

Collecting art in outlying areas?

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1**

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COLLECTING ART IN OUTLYING AREAS?

56

Verena Formanek One question often addressed to museums is: Why do you collect what you do? No straightforward answer exists. Mostly, collections simply arise from an initial donation or a cuckoo's egg-like deposit. It's hard to know what the future holds for such aliens. In a historical nutshell: the profile of collections has greatly changed over many centuries. Although existing until the 19th century in the form of cabinets of curios, since then they have been broken down into specific categories (e.g. museum of natural history, museum of technology, etc.).

Generally speaking, only after a certain period of time has elapsed do the scientific world and museums take an interest in a society's culture. Museums thus enjoy an overview of the subject. In addition, collection by museums has an effect on the semantic structure of the objects targeted: they must be considered in the light of their long-term preservation (archives), representing a change from their original context. Their preservation ties in closely with a scientific approach, with their documentation and with a policy determining exactly what is to be collected – all tasks incumbent upon a collection. To be sure, museums first tended to carry out these procedures far from the public eye. During the 1980s however, their stance changed as they began opening their doors more widely and competing with each other in the realm of infotainment. This led to an "event culture" to which the serious-minded and often scientifically over-laden museum structures seemed ill suited...

Museums have a variety of opportunities to assemble collections. Around 1900, in Vienna, the MAK (Austrian Museum for Applied Art, originally Museum for

Applied and Contemporary Art) set about assembling a collection for the applied arts and for students, in the same fashion as the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Zurich Museum of Design. In contrast to the mode of classification in art museums, these earliest collections – so-called model and sample collections – were originally organized by materials or period styles. Often, too, whole bodies of works by certain artists were incorporated into collections that, nowadays, strike us as strange. Then again, people's receptivity and relationship to other cultures at the time differed from their present attitude. The formerly "primitive" today falls under the heading of "tribal art". Thanks to new research fields – Cultural Studies, for instance – the latter's influence now comes across at new levels.

Major holdings tend to land in museums situated in metropolitan centres. Though not always with success. Political or economic changes can wreak havoc on big cities. A metropolis can abruptly turn into a cultural no-man's land unable to hold on to a collection. Does this tie in with the topic of outlying areas? Yes, inasmuch as we are called upon to support collections financially. More often than not, this entails public funding and, as such, grants taxpayers a say in the matter. They start asking questions, and their questions target the activity determined by the purpose of a collection in the first place. To indulge in a collection takes an intensively active infrastructure and a longstanding commitment to cultural tradition. On such a basis, collecting in outlying areas seems altogether feasible.