

Peeping into the Curious Space of the Vitrine

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INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for my art practice comes from collections, those of museums, eccentric 'collectaholics', or merely the accumulations of everyday life. From these, I seek to create installations for museums and galleries which stimulate curiosity and imagination through the juxtaposition of objects.

From childhood, we begin to collect, whether stamps, plastic toys or leaves and this most primal urge remains with us throughout our lives. At its base level we use collecting to recall memories of experiences, events even facts. But it is how they are categorised and displayed that stimulates our interest, imagination and appetite for a deeper understanding.

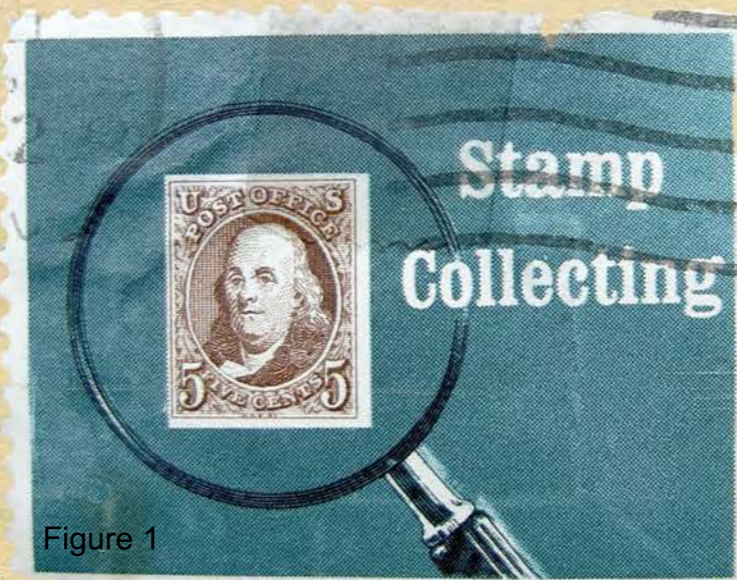


Figure 1

This paper investigates how museums have evolved into educational establishments, with less emphasis on their role as a place of wonder, and how artists have appropriated the concept of the vitrine, or glass cabinet, to endow the ordinary with a sense of fascination, authority and worth.

The necessity for cataloguing objects by genre ultimately defines how they are grouped for presentation. Nineteenth century museums frequently copied methods of display from the fashionable new department stores and the glass cases and overhead lighting with goods arranged in attractive thematic displays, were all concepts appropriated into the museum environment.



Figure 3

METHOD

Mark Dion is an artist who combines the roles of collector, curator and scientist in his practice. By taking his installation 'Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy' (2005), a giant vitrine containing an office furnished in the style of an academic's study as a starting point, we peep back in time into dusty cabinets, through a variety of containers, to end with Pinterest galleries, where anyone with access to a computer can become a curator of their own virtual museum, collecting categorising and sharing ideas with complete freedom from critique or control.

We scrutinise the work of the Surrealists, a group of artists who embraced the subconscious in their work, we look at how the juxtaposition and association of objects from different genres can stimulate the imagination and curiosity and give the familiar a sense of the eccentric, uncanny and uncomfortable.



Figure 4

Connections are made between the process of taxidermy and the preserved body of philosopher Jeremy Bentham, of display mannequins and the Keinholz' installation showing the prostitutes of Amsterdam, displaying themselves in brothel windows.



Figure 5

BACKGROUND

Since the Renaissance, collectors have created "Cabinets of Curiosities" to contain their most wondrous objects, books, maps and artefacts from the manmade and natural worlds.

Installed in what would be considered today as a random selection, they were arranged to impress, delight, and educate friends and visitors.



Figure 2

Over time, these cabinets were broken up and dispersed into new collections, what we recognise as today's museums.

CONCLUSION

The museum is a place to view objects from other times and worlds. Today, with affordable travel and increased leisure time, we can visit previously inaccessible parts of the world. Globalisation and access to the internet has diminished the power of objects to seduce and amaze.

The dilemma experienced by today's curator is to create a vitrine containing a juxtaposition of objects which may educate, deceive or confuse. We may form opinions based on carefully crafted labels and descriptions but in our thirst for knowledge we should not quench the curiosity and imaginations that will lead us into the worlds of the future.