

More Than Meets the Eye: On Collecting and Power

Week 1 Blog Post (January 7, 2025) by Lisa Büche (year 5/international humanities), Laura Horovitz (year 5/international humanities) and Nadia Lim (year 5/international humanities)

The discussion in class this week revolved around the temporality of human existence in contrast to the lasting nature of objects, as well as the ways in which collecting, museums, and epistemology shape knowledge and cultural memory. The idea that “we are very temporary phenomena in the lives of objects” highlights how material possessions outlive their owners,



Figure 1: Pieces from Esther Doornbusch's collection

existing as relics that carry cultural, emotional, and historical significance. This theme was reinforced by our guest speaker Esther Doornbusch, a private collector of jewelry. In her lecture she emphasized jewelry's role as a bearer of memories, a status symbol, and a reflection of human desire for self-adornment. Objects, especially personal or sentimental items like jewelry, serve as vessels of history and social meaning. A specific example included a bone hairpin, gifted as a symbol of friendship after Esther had fractured multiple bones. This underscores the idea that objects are embedded with narratives that stretch beyond their materiality, carrying stories of human relationships, personal experiences, and cultural practices.

Esther Doornbusch owns over 400 pieces in her private collection. For her lecture, she brought along some of her favorites: Some very large pieces, some small; some discreet, some very bold: “Conversation pieces”, she calls them. Her enthusiasm and passion for the field are evident: Over 40 hours of work per week go into her own website (hedendaagsesieraden.nl), a free jewelry encyclopedia.



Figure 2: Esther Doornbusch treats her collection with great care



Figure 3 : personal collection of vintage pins a student brought to class

Beyond their personal significance, objects also hold broader historical and geographic implications. Every object is shaped by a global span of labor, material sourcing, and assembly. The discussion touched on how objects are more than just individual possessions; they are part of interconnected systems of production, trade, and cultural exchange. From a socialist or evolutionist perspective, objects are reflections of the social and economic structures that determine their value, accessibility, and meaning. This perspective offers insight into how material culture evolves and how objects can carry the weight of human history, politics, and technological advancements.

Building on this, the week's reading examined how museums contribute to the shaping of knowledge. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's work challenges the traditional notion of museums as neutral institutions, arguing instead that they actively construct knowledge by curating what is displayed and how it is interpreted. Drawing from Michel Foucault's theories on epistemology, she explores how museums function within different historical frameworks and reflect power relations that determine what is considered knowledge. Foucault identified three major epistemes that have shaped museum structures: the Renaissance, which focused on resemblance and perceived connections without scientific order; the Classical, which introduced taxonomy and systematic categorization of objects; and the Modern, which centers on deeper structural and scientific analyses. These shifting frameworks demonstrate that museums are not static but rather evolve in response to cultural and intellectual developments.

A key question raised in class was how museums contribute to exclusion by privileging dominant knowledge systems, often prioritizing Western and Eurocentric narratives while marginalizing other cultural perspectives. Museum exhibits are not neutral; rather, they are shaped by historical and political imperatives that dictate what is deemed important. The selection and presentation of objects reinforce certain worldviews while silencing others, reflecting broader power structures that shape historical narratives.

This discussion emphasized that there is no single, definitive history of collecting and exhibiting. Instead, knowledge is always evolving, shaped by cultural imperatives, power structures, and shifting perspectives on how societies choose to preserve and present history.