
GOOD COLLECTORS MAKE SUPERIOR CURATORS



By

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In the course of my work with the Council of Museum Anthropology committee charged with reviewing the needs of training for curators of anthropology, I have been impressed by the connection between the general paucity of research in non-archaeological material culture and the training of curators. Curators of ethnographic collections¹ in the large majority of cases, do not do collection related research, and many do not even make collections.

Insofar as these curators perform the institutional tasks of exhibit and public work, they are fulfilling an educational purpose, which their university counterparts fulfill in the teaching of courses. Their immediate audiences differ but the educational task is a purpose they have in common. But what of their research? Is there to be no distinction between the research done by the university and museum anthropologists? At present no requirement of subject specialty is made when a curator is hired. Yet we do make stipulations that a curator of collections of a given geographic area be a specialist in that area. Why is it not also reasonable to stipulate as an additional requirement for a curatorial appointment that a scholar also be a specialist in the field in which museums have their distinctive obligation, namely material culture?

The obvious scarcity of material culture specialists among anthropologists is no doubt largely to blame for the frequent non-observance of such a requirement. Curators must be chosen from the available pool of anthropologists.² The question, then, is how to increase the number of good and appropriately specialized anthropologists in this pool. To this end, I offer the following suggestion, which should have as a desirable side effect, the improvement of the quality of collections as well as an increase in the pool of potential curators; all graduate students who intend to do fieldwork should be encouraged in, and given credit for, the making of ethnographic collections which are systematic and well documented. Such collections might even be purchased by university museums, or, if none are responsive, by larger ethnographic and natural history museums. I must point out that huge sums of money are spent by museums for material purchased through art dealers. For example, the Brooklyn Museum spent \$350,000 over the last seven years from one fund alone, to purchase "primitive art" from art dealers.³ Think of the collections -- systematic and documented -- which might be made for such sums as this, were monies to be earmarked for subsidizing anthropologists to make collections in areas where they intend to do fieldwork. Even expeditions, specially formed for the sole purpose of making collections, could be subsidized in this way. The material obtained would also be far more valuable than that purchased through art dealers. And, just as important, such purchases would not have the deleterious side effect of inflating the value of bastard objects.

I have a suggestion for the role which the Council for Museum Anthropology might play in this encouragement of scientific collecting and thereby of training potential curators. The Newsletter might be used to identify persons who are doing or planning to do fieldwork in a particular area who would be interested in making a collection

for some museum for a sum reasonably close to cost. The Newsletter might also (as with job placement ads) identify museums which would be in a position to commission particular kinds of collections. All particulars and logistics of the purchase and the reviewing of qualification of all parties involved would be left to the participants, but the CMA could serve the role of making these parties known to one another.

Making a collection is of potential benefit to collector as well as museum, even beyond the training component. The purchase of local crafts can be a way of repaying informants, even a whole community, for general assistance and hospitality. Such an opportunity is especially welcome where there is no expectation of piecemeal payment for information and/or where it would be inadvisable to establish such an expectation. Goods of interest to museums frequently include objects with no market value (i.e., objects beyond their prime, showing heavy use; objects with no tourist aesthetic appeal, etc.), thus offering additional income, even if only temporary, to a community.

Making a collection is frequently an easy, non-threatening way to begin establishing rapport in a community. The process of providing good documentation for a collection is likely to yield information of value to almost any study. Students doing fieldwork for a doctorate may thus find that taking on a commission to make a collection is a useful way to help subsidize their fieldwork.

This is not to say that everyone and anyone who ever makes a collection should have to study it, or work in a museum. But if the art of making collections were made a part of the field training of graduate students, there would be more people who would be involved with the study of material culture in a significant way. Furthermore, anyone who has made a collection, documented it, and transported it from the field (and through the export bureaucracy -- for those whose collections move across international boundaries) would have a greater appreciation of the time and labor that goes into the making of a collection, and thus would be likely to take better care of the collections under his or her charge, than one who has no such personal experience. Curatorial neglect is most virulent where curators have lost (or never had) a field sense of the sources of objects.

I offer the example of Curt Nimuendaju, who did an enormous amount of ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, on many tribes taking in all aspects of their cultural and social life, during the first half of this century. He also made collections. The value he placed on material culture is evident in his published works and in these collections -- even though he never studied them per se. The difficulties of travel and of the transport of these collections were made quite explicit in his correspondence.⁴ I have no doubt but that had Nimuendaju been a curator, he would have been a good one, and in large measure this would be because he would have been capable of appreciating the considerable personal effort that the making of good collections demands.

At present, both travel and the transport of materials are easier than in Nimuendaju's day, even in areas of the world off the beaten track. But physical and logistical difficulties do still exist; and (in addition, as though to fill a vacuum) are augmented by the problems which have increased in recent years, surrounding the purchase and transfer of collections across international borders.

The new laws, which are in large measure meant to prevent the alienation of what has come to be viewed (however half-heartedly or belatedly by the originating state) as national treasures, must now be taken into account in any plans to make and transport

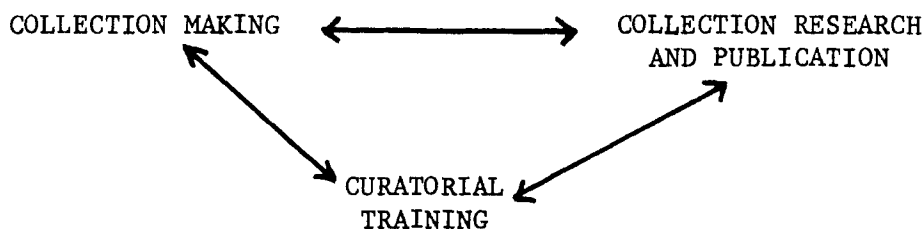
collections. So, although the increasing development of remote areas offers easier access and transportation, the skills and knowledge of diplomatic and legal factors have become more complex and necessary. Thus, the substantial expenditure of time and energy (not to mention money) involved in the making of collections is not changing, and curators can still be judged on the strength of their commitment to that task.

In addition to this proposal to stimulate the growth of curatorial skills among graduate students, I also suggest that museums begin to monitor, and be encouraged to make some disclosure of at regular intervals, the nature and sources of collections which they acquire and that they in some way match this against the total number and sources of collections offered to them during a given period of time. The hope would be that we might be able to document progress in reducing the present level of transactions between museums and people or organizations who buy and sell objects as a business. At the same time we might begin to identify, on an area by area basis, particular cultures and kinds of materials which are in most need of attention by anthropologists making collections.

The availability and continual active acquisition of research worthy collections cannot but have the effect of influencing students to utilize these collections and to emulate the anthropologists who made them. We should also see an increase in publications on material culture, as a logical outgrowth of this process.

This is evidently a feedback process, with the making of collections, collection use in published research and the training of curators, all linked together (see Figure 1). It is my opinion, that the most advantageous point to begin is with the making of collections. If there is, as some have asserted, an "untrainable" component to the superior curator, nevertheless relevant experience offers the best opportunity for individuals to acquire the "untrainable." I would suggest that the making and utilizing of collections in some significant way, offers such critical experience. Therefore, let us begin our training of good curators of anthropology by providing them with encouragement and the means for making good collections.

Figure 1



Notes

¹In this discussion, I am addressing the ethnologists and not the archaeologists whose work with collections is undisputed and who have moreover attempted to fill the ethnographic vacuum through their efforts in ethnoarchaeology.

²One of the results of the questionnaire circulated by this committee on the subject of preferred training for curators of anthropology, was the clear preference for candidates with a Ph.D. in anthropology.

³New York Times, Wednesday, March 28, 1978 p.C28.

⁴The following letter was written by Curt Nimuendaju to Fritz Krause, then of the

Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig, on 13 May 1929. It is presented here verbatim as the best way to convey the spirit of the man, something of the nature of his task, and also the important role which museums can play in aiding such dedicated efforts. (Translation from German, by Karin Benthin and the author.)

(São Luis, Maranhão 13 May 1929)

Dear Professor:

When I returned yesterday to São Luis/Maranhão, I found both your letters, of January 26 and March 6, for which I thank you very much.

In the meantime my assistant in Pará has informed me that the boxes containing the Apinaye collection, which I some time ago sent down the Tocantins, have arrived without ostensible damage. The same is true for the Gavião and Timbira collections which I had sent via the River Grajáhu to Maranhão/São Luis.

However there were considerable difficulties with the transport of the Canella collection, especially because of the large number of full-body masks. We needed more than a dozen Indians to carry them on poles the 78 kms. from the Indian village of Ponto to the town of Barra do Corda.

I went ahead by horseback but waited in vain for the Indians to arrive. Finally one of them arrived and explained that with the masks they could not cross the River Ourives which was overflowing because of the rains. In this devastating weather I sped back that night the 30 kms. to the Ourives River, where the Indians in the meantime had started to build a raft to take the masks across. It was hard work, but finally we succeeded, however my health took a heavy beating. When everything was finally in Barra do Corda, no motorboat wanted to take on the load, so that it was stuck there for a month. In the meantime, my state of health worsened slowly but surely, without me being able to do anything about it.

Finally on the 3rd of May I succeeded in loading the collection onto a small steamboat and the next day we went down the Mearim River. On the 8th of May we took on firewood in Bacabal. The village looked interesting to me, and I actually did find an old Indian settlement on the bank of the river, where I rooted out of the black soil a few pot sherds and half of a stone axe. This was my last act of endurance, however, because I could not bend over anymore. The day after the next, when the steamboat was in Victoria I again went looking for traces of settlements, I collapsed on the way. I made it back on board with the greatest difficulty, and could not get up for the next several days.

Yesterday we arrived in Maranhão/São Luis. Even today it was impossible for me to send off the collections. I'll see if I feel better tomorrow.

Around the 20th of May I will go with the collections to Pará. In what condition I get there we will have to see. It seems that my right kidney was adversely affected during that terrible night on the Ourives. Besides, I'm suffering from an infection on the inside of my upper eyelids which is a very common illness among the Indians and which I contracted in the Indian village of Ponto. Thirdly,

I also twisted the ring finger of my right hand in February when I ferried my animals across the river. Until this very day it's been impossible for me to straighten it out.

You can probably understand that under these circumstances I do not start my return home in especially good spirits.

I hope that you do not expect the humanly impossible of me, that is, that after my arrival in Pará to immediately and promptly take care of the last part of my responsibilities: inspect, cataloguing, packing and shipping the collection. If you do not come to assist me, and that means immediately, I do not know how I will be able to finish the last part of my work for I am at the end of my ropes.

When, in Grajahú with insufficient funds, I did not abandon the work, but decided to use the remaining money for the further exploration and utilization of that field location, I did that trusting that you would see the value in that decision and would not let me down in the present difficult situation.

I'm looking forward to your reply with understandable anticipation and remain until then your devoted,

Curt Nimuendaju.



We Get Letters...

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The article "Turmoil" which appeared in the last issue of the CMA Newsletter attracted interest from the Director of the Florida State Museum, Dr. J.C. Dickinson. In addressing several issues concerning the article, a specific point needs attention. Dr. Dickinson points out that the cancellation of the Association of Systematic Collections Meetings at the San Diego Natural History Museum was lacking truth in some of the reports which became public. 1) "The Association of Systematic Collections, Inc. issued a formal apology to the Director and Board of Directors of the SDNHM for its action in moving its annual meeting to another institution." 2) The SDNHM's Director requested that the ASC appoint a committee to examine whether that institution was no longer eligible for membership in ASC. 3) The committee included Dr. Dickinson as Chairman, and two other directors of national museums.

In summarizing Dr. Dickinson's committee memorandum to Dr. David Bates, President of the Association of Systematic Collections, Inc., they found that the SDNHM fulfilled requirements for membership. This was based on a study of its collections and general operation standards which found the collections and quality of professional and technical staff to be well above average by national standards. The committee was impressed by the exceptional responsiveness of the staff to numerous requests for service from organizations and the public at large.

The CMA Newsletter thanks Dr.'s Fenton and Dickinson for their letters and comments.