

## PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Mapping and taking academic turns in collection history studies: Reflections on the issues of the *Journal of the History of Collections*Da Zeng<sup>1\*</sup>, Ruihan Shuai<sup>2</sup>, and Jialin Mo<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Academic Affairs office, Capital Normal University, 100048, Beijing, China<sup>2</sup>Academy of Fine Arts, Capital Normal University, 100048, Beijing, China

## Abstract

This paper translates and collates the contents of all the issues published by the *Journal of the History of Collections*, one of Oxford University Press's academic journals, since its inception in 1989. A detailed analysis of the changes in article topics or themes in the journal is presented, based on which this paper demonstrates that the focus of research in this field has undergone three shifts on a decennial basis. By examining collectors' social identities, motives for collecting, and changes in collection categories, this paper provides significant insights into a theoretical framework that sustains the scholarship. It also provides a preliminary overview of current studies on the history of collections in both Chinese and Western academia, seeking to provide some guidance for future explorations of the scholarship.

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## 1. Motivations for research

This paper is an extension of my previous studies that have reviewed the research results presented by Chinese scholars in their studies of collection history. Regrettably, we still lack a systematic and sophisticated theoretical framework as new research angles and methods have not been accepted by local academia. Collection history studies in China are inclined toward the traditional approaches used in art history studies. In other words, it is more likely for Chinese researchers to focus on how to crystallize the formation of known collector circles and identify their core members, knowing the epochal features, and second-hand literary archives<sup>[1]</sup>. Having said that, by examining specific case studies, such as collectors of the Song Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, and the Republic of China, as well as sorting out primary materials, such as the literary records, diaries, and letters of collectors, some scholars do, to a certain extent, restore the genealogy of collection transfer for some collections.

However, these scholars still fail to avail themselves to new angles and methods that could unearth more information, and their investigation, which is ignorant of spatial development, is often limited to temporal aspects, precluding definite answers to key issues, such as whether or not collector circles remain the core of research while scholarly exploration works toward the division of collection history. This,

consequently, would confuse readers as they are presented with minor details, while the bigger picture is disregarded. Furthermore, Chinese academia often fails to draw a distinction between “collector” and “buyer” despite the fact that they play different roles in certain collecting behavior. Therefore, unless a well-informed theoretical framework is established, it is unlikely that the research into the history of collections can be contextualized in terms of social background, economic environment, market reforms, and the like<sup>[2]</sup>.

In contrast, since the 1980s, there have been attempts to interpret traditional art history studies with “new thinking,” thus forming a preliminary theoretical system for the scholarship. Among them, Francis Haskell stands out from researchers of this generation. His pioneering research on arts patronage and collection tastes has provided a paradigm of how future explorations could be developed. A closer look at his methodology, which is different from traditional research methods, reveals that Haskell’s study of the history of taste, to some extent, takes into account the history of exhibitions, collections, and markets. It reflects that Haskell is no longer restricted to the so-called “universally acknowledged” epochal features. Instead, his methodology shies away from deductive reasoning that uses existing conclusions to find evidence, and he diverts his research focus to case-studies, which to some extent allows him to draw subversive conclusions through general investigation of specific materials<sup>[3]</sup>. As more information of Haskell’s academic career is available, it is now clear that as an editorial board member, he founded the *Journal of the History of Collections* in 1989. The journal has made substantial contributions to promoting the then underplayed collection history studies.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. A look at the changes in research directions by combing through the publications of the *Journal of the History of Collections*

The *Journal of the History of Collections* is now owned by Oxford University Press. Originally, its publication was biannual, but ever since 2012, it publishes 3 times a year. The *Journal of the History of Collections* is dedicated to the investigation and documentation of research into collections. Hundreds of articles regarding the history of collections have been accumulated throughout the 30 years of publication. “Collection” is the main keyword of the journal. Its editorial board has sought to provide a platform where not only specialized disciplines, such as art collection and taste, can be engaged, but practice related to collections can also draw attention and secure multi-thematic discussions. It is clear that the history of

collections has the potential for providing a starting point for research across disciplinary boundaries. At present, the journal has archived articles featured in several specific themes, as shown in Table 1.

Nevertheless, following a comprehensive and detailed Chinese translation of all the issue contents from 1989 to 2021 and a vertical systematization of the titles of all the archived articles in chronological order, it is appreciable that the aforementioned latest research direction has, in fact, undergone three major changes, which can be decennially classified into three stages.

- (1) From its inception in 1989 to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

During this stage, research was dominated by country case studies, and the United Kingdom and the United States remained at the core of research focus. The subject-matter treated in this journal during this period was featured in monks, royal family members, and other aristocrats, such as the House of Medici, the House of Habsburg, the House of Bourbon, the House of Stuart, the House of Romanov, and cardinals. Consequently, practices mainly revolved around the confirmation of the connoisseur circle, which was the core collector group formed by the ruling class. Research interests mainly encompassed the British Museum, Rosenberg Palace, the South Kensington Museum, and the like. In addition, the journal also invited scholars to submit their writings for special issues on topics related to specific museums, including the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford and the Fogg Museum, Harvard University.

- (2) After the year 2000

Regional case studies began to take the center stage, and the scholarship aimed to decenter Eurocentric views. The art scholarship in Asian, Latin American, African, and Eastern European countries and regions, such as India, Palestine, Philippines, Japan, Argentina, Ghana, Ukraine, and Bulgaria, gradually came to the attention of scholars. Moreover, traditional studies during this period were

**Table 1.** Specific topics in the *Journal of the History of Collections*

No.	Themes
1	North American Ethnography in European Collections
2	Art and the Italian Renaissance
3	Jewish Collectors and Collecting
4	Collecting Prints and Drawings
5	Natural History Collecting
6	Art Space
7	Digital GLAM

devoted to the re-excavation of historical turning points that were once overlooked. Groundbreaking research has been done as to the loss of cultural relics of the Winter Palace during the two world wars and communist movements as well as the Nazi-looted cultural relics and artworks that were intended to be displayed in the unrealized Linz art gallery.

(3) In and after the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In this stage, research methods in this field range across disciplinary boundaries, and new approaches are being embraced. For instance, ethnology and ethnography, which have been practiced by archaeologists and social scientists, are now adopted by researchers. The study of collection history, as a specialized discipline, has been augmented by its vertical development, and its research interests have now expanded to include the history of writing, medicine, technology, and biology.

In general, the 30 years of publication by the journal can be categorized into 26 groups, as shown in Table 2.

### 3. Shifts in collectors' identities, motives for collecting, and collection categories

As stated above, all the changes are unfolded in three major stages, of which the underlying causes lie in the most important research subjects in the more recent practices of the history of collections, namely, collectors, collection categories, and motives for collecting.

History tells that ruling-class collectors, for centuries, are the only group that could afford large-scale art collections. However, the extent of recognition a collector receives varies according to the times they belong to. This is due to what the academia refers to as "the iteration of collectors," which can be divided into three major periods. Collectors in the first period often enjoy high social status as members of the royal families, aristocrats, and monks. Collecting, for them, is an act of worship and hedonic gratification, a way of possessing and showing off, as well as a form of embodied esthetics. Collectors in the second period are mainly industrialists, as represented by collecting activities taking place in modern America. These collectors include Carnegie, Frick, Mellon, and Havemeyer. Bankers such as Morgan and Altman are also engaged in collecting. Their motivations for collecting are for charity, upward mobility, and patriotism. The third period is characterized by collectors who may be property developers, tech professionals, luxury giants, and various organizations with display and publicity needs. The purpose of collection has changed into investment diversification, transmission of brand values, communication of organizational values along with internal training (corporate museums and

**Table 2.** Past research categories of *Journal of the History of Collections*

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First stage: From 1989 to 2000

- (1) Country case studies
- (2) Social museums
- (3) University museums
- (4) Private museums
- (5) Renaissance
- (6) Traditional categories of collections
- (7) Artists
- (8) Collectors
- (9) Collector circles

Second stage: From 2000 to 2010

- (10) Regional case studies
- (11) Epochal shifts
- (12) The extension of collection categories
- (13) Newly discovered ancient ruins
- (14) Ethnology
- (15) Ethnography
- (16) Photography and architectural rendering
- (17) The collection of scientific instruments
- (18) Critique of collecting activities
- (19) Reconstructing art spaces
- (20) The history of ornithology
- (21) International cultural heritage preservation
- (22) Modern art exhibitions

Third stage: After 2010

- (23) Ancient writing and epigraphy
  - (24) The history of medicine
  - (25) The history of technology
  - (26) The history of biology
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museums of school history), and responsibility for public education.

As far as the collecting activity is concerned, purchasing artworks that are openly circulated in the market remains one of the most convenient and common ways of collecting. However, there are different control mechanisms that place restrictions on art transactions in different historical periods, regardless in the East or the West. Besides, we should note that cultural relics or art pieces are not only expensive items, but they also require careful transportation, preservation, and maintenance. They endow individuals with enormous social capital exclusive access to art collections in many historical periods. However, as the transformation of social systems gradually changes the pattern of wealth distribution,

the middle and lower classes are no longer confronted with survival challenges. Driven by spiritual needs and consumerism, grassroots collectors have begun to emerge.

The research results presented by the *Journal of the History of Collections* demonstrate that the bourgeoisie, rather than the ruling class, is socially represented as the so-called “big collectors.” In other words, collections used to be monopolized by a few elites, and then competed by many people; now, they are part of cultural consumption accessible to the public. Once, cultural products were exclusive to the ruling class; however, artworks have been transformed into spiritual resources that can be shared with the populace through the hands of private collectors. It is also worth noting that although some collectors are willing to share their collections as public spiritual resources, they, as self-proclaimed intellectual elitists, equate their own preferences with the judgment of esthetic standards. Taste is represented by collection categories, such as books, manuscript, furniture, easel painting, and modern art. Taste standards are determined not only by artists and art dealers, but also by collectors who exert considerable influence. Noticeably, the discursive power of collectors on the esthetic standards of modern art is realized through the expansion of the art market.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, collectors from the United States gradually took over the art market from their European counterparts. In this phase, collectors made significant contributions to the surge in art transactions, and the prosperity of the modern art market in turn promoted the updating of collection systems for collectors. Based on the information collected by Artprice, artworks created by post-war artists dominate the art market in terms of price and auction volume. One reason is that there are only few antiques available in the modern art market. Works by established masters with good quality and clear circulation records are often auctioned at a premium. Another reason is that it takes less time for modern artists to create a larger number of artworks, thus guaranteeing an abundant supply for the growing market. The third reason is that some modernist works have been recognized and collected by mainstream museums, thus endorsing their artistic value.

Post-war and contemporary artworks, especially high-profile art pieces at auction, have enjoyed a relentless rise in popularity that rides on intense media coverage. The high return on investment in leading artworks has attracted public attention, rendering works of art a new type of high-quality assets. For example, families renowned for collecting in modern times, represented by the Rockefeller family, the Guggenheim family, the Lehman family, and the Whitney family, have accumulated insurmountable wealth

due to the Second Industrial Revolution and the booming US economy. Assisted by professionals, their second and even third generation heirs/heiresses have established monolithic systems of collections. At the same time, the emergence of modern art has enabled these families to make a considerable number of purchases at economical prices. There are numerous articles in the *Journal of the History of Collections* discussing how experts in museums or museologists influence big collectors and gradually transform their original collection systems. These collectors no longer conform to European ideals of art; instead, they have accepted modern art. Needless to say, the establishment of collection systems owned by model collectors corresponds to their desire to gain recognition and promotion for their tastes.

Finally, shifts in collection categories are indirect results of the aforementioned changes. At its official website, Sotheby's provides the latest categorization of collectibles, which classifies jewelry, handbags, and shoes as emerging collection categories. In particular, digital collections have become a part of collectors' collection systems in view of technological advances. Therefore, in the context of art scholarship, there are diverse collection categories available for research. The *Journal of the History of Collections* has published papers on coins, Greek vases, skulls, musical instruments, and other collections that were disregarded before, even after 2000. Driven by my own academic exploration, I have created a database of well-known American modern collectors and performed big data analysis and computation. My findings reveal that recent and modern collecting activities feature not only traditional categories, such as works of art by established artists, impressionist art, modern and contemporary art, sketches, watercolors, manuscripts, Chinese and Mexican antiques, and the like, but also new ones, such as music, coins, philately, dolls, celebrity items, photography, and so on. It is appreciable that collection interests change over time.

#### **4. Taking issue with current collection history studies and posing new research angles**

At present, the research scope of collection history studies, as a specialized field of research, has extended beyond art history studies, adding a new perspective on the enrichment of history writing. This is mainly due to the academia's deeper understanding of the word “collect,” which carries multiple meanings, such as gathering, sorting-out, picking, and keeping things as a hobby. In the past, researchers placed a premium on “the act of collecting/accumulating something as one's own possessions” despite the fact that



“collect,” as a word, has many other connotations. Scholars are vulnerable to elitism with an all-pervasive spirit of dominance, in which their individual tastes are valorized as the general guideline for all collecting activities. This tendency undoubtedly hinders the advancement of further research. Broadening research horizons and developing a clear understanding of all connotations of “collecting,” both as a word and a concept, are prerequisites for the realization of an in-depth analysis of documentation relevant to collection history. Switching research vantage points, such as standing in the shoes of the masses or minority groups to appreciate the collecting behavior, is also recommended. Another research angle is to track the circulation of collectibles, which is considered vital for the extension of research on the history of collections.

Research practice has illustrated six new research angles for the scholarship: (1) Collectibles *per se*, images, sources, and contexts; (2) individual or institutional collectors: their motivations, tastes, and values; (3) the establishment of the connoisseur circle: how top collectors motivate other collectors and how collectors within and beyond the circle interact with each other; (4) the establishment of collection systems and specific investment strategies; (5) intergenerational cultural capital inheritance; and (6) the display, transaction, and circulation of pedigree collections. The best solution to the problems inherent in Chinese studies on collection history is to identify the social identities of collectors, their motivations for collecting, and the extent of their influence in this field. Thereafter, scholarly investigations can shift their focus to the authenticity, circulation, and value of collections. In other words, explorations of collectors *per se* rather than collections should be the priority of research on the history of collections. After all, without core collectors, the collector circle would not exist, and the need to evaluate the pros and cons of their collection systems is rendered superfluous. When all is said and done, however, this research is just taking tentative steps toward a theoretical framework that still requires refinement.

Collection history studies share the characteristics of applied research. Our predecessors have already concocted a research paradigm, but there is still room for improvement with interdisciplinary input. The restoration of specific historical scenes, in particular, requires techniques drawn from various disciplines, including history, statistics, geoinformatics, and computer science, not to mention case inspection and supplementation based on new supporting materials. Materializing this will be of great benefit to the development of this field.

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## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

## Consent for publication

Not applicable.

## Availability of data

Not applicable.

## Endnote

- 1 Surely, there have been earlier periodicals that have published research on art history and collection history; for example, the *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*. However, they are far less specialized than the *Journal of the History of Collections*; therefore, these journals and/or magazines are not of interest to this paper.

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