

## Chapter 29: Collecting

It is perhaps a more fortunate destiny to have a taste for collecting shells than to be born a millionaire.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Lay Morals* (1911)<sup>1</sup>

I have spoken briefly about collecting in Chapters 3B.7, 4.D, and 6.A, and in Chapter 5 about Scott's Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue as a profoundly influential book in my life. But collecting is such an important part of who I am that I want to give it a short chapter of its own.

### **A. Stamps**

As mentioned earlier, when I was a child I had many collections. Stamps were one of the most important, and I learned a lot from this activity, not only about stamps themselves, and about history and geography, but also about collecting itself.

Like most stamp collectors who start as children, I was introduced to this pursuit with a largish packet of unsorted stamps, given to me by my father along with an album and some accessories like stamp hinges. These stamps were from dozens of countries, many of them were still on paper from their envelopes, and they were essentially of no value. But figuring out what they were and sorting them by country, and especially identifying them individually through the pictures in the album spaces and in Scott's Catalogue, was a deeply educational experience.

I learned the difference between an accumulation and a collection. What I started with was an accumulation.<sup>2</sup> By finding the spaces for them in the album I located them in sequences of time and space and saw what else I didn't yet have that made up those sequences. Was this stamp a solitary issue or part of a series? The album would tell me that, and also what the other stamps in the series looked like – identical, or just



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<sup>1</sup> Although, of course, it would be best to have both.

<sup>2</sup> The stamps in the picture on the first page of this chapter are all British Empire. But they are close enough to give the idea.

stylistically similar, or visually unrelated. It was unusual but not impossible for visually unrelated stamps to be part of the same set.

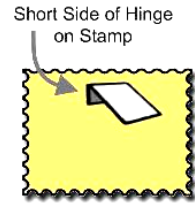
In addition to teaching about collecting, this was also my first real lesson in art – to notice, for example, that stamps from 1900 generally looked different from stamps from 1950 was the beginning of an appreciation of period and style. Compare the two stamps shown below, on the same subject, from 1892 and 1992 (even though the second one is from after my time as a young collector, it makes the point). Each stamp is a work of art – not always *good* art, it's true (although surprisingly often it will be), and I had hundreds of them to examine, and assess, and compare. It was the start of a lot of things for me.



If a stamp was part of a series, what were my chances of completing the set? The catalogue gave prices for stamps mint and used – one of the first elements of expertise for me was the realization that these listed prices were much above what the stamps really sold for at the stamp store. But the *relative* values still told me whether it was realistic to aspire to own the entire set, or whether some stamps in the set were out of reach.

Another thing I learned is that things are not always what they seem. A stamp might seem uncanceled, but without its gum it was not mint and had probably been used even if a cancellation was not visible. An overprint was different from a cancellation – it made the stamp a different issue, which a cancellation did not, but did not make it used. Even stamps which looked the same could vary in their shade, or paper, or perforations, or watermark. Sometimes these variations made them different stamps for collecting purposes, and sometimes not, depending on the collector's own approach. I learned to use a perforation gauge and a watermark detector. Most important, there were issues and varieties listed in the catalogue that there were no spaces for in the album, from which I learned that even printed sources could not always be relied on completely, and there might sometimes be more than there appeared to be. All this not only taught me a lot about collecting, but were useful lessons for life in general.

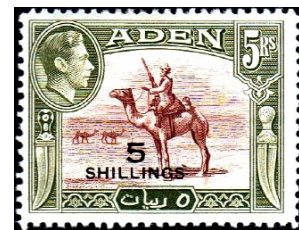
Mounting the stamps on stamp hinges (right) rather than pasting them directly into the album (even when they had gum on the back), not trimming the perforations and indeed being careful not to bend them, handling stamps with stamp tongs rather than fingers, all taught me about treating objects in a collection differently from objects just floating in the world by themselves.



As an accumulator my goal was just to get more stamps. But I didn't want more examples of stamps I already had, although I later learned that very advanced collectors sometimes have reasons for wanting to do this, such as plating issues.<sup>3</sup> Also it was impractical to try to get one copy of every stamp there ever was, and unsatisfying just to add stamps in an unfocused way. So gradually I became a collector. At first I concentrated on American stamps. But after a while I had all the cheap American stamps, and it made little sense to me to start in on the not-so-cheap ones as I could never hope to complete that collection and one stamp for four or five dollars was not enough bang for my buck, and much more than I could afford.



So I switched to British Empire, which had the advantage of containing many dozens of subcategories (all those colonies), each with lots of stamps cheap enough for me to afford. The British Empire also had the attraction for me that the stamps had unifying features. The sovereigns whose heads were on the stamps were already familiar to me, and King



George V was the same in England and in Bechuanaland. There were uniform issues, like the coronation and jubilee and victory issues (victory issue shown below). These were often the same for colonies and intriguingly different for dominions like Canada and South Africa. Anomalies like the bilingual stamps of South Africa, and the Maltese and George Crosses on the stamps of Malta, and the different currencies (which varied by colony) could be explored and contrasted with those of other colonies. Many stamps had



interesting local scenes – the scenes differed but the basic style was often very similar. I later learned that this was because they were designed by the same few firms, like Waterlow, De La Rue, and others. British

<sup>3</sup> *Plating an issue* means assembling, from tiny or even microscopic marks made by imperfections or wear on the original engraving plate, and strips or blocks showing relations between copies, examples of a (usually early) stamp from every position in a sheet! Talk about obsessive!



Empire stamps was a category both broad enough, and old enough, and with enough intricately ramified sub-categories, to be a perfect Petri dish for a collector. Not only did I learn in all these areas, I also learned to buy as a collector.



I found a stamp store the second floor of an old building on East 86th Street (gone now) that suited me perfectly. It was called the Zeppelin Stamp Company, named I'm sure not for the count or his airship but for a particularly desirable set of American air mail stamps (Scott C13-15), called Zeppelins because they showed a *picture* of the airship (left).

The Zeppelin Stamp Company (in Yorktown, then the German section of Manhattan) was run by an old German man. It was a retail stamp store of a classic kind now almost entirely vanished. There was a long counter with sets of stamps under the glass. Customers sat on bar stools next to this counter and looked through large stock books (albums with card-stock or transparent strips attached at the bottom, forming long pockets where stamps could be put in or taken out with tongs). The stock books, arranged within countries by Scott catalogue number, had the prices written in in pencil. You selected what you liked with a stamp tongs and the German man wrote down the price on a pad; every so often he added up the running total on an old manual adding machine. Sometimes the catalogue would need to be consulted. You could see what you needed and what you could afford – sometimes a stamp too expensive in a perfect version was manageable with a heavier cancellation than was ideal, or with less-than-perfect centering, or with a damaged perforation. Condition is critical in almost any collection, even at the bottom end. When you had spent all you could afford (or sometimes more) you stopped, for the day anyway.



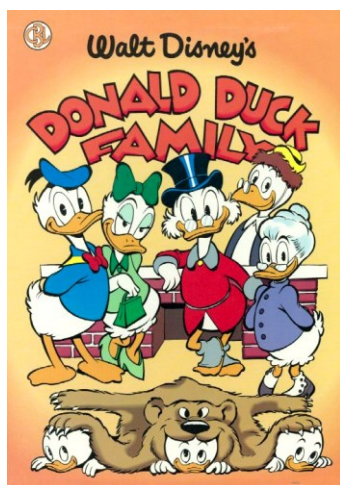
I spent a lot of time and (for me) a lot of money at the Zeppelin Stamp Company. They had a framed George VI coronation issue from all the colonies (1937) which I coveted (see example left); soon after Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 I did manage to get her complete coronation issue (see example right). What a thrill that was! A great part of the thrill was seeing the same design repeated so many times, but each time with a different country name. I'm not sure I can explain why that was a thrill, but it was.



Being a book person, I read up on this stuff. I studied the catalogues. I mention in Chapter 5 how important Scott's Catalogue was to me, not only as a collector but as a child learning about the world and an embryo scholar learning to use reference material. Document 5-1 shows a page from Scott. But there were more catalogues than just Scott – there were specialized catalogues and catalogues from British publishers and even

catalogues in other languages – that was a lesson in scholarship and research. I read some of the philatelic literature and subscribed to *Stamps* magazine. I looked at the stamp collection mounted in pull-out panes at the Public Library on 42nd Street. I went to stamp shows. I experimented with first-day covers and plate blocks (I later came back to first-day covers, in my 50s, as part of my heraldic collection, see Chapter 6.A). The more I learned, the more interested I became. Eventually I stopped collecting stamps but remain interested in the field, still read the philatelic press, and have kept a level of expertise which allows me to follow and appreciate technical discussions and lectures at stamp shows. My recent practice of collecting heraldic covers has allowed me to go to stamp shows again and enjoy looking through stock, hunting for items that fit my collection and my purse.

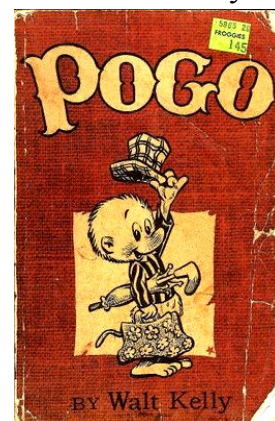
## B. Other Collections



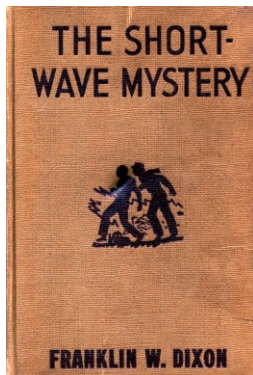
I have had many collections other than stamps. For example, as a child I collected comic books – but even then a specialist, I only bought those from Disney. There were Donald Duck, and Mickey Mouse, and Uncle Scrooge McDuck, and some of the wonderful adventures of Donald’s nephews Huey, Louie & Dewey. There were the thin saddle-bound 10¢ comics, which came out monthly, and the thicker 25¢ specials, issued less often and perfect- rather than saddle-bound. I now know them to be masterpieces of the genre by the great Carl Barks (1901-2000). The most extravagant of Carl Barks’ creations were in the 25¢ issues. Occasionally 50¢ super-specials would appear – those were a treat to own. Shown in the picture: top row, Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, Uncle Scrooge McDuck, Gyro Gearloose (the inventor), Grandma Duck; bottom row: Huey, Louie and Dewey Duck.

There were lots of other kinds of comic books, but although I read some others from time to time, including Batman and Classics, I was loyal to Disney and never *collected* any other kind. I ended up with more than 100 of them, at least. And then one day they all disappeared. I have no proof that my mother destroyed them but I suspect her – who else had access and would have dared?

Later I also collected Pogo books – these were paperback books by the genius artist and nonsense-poet Walt Kelly (1913-1973), collecting and elaborating on stories he had published in comic book form, and adding new original works. I never saw the comic book versions until I attended a Pogo evening at the San Francisco Comic Art Museum in 2006, where two advanced collectors



showed off some of their treasures. But I had most of the books, which were in two different-sized formats. Shown above is the original Pogo book.



I always collected books – as Jefferson said of himself, I have a “canine appetite” for them. In Chapter 4.B I mention some of these. There were the Hardy Boys mysteries, by “Franklin W. Dixon” (not, I later learned, a single or even a real person). These were in a uniform edition – I can see them now in my mind’s eye – and I had dozens of them. There were 58 titles published from 1927 to 1979 – of course by 1979 I was 35 and long past the Hardy Boys. Other sets in more or less uniform format were the Dr. Seuss books, the Oz books (by Frank L. Baum, Ruth Plumly Thompson and others), the Freddie books (by Walter L. Brooks, about the talking pig in upstate New York), the Doctor Dolittle books (by Hugh Lofting), comic novels and story collections by P. G. Wodehouse (in a uniform green English edition published by Herbert Jenkins, with Wodehouse’s signature on the front cover), and Landmark and World Landmark books (juvenile histories). There were others, too – see Chapter 4.

Later, in high school and college, I collected Modern Library books in uniform editions, and also began for the first time seriously collecting books by subject. I had a lot of plays, for example, and for the first time tried to catalogue my collection. I didn’t know then how to do that, and so the effort came to nothing, but it showed I was thinking of my books as a collection and not just isolated objects.

In Chapter 4.E I mention some of my current book collections. In addition to the major developed collections of specialized atlases and heraldic books (including titles on flags, medals, symbols and iconography), I have a number of subsidiary collections – specialized dictionaries, books on jewels and coins and palaces, books on languages and writing systems (including display types in exotic alphabets), books of decorative motifs of different times and cultures, books on the Indian states, and lots of others.

I collect books in less focused ways too. For example, I am always on the lookout for well-constructed, well-designed reference books, whether or not I’m particularly involved in the field. *A Glossary of Typesetting Terms?* Yes, of course, if the price is right. *License Plates of the United States?* Why not? *Military Considerations in City Planning: Fortifications?* *Costumes of the Greeks and Romans?* *A Field Guide to the Ferns?* There’s always room.<sup>4</sup> I would like to have a book to answer every possible question. This is part of the collecting *ethos*, discussed in Part C below – acquiring items that add information, fill spaces, or recommend themselves for their beauty or elegance.

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<sup>4</sup> Titles selected almost at random from my reference shelves. There’s always room even if there isn’t room.

I still buy these occasionally even though the Internet has made them largely (although not of course entirely) obsolete as a way to answer reference questions.

As a child I had other collections too. There were miniature cars of the Dinky Toy and Matchbox brands (see picture in Chapter 3A.4). In Truro, where we went for summers, I developed a collection of scenic postcards of Cape Cod, discriminating by publisher and size as well as by scene. For a while I collected coins, although not in the same serious way I collected stamps. But I did have albums for Lincoln pennies, Jefferson nickels and Roosevelt dimes, in which I tried to collect examples of every year and mint mark acquired from change or from the bank – I almost completed these collections, and learned something about the field. I learned a lot more about coins (American and foreign) from books than my collections ever showed, and still have a fairly good amateur's grasp of the field.

When I had my classical music radio show (see Chapter 26.A) I used to make the rounds of second-hand record stores (vinyl records in those days) collecting items to fill in the gaps. Originally it was so I would have enough music to play on the air, but soon this developed a momentum of its own as a collecting activity, and I was always trying to fill in gaps and try for new composers (especially modern ones) or unusual combinations of instruments. It was a lot of fun.

When I smoked cannabis (see Chapter 17.E) I always managed to have lots of different types and flavors. Every so often I would go to a cannabis club and get a few more. Often I didn't actually get around to smoking them, although I bought them to smoke rather than to collect – these too were kind of a collection, sort of like what wine collectors have. And of course it was a great pleasure to develop library collections as a professional librarian, working out categories and filling gaps.

During the years 1977-82, when I was the law librarian at Farella Braun & Martel (see Chapter 24.B) I cultivated an image as a friendly eccentric. This was partly a matter of policy, as explained in that chapter, and partly because I really *was* a friendly eccentric. In those days men wore jackets and ties to work. Part of the eccentric routine was always wearing a garishly loud tie – so loud as to be clearly intentional – and a lapel button. The lapel button, different every day, always showed some design or figure or scene but never words. I began to accumulate ties and buttons so I would not run out of them, and because this now intrigued me – two new collections! So I always stopped at garage sales, and thrift shops (for ties), and head shops (for buttons), and wherever else I might find these for a dollar or two, until I had large collections of each.<sup>5</sup> I sorted the buttons

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<sup>5</sup> Future researchers: a *head shop* is a store that specializes in drug paraphernalia – pipes, roach clips, cigarette papers, bongos, items with marijuana leaf motifs. They used to carry buttons because the buttons appealed to hippies and countercultural types, who were often also pot smokers.

into categories and began collecting by category. I gave away the ties some years ago – I almost never wear ties any more, they are out of fashion – but I still have the buttons and may start wearing some of them again.

Once on Market Street during the same period I bought a brass bracelet for \$5. I enjoyed wearing it and soon bought a number of others – eventually I had a couple of dozen. I collected them like I did the buttons – same basic type, always inexpensive, always suitable for masculine wear (no fem bracelets), and with an eye to style. The problem was that they tarnished and turned my wrist green, so I had to keep painting the insides with clear nail polish, and after a while some tarnished beyond polishing. It became a nuisance and I gave them up. I recently had my first, favorite bracelet silver-plated, and then the plating removed from the top so it still looked like brass, and started wearing it again. I paid 15 times more for the plating than I had paid for the bracelet itself. Within weeks it was turning my wrist green again.

I like having small bags and cases – they are useful for all kinds of purposes – and so I began collecting these too at garage sales and wherever I saw ones I liked. I finally got enough (many dozens) and stopped buying them, but from time to time when I need one I go down to the garage and select one from my collection.

In India in 2008 I bought Indian State revenue stamps, if they had the arms of the native state as part of the design. I did this to form a reference collection for the study of the emblems of the native states. The result of this study was my monograph *Looking at the Emblems of the Indian States*, to be published soon by the Flag Heritage Foundation, of whose publication program I am general editor. I will send a copy to Yale. It still forms a handsome collection.

There are lots more collections – I had a tendency, not always indulged, to make a collection of everything that interested me. But these are enough for now. My project to go to every American county (see Chapter 30.B) is a kind of collection in its way.

In his psychoanalytic book *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (1994), George Muensterberger says that in its origin collecting is similar to the familiar childish attachment to a stuffed animal or scrap of blanket – it transfers to an object the child's (perhaps transiently) unmet need for support and solace. Unlike the person who is the natural source of these sustaining attentions, the object is always available and always under the child's control. Objects which provide this surrogate support themselves acquire a magical potency, a *mana*, similar to those of fetishes.

Thus, the values attached to one's holdings usually follow an earlier affective prototype of yearning. In this inner affective state, a soft doll or the edge of a pillow or blanket can provide a sense of touch and the illusion of protection against the dread



of being alone and powerless. Later, a toy or some special object can bring the same kind of comfort, thus providing the first passion for possession.

And again:

The deep-seated attempts to grasp and hold – the forerunners of chase and capture – grow out of an archaic need for reassertion, because there is no one who has no submerged memory of powerlessness and early suffering.

Could be. But then why isn't everyone a collector?

### C. How to Collect

Over many years of building many collections, I have developed a sort of template about how to do it.

First accumulate, starting cheap. Buy whatever appeals to you; buy whatever you find within the parameters of what you're beginning to dabble in; buy in quantity if it's the sort of collection where you can do that (as with my first stamp packets). Stay cheap because (1) it frees you to buy widely, and (2) you don't yet really know what you're doing.

As you do this you begin to learn what is out there, how the field developed and what it contains, how to judge manufacturers and quality, how to judge what pleases you. You learn the resources and reference works and how to discover more about the field. You see a lot of things and get a feel for the subject, learn to tell one item from the other and know what you're looking *at* (this is a necessary precondition to knowing what you're looking *for*).

With increasing sophistication you stop accumulating and become a collector. It is now time to get selective. Specialization happens almost automatically as you learn what you *really* like and begin to go mainly for that. Sub-categories appear in the collection as you learn the field. Now it is all right to pay *slightly* more for a few choice items, because you know what's choice to you (what you like) and something of what there is to choose from and what things are worth.

At a certain volume a hand list (easily maintained on the computer) becomes necessary to avoid accidentally buying duplicates. I will lodge with Yale as Supplements examples of my hand lists for heraldic covers, atlases, medal books, and others as I create them.

Finally you become an advanced collector. The sign of this is a well-developed taste, a sophisticated understanding of the field, and a wish to buy only what really *fits*. What fits is determined by taste and holdings – an item can fit because it fills an empty space, or

because it is an especially good example of something that pleases, or because of its beauty or utility or provenance or informational content or whatever the criteria are for what you have learned you *really like*. The desire to buy something that adds nothing interestingly new drops away – by now I have enough Bible atlases that I don't buy them any more, even when I find one I don't already have. At this point you are no longer buying to learn, or to build a basis for a collection – you are really collecting.

This doesn't mean you need to spend more than you can afford. You can learn to wait for a good price; you can continue to keep a very low price limit. Before I retired and money got tight, I could spend over \$100 for a really juicy heraldry book, but I never spent more than about \$3 for a heraldic cover. Finding a good item at \$5 is as much fun as finding one for \$500, and 100 times cheaper. One difference between a collection and an obsession is that I don't *have* to have something – if I can't afford it I don't buy it. So I won't have it – I can live with that.

These rules probably don't work for investment collecting, with an eye to value. I have never collected that way, even though my book collections are probably now worth quite a bit, and can't suggest how to do it. I have only ever collected for my own pleasure, and have never sold anything from any collection I have ever had, except the phonograph records, and even then I waited 21 years after I stopped listening to them, and sold for much less than I paid just to get them out of the way, and didn't really care what the price was.

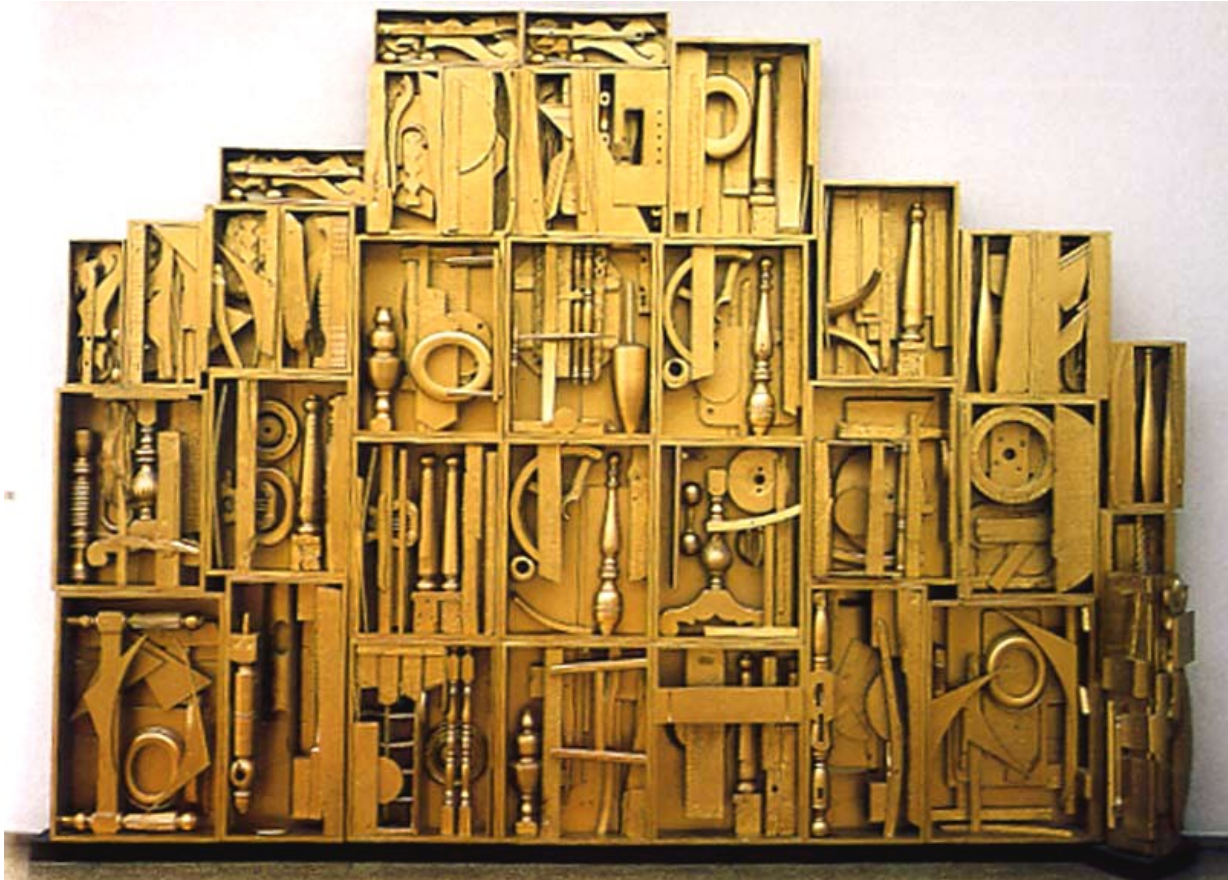
In addition to the satisfactions of collecting, and the allied satisfactions of learning (which are part of the fun for any serious collector of anything), there are the satisfactions of shopping and of buying. I buy books the way some women buy shoes, even though they don't really need any more shoes.<sup>6</sup> After a day of hard work, for example, or in moments of stress, I sometimes log onto eBay and see what is out there in the atlas or heraldry department, or onto Bookfinder to see what's available cheap by an author I'm interested in.<sup>7</sup> I think: "I'd like to buy a book now" and then look for something *that I can afford* that interests me or fits one of my collections.

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<sup>6</sup> For a collector, says Muensterberger in *Collecting*, obtaining an object "is more than an impulse. Rather, I see it as an in essence a defensive move, initially with the aim of turning disillusionment and helplessness into an animated, purposeful venture. If collecting is kept within these bounds it is by no means an unhealthy ego defense. It is a device to tolerate frustration and a way of converting a sense of passive irritation, if not anger, into challenge and accomplishment."

<sup>7</sup> Bookfinder ([www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com)) is the best source there ever was for second-hand books, containing listings from dealers large and small from all over the world, for books in several languages. They include shipping in the quote. It is comprehensive enough to be a valuable bibliographic tool also.

Just buying something is a pleasure and a reward – just shopping is fun, even if I don't buy anything, although I do this much less now after my retirement. When I went to a stamp fair looking for heraldic covers, part of the fun was pattern recognition, looking through huge stacks of possibilities for a few things that met my specifications and filled a gap or added something special. Looking was as much fun as buying. If I spent three hours browsing the boxes and ended up with only a dozen or so items, I was not disappointed – I had spent three hours in a pursuit I enjoyed very much, and whatever I ended up buying was gravy. This was true from my early days as a collector. When I shopped at Zeppelin as a boy, a large part of the satisfaction for me as a stamp collector was not so much the *owning* as the *selecting*. Looking through my album was fun, but the most fun was at the counter, filling in the blanks and choosing what to buy. If you can understand that, you can understand collecting.



Tailpiece: *Royal Tide IV*, by Louise Nevelson (1960)