

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

「文物、記憶與文化認同的建構」國際學術研討會

Taiwan Historica, Nantou & Feng-chia University, Taichung, Taiwan

27-28-29 June, 2008

Private and Public Collecting as Expression of Personal and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Historically spoken, two types of collection and hence two types of collector can be distinguished: elitist collections focusing on artworks, antiquities and books on one hand, and collections of mass produced objects such as stamps, dolls and cultivated plants on the other. Objects of the first type are often unique (artworks, for example) and their collectors belong to social, economic, intellectual and, in the past, clerical, royal and aristocratic elites. The second type only appeared after the Industrial Revolution; includes members of the working and middle classes too; and people of all ages (also children); and implies a democratization of the collecting practice. Today, both types of collections are represented in museums (public collectors), although the first type of collection generally elevates the prestige of the museum as well as that of private collectors much more than the second type, even up to a point that most participants of the first type do not wish to be compared with the second. Not everybody is a collector, nor are all human societies in the world museum-focused, but the number of collectors and museums is important enough to seriously consider collecting as a personal (individual) and collective (cultural or national) identity support. This latter thesis implies that collecting should be studied as a metaphor for something else, which largely transgresses the limits and actual object matter of the collection.