



# The sketchbook as collection: A phenomenology of sketching

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## **The Sketchbook as Collection**

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‘Collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin. From an early age non-Western artifacts brought home by soldiers, travelers, and antiquity hunters had played the role of spoils. What the modern museum particularly developed, in conjunction with this paradigm of conquest, was a model of colonization, of foreign dominion.’ Howes & Classen in Edwards, Godsen & Philips (Eds.) 2006:209

There is an interesting parallel which can be drawn between the sketchbook and the museum, both of which can be understood explicitly as activities, as practices of *collecting*. The way in which this practice actually functions in reality is of course different, that the activity involved differs, but the intent remains similar.

Collecting is of course, something of some interest to museum studies and is closely theorised by anthropologists as a form of cultural display. What is it that motivates the collector, and how can sketches be understood explicitly as collections. What is to be gained by this understanding?

### **Sir John Soane’s Museum as Cabinet of Curiosity**

The Soane is a curious place in several senses, representing both a prototype for later museums and as one of the most extreme examples of the type. The building sits on Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London, on the Northern side of a city square. Soane established his museum in 1833, marking out his own collection for this use in what might appear now to be a rather self-aggrandising move. This is an ideal starting point, of course, as it is this intention to display that we wish to interrogate with this chapter. In this sense, understanding both Soane the man and the institution is fundamental to the study.

Soane himself was an architect and educator with a strong interest in antiquity. As such, he created a vast collection of artefacts, drawings, models, and plaster casts to work from. As a classicist, his practice involved close examination of these artefacts as models or prototypes for his own work.

Soane’s aim was to work with direct observation wherever possible. This follows on from earlier European traditions of the Grand Tour. There was an explosion of interest in Egypt in the 19th Century, fuelled by imperialist expansion from Europe. Soane’s collection can be seen as a continuity with this idea, but his intention was more direct, pragmatic, and pedagogical: Soane intended to learn and to teach with this collection in order to allow architecture to return to these Classical, universal roots.

6. Sketching is permitted in the Museum provided that circulation is not impeded by the sketcher or his equipment. Inks, paints and charcoal are not permitted. For making measured drawings, permission must be obtained from the Director.’

Extract from the General Regulations for Admission to the Museum , 2007.

The archives and drawing collection remain available to scholars, and the conditions of entry remain as close as possible to Sir John Soane's original regulations as possible. This gives the museum a unique character, as there is a practice of visiting, from waiting in the street until being allowed in (there being a strict numerical limit to the numbers in the museum at any given time), the signing of a guest book, and leaving bags and other items with the attendants in the entry hall.

John Elsner, in his contribution to the edited collection *The Cultures of Collecting* explicitly explores the example of Sir John Soane's museum in the essay "A Collector's Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soane." This connection of collecting and desire begins to theorise the museum as a process of accumulation. Rather than a fixed and completed thing, the museum lives and breathes through its acquisitions and display policies. Even where the collection doesn't grow any more, the collection must be curated and selected, with some items remaining in storage and choices being made about what to show and what to hide away.

'Collecting is the desire of the Museum. The museum seeks to be a static hold-all, largely a finished piece (although with blurry edges caused by de-accessioning and new acquisitions), a mausoleum of previous collections; collecting is the dynamic that brought it into being. While the museum is a kind of entombment, a display of once lived activity (the activity whereby real people collected objects associated with other real people or living beings), collecting is the process of the museum's creation, the living act that the museum embalms.' Elsner (1994:155).

In the essay, Elsner attempts to describe the process by which museums actually *happen* or come in to being. This is described as a point at which a collection is transformed into a museum, the point at which these artefacts are constituted into a coherent body. This is tied up in a number of processes and concepts, where Elsner considers the status of the collection, the ideas of nostalgia associated with the selected items, and the idea that such disparate fragments can be understood in any way as a whole.

Soane's museum is the perfect case study in this regard, of course, representing as it does the collection of a single individual over a single lifetime rather than the political and colonial implications of a National collection such as the British Museum. Soane's museum represents a prototypical museum and a collection that has remained in situ since its institution. Elsner questions the foundational myth of the museum:

'In suggesting that Roman Italy was constructed as the all-plentiful provider and the Ur-collection, I wish to address a dream lying wistfully *behind* the collecting impulse: namely, the urge to evoke, even sometimes to fulfil, that myth of a completion, a complete ancient world, which was once itself *collected* in the imperial splendour of Rome.' Elsner (1994:156)

Rome, then is the Ur-source, the originating source of civilisation to the 19th Century academic and architect. This is, of course, questionably Eurocentric, but was the reference point of the time, and drives many of the commonly held ideas we have of original sources, and the completion of the collection: that there is a source, an originating point like that of a river from which knowledge might flow.

By limiting this to Rome, the achievement was made possible. The discovery of rich new worlds, even earlier or isolated from the Greco-Roman model complicates this substantially.

Elsner is fascinated by the difference between the *Museum* and the *Collection*. What is this distinction? When did this transformation occur?

'The exercise of translating the private into the public, the personal collection into a museum for the nation, is thus to be seen as a peculiarly textual act. It lies in the creation of the handbook, in legal formulae (such as the Act of Parliament) and in the paraphernalia of the official language with which Soane came increasingly to frame the descriptions of his collections.' Elsner (1994:158)

This codification of the collection, then marks the Museum as a quality lying in the understanding applied to the artefacts, the sense that Soane made of the works. More than a mere functional difference between the Home and the Museum, it can be understood that there is a heightened sense of intentionality behind the museum. The home can be said to have meaning, but this is always hidden, and the difficulty lies in revealing or otherwise uncovering these unintended consequences. The museum is a deliberate construction, which often obfuscates or hides other, deeper, more politically motivated intentions.

There is an extent to which Soane's Museum helps define what is *collectible* in the first instance. Were it possible to capture entire buildings from antiquity, then this might have been Soane's ultimate aim. This illuminates some of the presuppositions of collection and the relationship with classicism's inherent universalism and the idea of original context. Soane's thinking was, to a large extent, informed by the notion of Classicism. This idea is not only out of fashion nowadays, but we must critically engage with what the very notion of the classic might mean.

As a concept, the idea of a 'classic' indicates some sort of timeless and spaceless quality: a transcendence from that which is contextual, grounded, and mortal. The classic approaches the notion of the Platonic ideal, whereby ancient philosophers considered that there were Earthly manifestations of things, but also some etherial and otherworldly *ideal* form. The critique of classicism, then, is that it treats a body of antique knowledge and artefacts as originating or ur- categories; that these represent the ultimate models from which all other responses are measured and normally found wanting.

The critique of this would be that it first of all ignores the original context, temporality, and use. There is undeniably a beauty and consideration for proportion in such buildings which is sublime and worthy of investigation. Such classicism has flaws, however, and politically, it promotes an idea that there can ever be this originating (very Western) ideal from which all other things are mere shadows. More than a stylistic movement which stripped ornamentation and displayed the interior arrangement to the outside world, Modernism is an important step away from Classicism which began long before the 20th Century. Such Modern thought is often considered as beginning in the mid-19th Century or even earlier, certainly post-Enlightenment. Thus, architectural Modernism as a movement occurs in the mid-point of the modern period, post-war expressions are late modernism, and the 1970s onwards can be understood as post-modernist. Modernism represents a gradual movement (rather than the rupture as often understood) towards contextualism, specificity, and invention.

The museum supports a continuing Classicism, intended as it was by Soane as a collection of artefacts to be studied. This frozen aspect of the museum is one of the keys to understanding it according to Elsner (1994:176).

Elsner is fascinated by the desire that drove Soane's collection, arguing that his acquisitiveness was driven by a compulsion to have, to possess. This is certainly true of early museums based on collections: that there is a material culture and economic value as well as academic interest and conservationist impulse at work. The early museum sought to save these items from ruin, but also funded expeditions to these sites of antiquity, creating a marked for such things as Egyptian sarcophagi and fragments of Roman architecture. This commodification is one of the most troubling aspects, where such items are displaced from their original function of being the funeral rites of a high status individual or an essential and functional piece of architecture.

In what ways does sketching avoid some of these problems within the collecting impulse? As the foundational *idea* of the collection, based firmly in the Grand Tour, the Soane Museum helps us to define the very activity of collecting, marking the difficulties and importance of decontextualisation. This removal of original context is both what is most troubling politically and ethically, but also what affords the opportunities for creative acts, of abstraction, analysis, and understanding.

### **Baudrillard, Bacon's Studio, and the System of Sketching**

Critical theorist Jean Baudrillard's essay *The System of Collecting* illuminates many aspects of Bacon's studio's transformation into a museum piece. He describes collecting as a systematic activity, not merely an end result, and focuses (somewhat ironically given the detemporalisation of such activities) on the practice of the museum in collecting:

- THE OBJECT DIVESTED OF ITS FUNCTION
- THE LOVED OBJECT
- THE PERFECT PET
- A SERIAL GAME
- FROM QUANTITY TO QUALITY: THE UNIQUE OBJECT
- OBJECTS AND TEMPORALITY: THE CONTROLLED CYCLE

Baudrillard is a complex and difficult thinker, a philosopher in the Marxist critical theory tradition. He deconstructs problems in order to understand the fundamental politics at the heart of things. He famously writes on simulations and simulacra: the mediation of life through television and other forms of communication, but he also turns to the objectivising nature of the collection and the museum. The museum, to Baudrillard, is a process of gathering, collecting, and objectifying items.

In order to be placed in a collection, an object is stripped of its function, and is no longer needed for anything: it is to be placed on display and frozen. This is the aim of the gallery and museum: to aestheticise objects, to entomb them in this system of objects. He explicitly cites the banal example of the refrigerator in this regard:

'The fact that I make use of a refrigerator in order to freeze things, means that the refrigerator is defined in terms of a practical transaction: it is not an object so much as a freezing mechanism. In this sense, I cannot be said to possess it. Possession cannot

apply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject*. In this sense, all objects that are possessed submit to the same *abstractive operation* and participate in a mutual relationship in so far as they each refer back to the subject. They thereby constitute themselves as a *system*, on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm.' Baudrillard 2004:7

In this way, Baudrillard has something very specific in mind when he uses the word 'object'. The object is a particular way of rendering a thing, an item, as valuable and desirable that has nothing to do with its use-value. An object, then, is an object of desire.

The aim of this consideration of things is to form a collection, according to Baudrillard (2004:8). This problem becomes all the clearer when presenting objects which were not originally designed for such display. A prime example being the artist's studio: the secretive machinery behind the production of Bacon's paintings. The stated aim is educational and critical, but the result is to objectify, to reify, to render precious and desirable and even valuable. As soon as the studio is placed on display, it cannot be used, and is in a way no longer a studio but an *image of a studio*.

Taking this on to the consideration of the loved object, Baudrillard expresses the passions of the collector as something almost sexual in nature. This is a common move in the work of theorists such as Baudrillard and whilst at first it might seem absurd, the basis of much work in psychoanalysis suggests that there is at the very least a kernel of truth and a similar mechanism at work. With regards to architecture, the most interesting recent example of theory exploring this is by the architectural theorist Alberto Perez-Gomez in *Built Upon Love: Architectural Longing After Ethics and Aesthetics*.

This psychology of the collection process is found by Baudrillard's source in this section to have the following characteristics – it is a perfect pet, a 'docile dog which receives caresses and returns them in its own way; or rather, reflects them like a mirror constructed in such a way as to throw back images not of the real but the desirable' (1994:10). This is one matter with objects from our own culture, but becomes much more politically undesirable once one makes the decision to attempt to show other contemporary cultures, as in an ethnographic museum. Such displays, then, are fraught with dangers and encourage us to present the Other in an objectified fashion, giving value to certain items which are inducted into the gallery systems of exchange-value attribution and marketplaces. Objects enter, unwillingly, and in an unintended fashion, into the power exchanges and are accorded monetary or other economic value.

The system of collecting, for Baudrillard, only works when the objects are collected as a series. The terms for this series can be as specific as the antiquities Soane was interested in, or as narrow as everything contained in Francis Bacon's studio at the time of his death. This serial nature automatically places objects in relation, in comparison with one another. One begins to speak of that which belongs to the series and those objects excluded (such as things from Bacon's earlier studio or which he owned, but did not leave there). We also have platonic samples: the perfect object and the imperfect object, much like the market in unlikely antiques such as pottery or teddy bears, often evolving largely through the relative rarity of an object, meaning that the work of a pottery which went out of business and existed for a brief period can be worth a great deal more than one which remained successful.

'For It is invariably *oneself* that one collects.' Baudrillard 1994:12.

The figure of the collector is displaying an aspect of themselves. This is certainly true of Soane, and was part of his stated intent, a kind of self-aggrandisement, culminating in his gifting of this collection to the State. The case of Bacon is of course rather different, the collectors not being a single person, but the art-historical and art-critical establishment.

This leads us to consider the phenomenological implications of collecting oneself through the practice of keeping a sketchbook.

## **Resonance and Wonder**

This all appears very critical of the museum, the collector, and broader attempts at cultural display as well as, by extension, the sketcher. This is far from the case, however. It is important to complicate and refine our relationship with items held by museums or deliberately exhibited. Questions of who is saying what about whom should be at the forefront of our encounters with such displays.

It is worth at this point returning to the potential of the museum, and therefore to end on a more positive note. This lies in the dual intentions of evoking resonance and wonder with a collection.

Steven Greenblatt examines these twin concepts in his essay of the same name;

‘By *resonance* I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By *wonder* I mean the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.’  
Greenblatt (1991:42)

This becomes for Greenblatt a discussion of the artefacts and the feelings or responses they can evoke in the museum-going public. The aim is, after all, to share and educate; to further our understanding of one another. However much we might problematise that particular activity, there is something edifying and positive in this intent – to the extent that it must remain possible and be an aim worthy of achieving.

The stories of artefacts, then, are the key to this. Rather than only showing the perfect, platonic ideals, there might be more narrative to accompany a broken item, one that shows the traces of being well used, or which is everyday rather than ceremonial. This sounds subtle, but represents a huge shift in the collections’ focus. Away from the best examples in a series, the one which is shown might be the *most informative about the lives of the people who used it*. We can always find traces of life and use in these artefacts, and it is this connection with others, this resonance and appeal to common humanity that ought to lie at the heart of our attempts at the display of a culture.

‘I am fascinated by the signs of alteration, tampering, and even deliberated damage that many museums simply try to efface: first and most obviously the act of displacement that is essential for the collection of virtually all older artifacts and most modern ones – pulled out of chapels, peeled off church walls, removed from decayed houses, given as gifts, seized as spoils of war, stolen, or “purchased” more or less fairly by the

economically ascendant from the economically naive... Even the accidents – the marks of a literal fragility – can have their resonance: the climax of an absurdly hagiographical Proust exhibition several years ago was a display case holding a small, patched, modest vase with a label that read “This vase broken by Marcel Proust”. Greenblatt (1991:44)

I am again drawn to a Japanese practice in this regard, however. In the display of museum quality pottery, there is an acceptance that certain hairline cracks will eventually develop into full ruptures in the fragile brittle ceramic. The solution is not efface the repair, but to celebrate it by pouring a stabilising resin into the crack and then applying gold lacquer, accentuating and highlighting the crack and showing the contrast with the remaining pottery. This shows an acceptance of use; the absurdity of museum culture is that the items most likely to be exhibited are the ones least likely to have ever been used, for these are the items which survive pristine and unbroken.

Greenblatt’s account of wonder (1991:50-51) takes the example of early Renaissance cabinets of curiosity, called *wonder-cabinets*. Like a curate’s egg, the aim was not for the most valuable or most perfect, but rather for the outlandish, unusual, inexplicable, or most deeply narrative objects.

Greenblatt ends with a discussion of the Musee D’Orsay in Paris, which was opened around the time of the publication, and a source of great debate. The museum was designed by Gae Aulenti, and a conversion of a large beaux-arts railway station from 1900, complete with massive barrel vault and ornamental clock. The museum gave precedence on the open ground floors to items which the art-criticism establishment felt were of minor importance compared with the masterpieces of Impressionist and Post-Impressionism displayed in less prestigious spaces deep within the museum.

The prominence instead went to furniture, crafts and other decorative arts rather than fine art. The effect, the wonder is certainly there; but Greenblatt (1991:54) feels that this is at the expense of the resonance of the space. This is perhaps a little naively defined, for there is a great deal of drama in the display of beautifully crafted furniture placed in the context of complete room settings; set against the impressive concourse with carefully terraced display areas and balconies.

In practical terms, the museum has proven a success, albeit one with a great deal of controversy surrounding the status of the objects contained within. The viewing conditions of the acknowledged masters of painting do not afford vast numbers of visitors at once, but nor should they. The intimate setting deep within the plan is actually appropriate, ensuring a practical amount of through traffic resulting in more people spending longer with the whole collection rather than heading straight for the star painters and paintings.

There is also a question of context here, and I am reminded in particular of the galleries showing delicate pastel drawings so popular not only as studies but as alternative finished works by the artists of the time. The pastel, however, is also not as valued by the museum and art-historical establishment, partly enmeshed in the exchange value of a picture, the scale of works leaves the fragile pastel somewhere below watercolours and far below an oil painting in the pecking order of media. These are, however, important works showing the development of modernist thought in art and society more broadly. They are viewed in conditions similar to that which the artist and client might have seen them; darkened and close-up.



This is not only appropriate, but evocative of the resonance and wonder that all good museums must strive to achieve. Both at once, not one or the other.

Wonder represents our astonishment at some of the possible ways for humans to understand the world, make sense of their environment, and interact with it. Resonance is that recognition that there are a plurality and multitude of ways to live, to be human, and that we share something in common even with the most unusual of these. Confronting the material traces of these, provided the context is sufficiently appreciated, allows us some access into other peoples' worlds.

## **Conclusion: Sketching in the Museum**

The notions of representing difference and otherness highlighted by museum studies and anthropology also hold true for the sketchbook. This might be understood as an over-problematisation of the humble sketch, but if we are to understand what it is we are doing when we sketch, then we must challenge some of the preconceived notions of what we are trying to achieve. What is the aim of the sketch, and what is the sometimes inadvertent result?

*Figure x.1-3 British Museum Sketchbook Page. Selection of images from the author's sketchbook, these were drawn in situ at the British Museum. The multiple projections used in the sketches are particularly important in showing ways of describing and understanding objects more fully than a solely perspectival representation.*

Writing on the theme of 'The Museum as a Way of Seeing,' Svetlana Alpers discusses the museum in a manner which could just as easily describe a sketchbook, in this case a large crab found at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge is described:

'I could attend to a crab in this way because it was still, exposed to view, dead. Its habitat and habits of rest, eating, and moving were absent. I had no idea how it had been caught. I am describing looking at it as an artifact and in that sense like a work of art. The museum had transformed the crab—had heightened, by isolating, these aspects, had encouraged one to look at it in this way. The museum had made it an object of visual interest' Alpers in Karp & Lavine (Eds.), 1991:25

We can return to the Soane at this point, and draw a relationship between it as the prototype of the museum and also underline its facility for the sketcher. The Soane Museum itself is a *potential* sketchbook, the resulting drawings a form of personalised museum collection.

'I started with the hypothesis that everything in a museum is put under the pressure of a way of seeing. A serial display, be it of paintings or masks, stools and pitchforks, establishes certain parameters of visual interest, whether those parameters are known to have been intended by the objects' producers or not.' Alpers in Karp & Lavine (Eds.), 1991:29

The sketchbook is also a way of seeing, both for the sketcher and for the audience of the sketchbook, often the same individual. The imposition of order through seriality is crucial to the sketchbook. Items, scenes, and people are placed into a relationship by this simple seriality, a kind of equivalence being given to them so that a series of images are given equal weight.



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