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Connecting the Dots

Quirky Private Collections Can Seduce



'The Museum of Innocence' in London, (2016). Photo credit: Yunus Kaymaz/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

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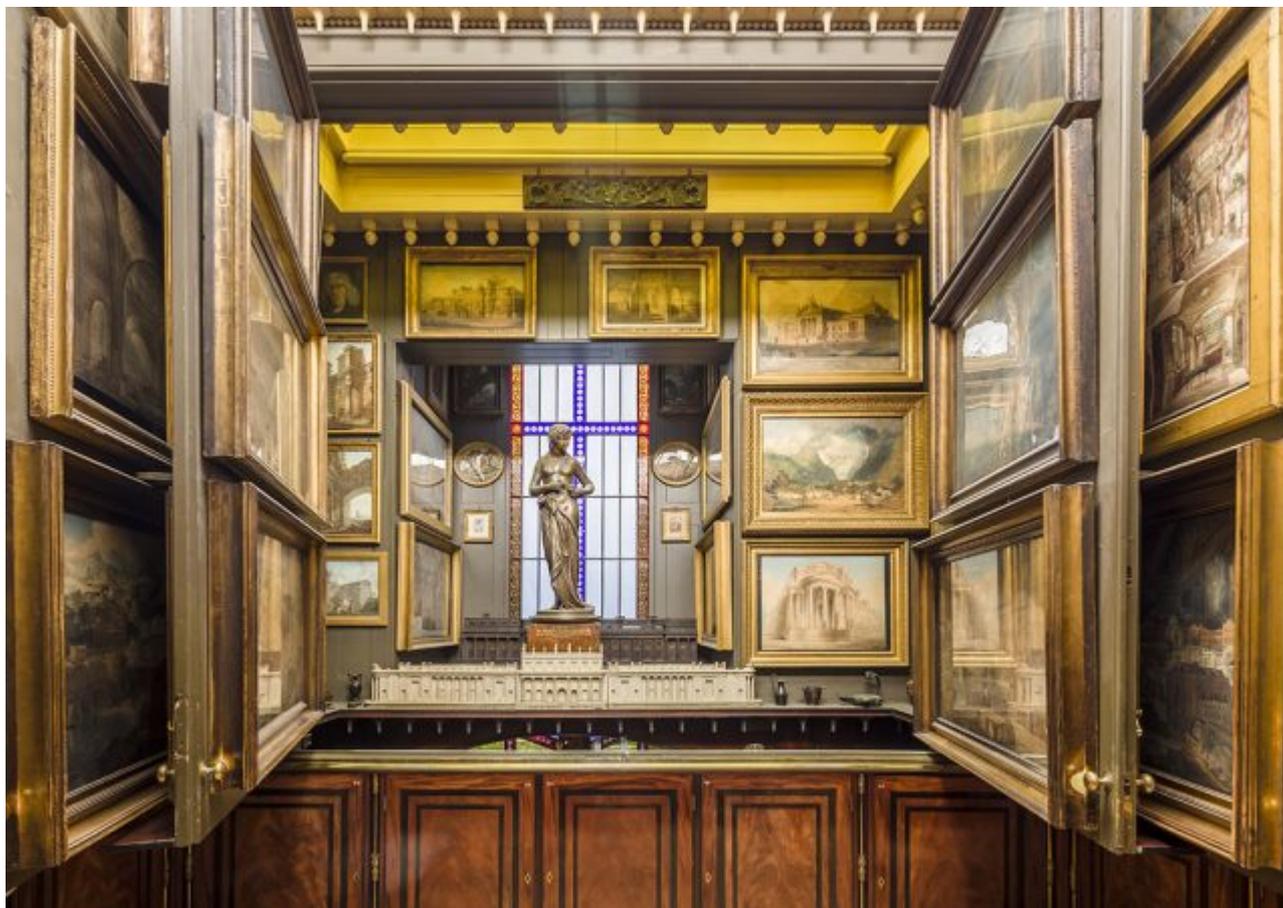
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These days, private collections are often lauded as being of “museum quality”, which usually means that the works on display are part of the current canon. Especially in the contemporary area, this validation is also a signifier that the selection of works in the collection are pretty much by established artists who the market and the broader museum community has identified as being of major importance and impact.

However, I have to say that as a museum director who visits a lot of private collections, I am often seduced by the opposite—by collections that don't mirror those of our public institutions. To a certain extent, the most interesting collections are those based on very particular private, idiosyncratic taste and which show unique methods of discovery by individuals who are looking at art and artefacts differently.

Discovering Undercurrents

It is fascinating when a collector discovers undercurrents between completely different works of art, spanning different epochs, media and meanings. By assembling them and putting them in context, previously “muted” correspondences can come to life in a very surprising way. Sharpening the perception of one artistic object by placing it alongside another object that is completely unexpected, and connecting dots where no dots officially exist other than the collector’s viewpoint—sophisticated or weird—creates new, subjective methods of looking and a revelatory formula to conjure joint relationships. Even when these private collections ultimately become public ones, they maintain a very specific element of “privacy” which makes them so unique.



Courtesy of Sir John Soane’s Museum. Photo credit: Gareth Gardner.

The [Sir John Soane’s Museum](#) in London is a great historic example because its contents do not represent an epoch or a particular time, but first and foremost a particular kind of attitude and knowledge. There’s a philosophy behind the collection about what culture is, what it should do, and how it can open up one’s own perception of what humankind has produced in various arenas.

Even more so, the [Frederic Marès Museum](#) in Barcelona is an absolutely fascinating place with an extraordinary history: Marès was a notorious collector who obsessively assembled very different objects, from walking sticks and cigar banderoles to important sculptures. Despite the abundance of objects (and curiosities), the display creates a very intimate, personal, narrative context. To a certain extent, this institution was the basis of [Orhan Pamuk’s Museum of Innocence](#), which is another prime example of an unusual private collection—both as a book and as a [museum](#) which Pamuk then built in Istanbul based on his own novel of the same name.



Museu Frederic Mares, Barri Gotic, Barcelona, Catalunya, Spain, (2007). Photo credit: Travel Pictures/Alamy Stock Photo.

While the ambition to be different and individual hasn't gone away for today's collectors, one can see a tendency towards uniformity in what is being collected and being perceived as worthy of presenting. This goes hand-in-hand with an art market that has expanded, so collecting has become increasingly professionalized. Information about the most recent trends in contemporary art is so readily available, abundant and transparent that the adventurous part of discovery and the unexpected is getting lost.

The adventurous part of discovery is getting lost

While it is true that focus has shifted to very different areas within our more globalized perception of the art world, we see a lot of specialization happening, which means that makes the collecting is "contained" in a certain sense. Right now, for instance, you see that several major collectors are vigorously focused on contemporary African art, which is an interesting area—and it's revelatory and laudable that this is happening on a grander scale. But what will be important in the long run is how some of these collections can cross bridges and connect artistic output less through the lens of nationality, geography or chronology but through a more complex personal narrative.

Less Traveled Paths

I would encourage all of us to pay more attention to other possibilities and methods. I'd argue that it's less interesting to see a Gerhard Richter painting paired with another Richter painting (abstract or figurative), or hung with a work from the same period made by an artist on the other side of the Atlantic (which is what lots of curators and collectors do now). Mightn't it be more unusual to see that same Richter painting paired with some great stock photography from the period of time in which it was made. It could have a resonance with the work of Richter, and change how it is perceived.

If you're a collector of Karen Kilimnik or Elizabeth Peyton, for example, there might be a certain logic to also being interested in Sèvres porcelain sculpture? Visiting a collector's home and seeing this kind of pairing would give me a deeper understanding of their sensibility and possibly even some of their spleens.



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Artists are usually the best collectors in this context, which is no surprise. What is truly outstanding about Georg Baselitz's collection is not just the works of his contemporaries but his collection of Mannerist Old Master prints and African sculpture. Does he collect these because his painting and sculpture is in direct response to these areas? Not really, but there's

something truly unique there—and certainly interesting correlations can be made between these seemingly different areas of artistic expression. Talk to Jeff Koons about his Old Master paintings collection and what interests him and you can follow an interpretation that is subjective but also lucid—because of his unique eye, experience and perspective.

Right now, the majority of new contemporary collectors probably aren't thinking about connecting dots but are happy to focus on one particular area. The art world has grown so fast and there are so many different kinds of players involved, yet when they go to Frieze Masters or to Tefaf—somewhere that displays of art are more diverse and multi-faceted—they feel refreshed and might feel a different level of distinction.

Needless to say, it can be a big challenge and time investment to specialize yourself, to go deep into a field and develop a special and unique taste. If you're collecting paintings in a highly competitive contemporary market, like that, say, for Mark Bradford, then you are already busy keeping up with that and might not have the interest, time or energy to also go into a completely different (but possibly, in some special way, related) area such as tapestries or weavings or old maps. There is a lot of research and complexity involved in finding out about an area that is not so well developed. Some people just have it in them to look at the world this way: for others, it is an issue of time and interest.

What Do We Get Excited About?

Do we get excited about, impressed by or celebrate the collector who has the best grouping of works by artists who are at the top of the market right now, which everyone else is gravitating towards? Or are we more interested in collecting as a means of not only of developing the best eye for a particular area but also of presenting a certain ideology about how different forms of artistic creation and culture can connect with each other? We have to work together in the art world to influence this.

The desire to mix diverse objects stretches back through centuries. It can be traced back to the idea of the [Wunderkammer](#), or cabinet of curiosities, which were the precursors of our museums today. Developed by aristocrats in 16th and 17th-century Europe, they were encyclopedic assemblies of exotic, special objects from around the world: artefacts; works of art; objects that nobody had any clue what they were; objects that were the result of expert craftsmanship or value; oddities. Their initial intent of assemblies of wondrous, special, exotic objects of all kinds of origins led to a particular presentation style, basically being a microcosm created by the collector, in each case a specific, unique representation of the world.

Our oldest museums, themselves an outcome of the age of the Enlightenment, then changed this style and developed a much more organized, defined, academic and educational way of looking at art and thinking about how to differentiate between the arts and between the art, the artefacts and the natural objects.

Maybe today we should sometimes revert back more to the idea of the Wunderkammer—to be able to grasp the world as a whole again. This could be especially true for some private collectors who know and have seen the world in its many different facets.

There are very different ways of combining interests and going about collecting. Great collections can push the boundaries of art's perception. When curiosity is matched with connoisseurship, people get really excited. Those collections always reveal the most: they make the collectors more transparent as people and they connect dots for us we didn't know existed. We still need more of them.