect sand, seashells, or even just pretty rocks that each hold a story. To anyone else, these objects would be worthless, but to the collector, they are invaluable. And

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when displayed in a home, they can tell a visual story about the collector’s life.

Collecting is often misunderstood as a hobby for the wealthy or influential, but it is a practice that is a common human behavior. Most children and a large percentage of adults collect some kind of item either with the intention of formulating their own identity or preserving their family or cultural history. When looked at through a lens of individual identity, memory preservation, or storytelling, collecting becomes a vital part of the human experience. In class, we looked at how artists can use their work in a similar capacity to tell stories about themselves or their cultural background, but for people who are not as inclined towards art, this can function in much the same way. A poet may use a book of poems to tell her story, but just as effectively, a collector could use any number of items to do the same. For these reasons, collecting has great significance not only for individuals but for entire cultures and should be encouraged in anyone who is interested.

References


