Collecting then and now

The English and some other collectors

Frank Herrmann

This paper sets out to show the generosity of spirit, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, with which collectors in England enriched the country’s museums. This was by piecemeal donations, as well as by the endowment of newly founded establishments, housing entire collections. As far as one can judge today, it was much more often a case of philanthropy than self-gratification. With a few major exceptions, it continued on a much reduced scale in recent times. The mood has changed among some giants of collecting, often those with exceptional commercial talents, for whom self-gratifying philanthropy—and tax advantages—are often the order of the day. This has been particularly true in America, where an extraordinary shift to collecting ‘contemporary’ art has until very recently dominated the scene. Self-gratification was certainly part of that pattern.

‘Between philanthropy and self-gratification’ is a particularly apposite theme to consider in terms of the history of collecting. But there is another most important element which we also need to consider, and that is generosity—an essential attitude of mind needed to render philanthropy possible.

What are the options for disposal available to an active collector, usually towards the end of his life? He can re-circulate at auction what he has assembled, or leave everything to his offspring. He can create a large endowment and fund the establishment of a museum, or simply donate his collection to an existing institution if it contains sufficient material not currently represented in that museum. He can split up his collection and give it away to all and sundry or, simplest of all, he can leave it to his executors to cope with the problems of disposal, but that usually means no philanthropy and certainly no self-gratification. There are innumerable variations of these alternatives. Let us consider some of them in detail.

First, as we suggested, our collector can sell his whole collection by auction. Many collectors do. It is a case of re-circulation of rare items. Basically, it is also what keeps the auction houses going. If what he has is important enough, the collector will get an entire catalogue to himself: it is a memorial to what he has achieved. Or he might get a small named part of a general catalogue as ‘the property of Archy Lloyd-Baker’, with a few lines of biographical information. Or, the more usual but anonymous description, at least in the UK, is that items in his collection will be headed with the wording, ‘the property of a gentleman’. Probably the most celebrated recent example of a collection achieving immortal status through publicity promoting a single-owner dedicated catalogue was the collection of Impressionist and modern art belonging to Victor Ganz (1913–87), an American manufacturer of costume jewellery. Not a wealthy man, Ganz had assembled his 115 items over many years, with astonishing judgement of future taste, for a mere $2 million. It fetched $206 million at Christie’s in 1997. Incidentally, few collectors sell their collections privately.

Secondly, a collector can leave the whole bang shoot to his offspring. If they are really interested, which is not often the case, they will add to it; but more likely they will keep it for a while and hope it will increase in value as time passes, and then sell it. The disadvantage (in the UK at any rate), unless the collector has gifted it formally seven years before his demise, is that death duties will be payable and, what is worse, the collector cannot keep his collection in his own house during those seven years.

Thirdly, if the collection is big and important enough, the collector can make a substantial endowment for a new museum in its own right, and hand it over to his local municipal or some other authority. There are dozens of cities in Britain that are the proud...
possessors of such institutions, the gifts of great industrial patrons: the motive in each case was the desire by a local boy made good to put back into his community something of what he had taken out: as a manufacturer of say, bowler hats or boots, or as an ironmaster. This was a very usual pattern in the 1860–1914 era: examples are the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, the Harris Museum in Preston, the Usher Gallery in Lincoln, the Tate Gallery in London and, more recently, the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. There are over thirty such institutions around the country. Although it sounds like self-glorification, it was more often a case of genuine benevolence, for acquisition budgets were tiny or non-existent.

The fourth option—probably the most common—is to break up the collection and give it away piecemeal to friends, relations and, above all, to museums. Sir David Wilson, a recent director of the British Museum, wrote in his highly important and unusually candid book, *The British Museum. Purpose and Politics*:

The importance of gifts or collections to the [British] Museum cannot be underestimated. [He might equally have said overestimated.] Since the foundation of that Museum, the British have been singularly generous in this fashion. A recent exhibition of the major donors to the Louvre was accompanied by a catalogue which listed all the benefactors of that great museum—nearly 2,700 in all. The British Museum has probably had a hundred times that number. Choosing two years at random (the calendar years 1885 and 1980), the Museum received a total of 107 major donations and 832 minor ones, many of which—in both cases—were multiple gifts.

No self-glorification! The sole tribute consists of the name of the donor, in a very small font of type, on the exhibition label. Knowing that their gift is in good company is enough for many collectors.

In contrast, it is interesting to consider London’s other great museum, the Victoria and Albert, in the same context. A very large proportion of its most important exhibits stem from a single source, a man called George Salting. He was born in Australia in 1836 and died in London in 1909. Educated at Eton and Sydney University, he settled in London in early mid-life. Of immense wealth, inherited from his father, he was said to have lived on the interest from the annual interest of his fortune. He devoted his entire life to collecting every conceivable form of work of art. The V&A catalogue of his donations said: ‘Gifted with great natural taste and flair for fine things, his habits gave him the opportunity of studying the best examples of almost every category, and since his means permitted him practically unlimited scope [to buy things], he became that rare phenomenon, a collector of the finest things with an appreciation for all.’

He was, of course, much encouraged by the director of the day, Arthur Skinner. There were nearly 5,000 items in his collection, and since he lived in chambers of no great size in St James’s Street, there was an unceasing stream of items moving to South Kensington from 1874 onwards when the Museum started to become Salting’s storehouse.

It was indeed a case of riches beyond avarice. The range is astonishing by today’s standards. It is listed in the V&A catalogue in sixty-five categories, from Greek and Roman antiquities to Chinese and Japanese porcelain and pottery, from swords to ivories, from leatherwork to miniatures. A recent author has described it as ‘… one of the most munificent and splendid benefactions ever bestowed on the Museum’.

At Salting’s death, much of it stayed where it was, but a huge quantity of his prints and drawings also went to the British Museum and many paintings to the National Gallery. What was left over, Salting bequeathed to his niece, Lady Binning, who lived in the delightful seventeenth-century Fenton House in Hampstead. She continued collecting in her own right and eventually left her house and its contents to the National Trust: second-generation philanthropy, and no one has ever accused Salting of self-glorification.

Between the First and Second World Wars, there developed a small group of specialist collectors in the UK that became known as ‘The Dragons’. They were pioneers in assembling rare oriental ceramics. In life, they were bankers, rich merchants and lawyers, many of whom had spent long periods in China and the Far East, but in their own field they became devoted scholarly researchers, and their collections are scattered throughout the British Isles. The most celebrated of these men was George Eumorphopoulos (1863–1939). Much of his collection was sold at Sotheby’s in 1940, just as France was collapsing under the German onslaught. Many of the bids were the last messages from France to reach Britain. A most modest man, he did not seek self-glorification, but almost every object from his vast assemblage of ceramic items that has reappeared on the market now fetches a thousand times what it did then, and his provenance is the highest encomium available.
Sir Percival David was a contemporary of Eumorphopoulos and had also spent much of his career in China as a banker. He again was of celebrated modesty, and left his collection of some 1,400 items, *en bloc*, which included many items from the Chinese Imperial family, to London University, where it formed a museum of its own in Gordon Square (sadly, now to be closed: the contents will be transferred to the British Museum).

Two other collectors of the same generation in a category of their own are of vital importance to us. The first is Samuel Courtauld (1876–1947), a man whose glorification has been cast upon him by others. After earlier interests, Courtauld’s primary pursuit as a collector concentrated on the work of the Impressionists. He very rarely sought or took advice from others, and steered his own boat. He was collecting their work at a time, we must remember, when in Britain it often met with indifference, or indeed downright hostility. Courtauld’s aim was to reverse this attitude. As early as 1923, he gave a substantial fund to the Tate Gallery to launch a trust with which the trustees could buy whatever they wanted. They were even permitted to exchange certain paintings for others if they no longer considered them a good purchase. What they did buy in the early years were twenty-three paintings by Renoir, Monet, Manet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Seurat, Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, and others of similar stature. Later, Courtauld and his friend, Lord Lee of Fareham, decided that it was time to launch an institution for the study of the arts, and provide a house for it, which became the Courtauld Institute. Lee was another enthusiastic collector, who nearly beggared himself by giving away his first collection, as well as Chequers, as the country seat for Britain’s Prime Ministers. At the end of his life, as a final gesture, Courtauld left his own paintings to the nation, where they now form an unforgettable sight in Somerset House.

In this category of the greats among collectors, there is another name that receives little attention today. This is Edward Cecil Guinness, the 1st Lord Iveagh (1847–1927), of the brewing family. In 1925 he bought Kenwood House, a magnificent mansion—the original building much improved by Robert Adam in 1767—together with great stretches of parkland in what is now virtually central London. There had been a threat of developing it all as building land.

He then installed his own magnificent collection of British and European art (sixty-three paintings in all), which included a Rembrandt self-portrait, Vermeer’s *Lady with a Lute*, a couple of Guardis, three Bouchners, two portraits by Van Dyck, as well as a host of Gainsboroughs and Romneys. He died only two years later, and left the hundreds of acres of grounds, the house and its entire contents, as well as an additional seventy-four acres of land, to the nation. The land alone represents an incalculable fortune by today’s standards.

Bequests on this scale have become rare in the UK in the last fifty years. Taxation has taken its toll. But one has only to think, on the one hand, of Robert and Lisa Sainsbury’s immense collection, ‘A rare Continental fusion of ancient civilisations and modern masters’, as James Stourton has labelled it in his recent magnificent volume *Great Collectors of our Time*. The Sainsburys gave their collection to the University of East Anglia in 1973. They housed it in a stunning building, designed by Norman Foster, which the Sainsburys also provided, and which opened in 1977.

The founder of this institution, Sir Robert Sainsbury, set out his philosophy both for the building of his collection and for the form in which he chose to expose it to a wider audience. In a lecture given at the Courtauld Institute in 1977, he said:

I never regarded myself as a collector in the most usually accepted sense of the word—that is to say, I have always refused to acquire something merely because it filled a gap, or added to the representations of some particular art form. Rarity, as such, has had no attraction for me. If asked what I am looking for, I always say ‘I am not looking for anything’. On the contrary, I have spent my life resisting temptation. For although denying that I am a collector, I have to admit that, first as a bachelor and then jointly with my wife, I have, for over forty years, been a passionate acquirer …

In the same lecture, Sir Robert explained the reason for establishing a ‘Centre for the Visual Arts’ rather than a straightforward museum or gallery: ‘It is because we wanted to give some men and women—and who better than undergraduates in a School of Fine Arts—because we want to give them the opportunity of looking at works of art in the natural context of their work and daily life …’

On the other hand, there is the superb Burrell Collection in Glasgow, a little similar to the Salting Bequest in its multitude of interests. It is also housed
in an enlightened piece of architecture. Both collections prove that the spirit of philanthropy at its highest level is not dead.

However, there is always someone who carps: Marcia Pointon takes a contrarian view in *Art Apart*, a book she edited in 1994. She states quite categorically in her introduction: ‘The authors of this book reject the history of the selfless generosity of a series of great men [in giving to museums].’ She was the Professor of History of Art at the University of Manchester, and concerned with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European visual culture. She was aggressively involved in museology, a very academic approach to what most of us take for granted. This is a very fundamentalist outlook: she would regard the study of collecting as a mere symptom of a very much wider area of analysis. Her book is a record of a 1994 seminar of like-minded scholars.

Another instance of a regrettable outlook occurred in a *Code of Conduct for Museum Professionals* of the Museum Association, where we can read the following guidelines: ‘Museum professionals are advised to eschew personal collections, mindful that the best opportunity for an object to be preserved for the public is in a museum.’ An unexpected stance when one considers that some of the greatest museum curators of the past, such as Augustus Wollaston Franks or Sir Hercules Read, both greatly enriched the British Museum holdings out of their own pockets. And across the Channel, Wilhelm von Bode was not only the first man to cultivate a clutch of putative donors, the ‘Friends of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum’ in Berlin, but also left his own vastly impressive aggregation of Renaissance treasures to that institution.

Yet, self-aggrandizement is very much with us today. Among the recent Titans of collecting, there is a quartet of highly competitive and vastly wealthy individuals, each endowed not only with a most perceptive eye when it came to a choice of art or artefacts but each also had fundamentally brilliant commercial talents, and for each of them collecting became an overwhelming obsession in which self-glorification became an inbuilt factor: they are Norton Simon in Pasadena (1907–93); Heinrich, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza in Switzerland (1921–2002); Peter Ludwig (1929–96) in Germany, and Charles Saatchi of advertising fame and still very much with us in the UK.

For the first we have to cross the Atlantic, to Pasadena in California, to call up the ghost of Norton Simon, who had acquired an existing museum there, which he had bought for one dollar after it had run out of money. The collection he had brought together was staggering, and it was astonishing that a single man could have achieved this in a mere twenty-five years. At one stage, very shrewdly, he bought the rump of the Duveen Gallery and its archive. It landed him with 120 Old Master paintings of uncertain authorship, where he could argue to his heart’s content with experts over what they were. But he was also the bane of the auction houses: the story of his acquisition of Rembrandt’s *Portrait of his Son Titus* at Christie’s has become legendary, and the methodology of his purchase of Dirk Bouts’s *Resurrection* at Sotheby’s some years later was no less of an entrapment.

But nevertheless, his collection of early Italian Old Masters, including Raphael’s *Madonna and Child*, or his *Flight into Egypt* by Bassano, his Moroni, his El Greco, his Gerard David and the Cranach of *Adam and Eve* more than balanced his Frans Hals, his Murillo, his Zurbarán and his Rubens, his seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and his amazing assembly of Impressionists. He was certainly determined that the world should remember him but, great collector though he was, he was a most difficult man to deal with.

Heinrich, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, maintained the collection of masterpieces he had inherited from his father, together with a great cascade of additions from different schools, in the Villa Favorita in Lugano in Switzerland. The Villa was open to the public and housed what was probably one of the greatest privately owned collections in the world. Thyssen initially inherited only half of his father’s collection and had to buy the other half back from his siblings. He invested heavily in Impressionists but his taste gradually shifted to more contemporary art, particularly American. Much married, Thyssen decided in the 1980s, firstly to establish a series of very detailed catalogues of what he had, and then to house the 1,500 or more items somewhere permanently outside Switzerland, where he suffered from and bitterly complained about high taxation. He teased Mrs Thatcher about bringing it to London, but ultimately Spain won the day and the bulk of what he eventually sold now forms a very popular gallery in Madrid.

The third of such master collectors, who certainly concerned himself extensively with self-glorification,
was Peter Ludwig. James Stourton describes him in a nutshell:

I met several people who regarded him as the most remarkable figure in their lives, and the greatest German collector of the second half of the twentieth century. This larger-than-life personality, over six feet tall, attracted admiration and criticism in equal measure. He was a man whose life was driven by the twin spurs of art and business, who sought political opinions throughout, who bullied and changed his mind and yet he was at the same time a visionary who passionately believed in the mission of museums and the idea of a universal family, united by art. 15

Ultimately, the name Ludwig was linked with no fewer than eleven museums and institutions, the principal interest of which was, in each case, quite different. It shows how varied Ludwig’s aggregations were. They ranged from Greek and Roman antiquities to the art of Central and South America, to illuminated manuscripts and eventually, in the main, to contemporary and particularly American art. 16

That brings us neatly to our fourth Titan: Charles Saatchi. His interest is entirely in contemporary art, at two levels. He has often bought the work of talented students who have only just launched on their careers, as well as from all the foremost names of our time. He will forever be associated with Damien Hirst’s preserved shark, titled The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (which Saatchi eventually sold for $12 million). 17 Saatchi’s collection became so vast that it was housed in two former industrial buildings in St John’s Wood in London. His is what is known in America as a ‘warehouse collection’. It has become so widely representative of the best-known names among living artists on both sides of the Atlantic that it has virtually obtained public status. In 1985, it already required a four-volume catalogue, titled Art of our Time. The Saatchi Collection, to describe it. 18 This was followed in the next fifteen years by five further volumes. He has been described as the ‘prototype of the modern “branded” collector’. 19

Saatchi provides an excellent bridge to take us to the other side of the world, where one gets the distinct impression that we have entered an era of cheque-book collecting, where self-glorification is definitely the name of the game. We find ourselves confined to the fickle realm of contemporary creation, and what has become termed ‘conceptual art’—so much so that the principal desire of competing collectors is limited to the work of probably no more than thirty artists, some still living and some recently dead. The names that count are Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko (although of an earlier generation), Joseph Beuys, Jeff Koons, Willem de Kooning, David Hockney, Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud.

Auction prices for their work are of an unprecedented dimension, vastly exceeding those of Old Master paintings and even the Impressionists. In May 2007, an evening sale at Sotheby’s in New York of some sixty-five such works reached a total of $255 million. Forty-one sold for more than $1 million each. A painting by Mark Rothko, owned by a member of the Rockefeller family, was hammered down for $72.8 million; it had been bought in 1960 for $8,500. On the following evening at Christie’s, the total reached was even higher at $385 million. Warhol’s silkscreen showing multiple images of a car accident sold for $71.7 million. It was bought by a Chinese bidder who had been out-bid for the Rothko the night before. But such sales are extremes—extremes you might say of lunacy. It will be interesting to know what sort of prices such works of art will fetch when sold a second time round. 20 Each such purchase brings a small element of self-glorification: ‘I bought the Koons in New York last May, you know!’ Cheque-book collecting rarely lasts the course.

It has happened before in the dying days of the Victorian age. Auction prices for specific well-known painters of that era went for what were then inconceivably high prices. That market collapsed, so much so that by the middle of the following century, examples of Victorian art could be bought for peanuts.

It is another Titan who has helped to revive interest and values in the Pre-Raphaelite movement: Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber. But he also bought a splendid Canaletto for £10 million in 1993, and a Picasso portrait for £48 million, which is now on loan to the National Gallery.

Another whole chapter could be written, on the other hand, about avid collectors in USA who have helped to fund, and continue to support, the growth of museums. It is said that over 1,000 art museums have been founded throughout the world since the Second World War. But unlike in the UK, such philanthropy receives assistance from the state through tax advantages—still, sadly, not the case in the UK. An element of self-glorification is certainly detectable in most cases.
I have left till the end the last option a collector has over the fate of his collection. He can do nothing whatever, and leave the headaches to his executors. One can only hope that he himself had had a lot of fun getting it together and simply could not make up his mind what to do with it. It happens often enough.

The sort of philanthropy we have been discussing has preoccupied the press in Britain in recent times because the state has decided to penalize, by heavy additional taxation, wealthy foreigners living in Britain who have expressed their appreciation of the country by very generous donations to museums. The Times has discussed at length the question of attaching names to such donations. In a recent leader it wrote:

Philanthropy is the alchemy to transform Philistine profits from tobacco, sugar or steel into a cultural complex, a hospital, a new municipal stadium, and earn the gratitude of millions. It is easy to prefer anonymous donations as they represent not only generosity, but selflessness. Some management boards insist that no arriviste’s name should usurp their glory. The millions go elsewhere. Standing in the way of named gifts is stuffy and self-defeating. 21

I will leave a final thought with you: that as state funding of the arts diminishes, and prices rise, private philanthropy will have to increase. Self-glorification is a small price to pay for it.

Address for correspondence
Frank Herrmann, West Bowers Hall, Woodham Walter, Maldon Essex CM9 6RZ.
patriciaherrmann@talk21.com

Notes and references
4 Douglas Cooper, The Courtauld Collection. A Catalogue and Introduction, with a Memoir of Samuel Courtauld by Anthony Blunt (London, 1954). One of the earliest, and probably the most useful, of the many books on Courtauld and his collection.
7 Lord Iveagh’s immensely generous bequest was written up at great length in the Connoisseur. This had been founded in 1900 as a monthly magazine, and proudly stated in its first issue that the idea of ‘a magazine for collectors had not occurred to anyone before’ and that it is proposed to fill this empty place in the world of contemporary periodical publications’, which indeed it nobly did, regularly drawing the attention of its readers to the multitude of collections that was being formed. It went on doing so until its demise well into the 1980s.
8 James Stourton, Great Collectors of our Time (London, 2007), p. 316. A recent and most useful volume on near-contemporary collecting by the current Chairman of Sotheby’s UK.
9 Jeannie Chapel and Charlotte Gere (eds.), The Fine and Decorative Art Collections of Britain and Ireland (London, 1985) p. 220. This title is the most important guide ever published on its subject; sadly, it remained in print for only a short time.
13 Wilhelm von Bode, Mein Leben (Berlin, 1930). Bode, now much and unjustifiably neglected, was probably one of the most important institutional figures in the growth of German, if not European, museums, and was well known to his counterparts in the English museum world. He had begun these memoirs as far back as 1907; they were published only after his death in 1929. In their printed form they lacked his experiences between 1910 and 1929, and a second, much-enlarged edition, covering this period appeared under the imprint of Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin, in 1997. Any student of Bode’s life should also read his fascinating Fünfzig Jahre Museumsarbeit (Berlin, 1922), where he emerges as a much gentler character than in his many rather didactic works on purely art historical subjects.
14 I have to admit that I had protracted dealings with Norton Simon and that I compiled the first catalogue of his collection: The Norton Simon Museum (London, 1980). See also my Low Profile. A Life in the World of Books (Nottingham, 2002), which contains (pp. 294–303) a detailed account of my struggles with Simon.
15 See Stourton, op. cit. (note 8), p. 245.
16 His collection of manuscripts was sold to Getty for $60 million at a stage when Ludwig was short of money.
17 This was an event that generated a book by Don Thompson, The $12 Million Stuffed Shark. The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses (London, 2008). It is a brilliant and incisive summary of the way in which the art market for ‘contemporary’ work functioned up to mid-2008.
19 Thompson, op. cit. (note 17), p. 93.
20 Damien Hirst himself, who employed no fewer than 200 people to produce the artefacts of his own designs, sponsored an exclusive auction sale of this output at Sotheby’s in London which raised £111 million on 15–16 September 2008, the two days when the entire world began to teeter...
on the brink of a global recession. It was an amazingly bold move by an artist to go direct to his public through auction instead of dealerships. For Hirst, the timing was also an astonishing piece of luck. Immediately thereafter, the dizzy heights to which the art market had ascended, and which collectors from all over the world had cheerfully supported, collapsed.

21 *The Times*, in three related articles: issue of 20 March 2008, Dalya Alberge (on Sammy Ofer’s gift to the Maritime Museum, Greenwich); issue of 28 March 2008, anonymous: third leader ‘Name Dropping’ (on patrons being entitled to be remembered in bricks and mortar); issue of 2 April 2008, Magnus Linklater (concerning recent new taxation on foreigners living in Britain).