

Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-300-12493-4. 386 pp., 52 col. illus., 145 b. & w. illus. £45.

As readers of this journal need no reminding, research into the growth and development of museums and the history of collecting has grown apace in recent years. But the explosion of interest in all aspects of the museum world has produced a literature that tends towards the particular rather than the general. Although a number of scholars have reflected on museum culture in its widest sense, offering theoretical and critical readings of the collecting impulse, a large part of the new research has been preoccupied with case studies, exhuming the histories of individual collections, institutions and individuals to revise or question received understandings and, in some cases, to bring neglected examples to scholarly attention for the first time. Likewise, although the last decade has seen the publication of handbooks in museum studies, providing edited texts of historically significant documents for the history of collecting, the selection of materials in these volumes necessarily provides a discontinuous experience for any reader wishing to understand the history of collections in the west as a whole. For a general overview, Kenneth Hudson's valuable *Museums of Influence* (1987) provides a more rounded historical account of the development of museums, focusing on thirty-seven institutions in thirteen countries, with most of its examples founded in the last two centuries. But much new research has been conducted since Hudson's book was published and what was badly needed was a new history, informed by the scholarship published over the last twenty years and providing a fuller description of

collecting and collections. Arthur MacGregor's new account is that book and in a very real sense it marks the coming of age of museum studies. For the first time we now have in one volume a well-informed historical survey of the growth of collecting in the west.

MacGregor's task is a daunting one for, despite our accumulating knowledge of collections and collectors, the field is still not fully explored and its landmarks are susceptible to reworking or even demolition by new research. While some of the narrative offered here may eventually need revision, MacGregor's impressive knowledge ensures that his account is informed throughout by the latest developments in scholarship. As noted in the Introduction, not every collection included here was influential, but less well-known examples are valuable precisely because their formation or display helps to encapsulate some of the wider issues with which MacGregor is concerned. Moreover, tracking the transition from private collection to corporate institution allows him to say valuable things about the differing roles of each. In place of a monolithic account of the (typical) collection, museum or collector, we are treated instead to a subtly woven narrative that allows differences to register.

MacGregor is clear, however, that he cannot offer a comprehensive history: his focus is western and it ends in the nineteenth century. His first chapter begins with accounts of collecting in the classical world and moves briskly through medieval collections to the rise of the *Schatzkammer*, but in only ten pages this can be no more than an appetizer for what is to come. It is with Chapter Two, on cabinets of curiosities, that MacGregor gets properly into his stride, synthesizing a large body of scholarship into a very engaging narrative that ranges across Europe and Russia, highlighting the quirky as well as the studious. The chapters that follow cover respectively collections of art, the natural world, anatomy, antiquities, science and technology from their Renaissance origins to the mid-nineteenth century and demonstrate, as before, a wide familiarity with an extensive array of examples. The book's final chapter, 'The Museum Comes of Age', looks at the museum world in the later nineteenth century, recapitulating the topics of the previous chapters.

Stopping at that point is, perhaps, the only weakness of the book, for it means that ethnographic collections do not receive their own chapter. Even accepting that such collections grew relatively slowly towards the

comprehensive displays of the later nineteenth century and afterwards, and therefore do not follow the same narrative arc as other collections, the issues raised by them have proved to be of urgent interest to us today. The occasional mention that is made of them here only excites regret that MacGregor did not attempt a survey of their beginnings and their development towards the establishment of the specialist departments in London, Paris, Dresden, Berlin and elsewhere.

With the exception of one, which seems slightly out of focus (Fig. 8), the illustrations are all of a very high standard and are placed very helpfully in the text, especially those showing the disposition of a collection or recording its visual impact. Yale University Press has again demonstrated why it is one of the few academic publishers who can be relied upon to take images seriously as contributors to scholarship. This highly impressive book deserved nothing less.

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