Why Collectors Collect

By SHIRLEY M. MUELLER

One out of three adults is a collector, someone who acquires and treasures objects of value. The other two-thirds of the population either live with a collector or know several of them. Despite this large, interested audience, the question of exactly why collectors collect remains unanswered.

Sigmund Freud described collecting "as a redirection of surplus libido onto an inanimate object." Though Freud's theory sounds intriguing, even titillating, it probably has little, if anything, to do with the real reasons collectors collect. The search for rare objects is more basic: It is rooted in our neurobiology. Unlike the unsubstantiated opinions of Freud and his fellow psychoanalysts, our understanding today is based on methodical research and experimental evidence performed by a range of investigators using sophisticated techniques.

THE COLLECTOR'S DECISION

A decision to collect is not made entirely in the thinking part of the brain, the cerebral hemispheres that developed later in the evolutionary process. (See the diagram of the brain on page 60.) If it were, the collector would be a machine, like a computer, because the decision would be made coldly without emotion. Instead, a kind of animal spirits depository (located below the cerebral hemispheres, in the midbrain) exerts influence. Older in origin, this area is where emotional states tied to earlier events are stored. It is also here that the drive for collecting is initiated in a kind of pleasure center, an area named the *nucleus accumbens.*

David Hockney (b. 1937)
American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)
1968, Acrylic on canvas, 83 7/8 x 120 in.
Art Institute of Chicago, Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic G. Pick, 1984.182

COFFEEPOT (ARITA, JAPAN)
C. 1700, PORCELAIN, 9 1/4 IN. HIGH
COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR
PHOTO: THOMAS M. MUELLER

Two researchers from Stanford University have confirmed that an *expectation* of reward (obtaining an object) stimulates our pleasure center. They used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to measure changes in blood flow and oxygenation due to activity in the brain. This relatively new technique, among others, has revolutionized our understanding of the neurofunction relating to decision-making and is the basis for much of the information behind this modern neuroscience.

ANIMAL SPIRITS

Yet it isn't just the pleasure center's interactions with the higher analytic centers that determine whether and what we collect. While our pleasure center is driving the decision, animal spirits are affecting us subliminally. Fear, a kind of caution or vigilance located in the midbrain, acts as a depressor. Its technical name is the *amygdala*. I conjecture that it could be quietly posing questions as a collector studies an object: "Is the piece what the dealer says it is?" Or, "Did the auction house's expert date this piece earlier than it is?" In both cases, the effect is caution.

This could be advantageous if it prevents acquisition of an object that is not what it is represented to be. Alternatively, an exaggerated amygdala response leading to unwarranted alarm could be counterproductive: For example, a collector might not buy a correctly attributed object due to an uncomfortable feeling because she had not seen that particular shape or design previously. Instead of going with her gut, or animal spirits instinct, the collector might intellectually talk herself out of the piece.

Whether we are born with a strong fear response, or our environmental circumstances cause or exaggerate this underlying propensity, the result is the same: Warning signs can be stirred when making any collecting decision, sometimes to our advantage and at other times to our detriment.

A CASE IN POINT

I collect export porcelain, objects made in China or Japan and then exported to the West from the 16th century onward. In pursuit of such objects, I attended one of the world's major antique fairs, Olympia in London, in June 1996. A dealer from Harrogate, Yorkshire, was showing a vessel he labeled a "Japanese Arita coffee urn, circa 1700," with no further description. His stand was crowded with all sorts of ceramics, only a few of them Asian. The coffeepot had thicker walls than most porcelain of its type and was more densely painted than the delicate decorations I was accustomed to seeing.

Whether or not to buy this piece was a conundrum for me. I knew I wanted it if the dealer's description was correct. My pleasure center was clearly at work here: This little-known object would be a wonderful addition to my collection of 17th- and 18th-century Asian coffeepots, *and* I could cite it in the article that I was already planning to write on the chronological development of such pots. But caution intervened: "If I have never seen one of these before, how do I know it is what the dealer promises? And he certainly does not seem to be an expert in this area." This was my caution kicking in.

As I weighed these factors, it was impossible for me to make a decision. I went back to the dealer's stand several times and learned the asking price, which was reasonable. Indeed it was not so enormous that I couldn't afford the risk of learning later that my bet was wrong. I bought the piece. Later, while perusing the book *Interaction in Ceramic Oriental Porcelain & Delftware* (1984), I spotted a similar coffeepot that author Christiaan Jorg described as rare. I had lucked out.

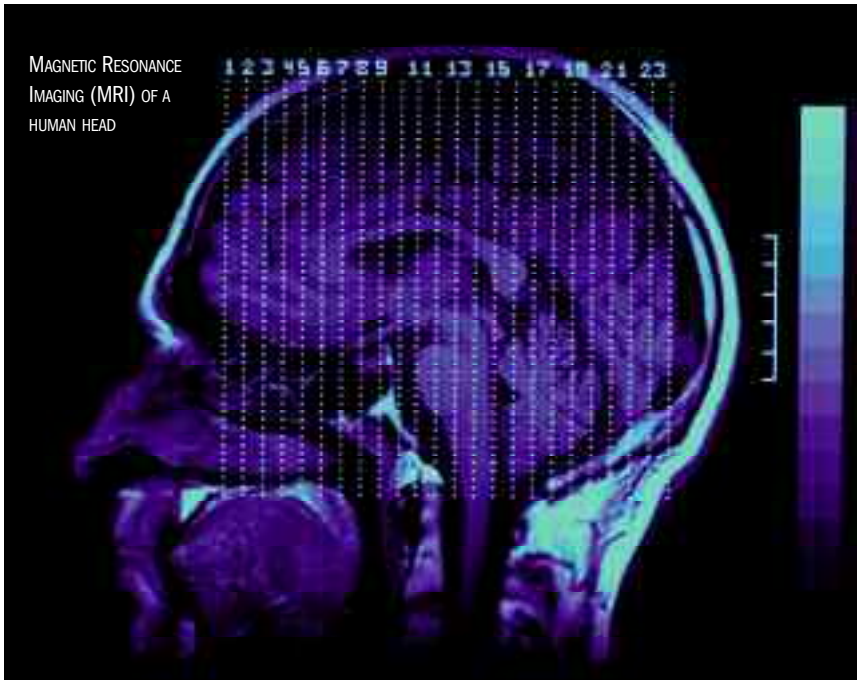
In telling this story, I don't want to suggest that I am always so fortunate. The point is that my judgment involved my pleasure-seeking center *and* my cautionary influences — both animal spirits. In fact, they were dueling. Ultimately, a minor piece of information (the affordable price tag) broke the tie. This is where other animal spirits from the midbrain came to bear.

THE MODULATOR OF REASON

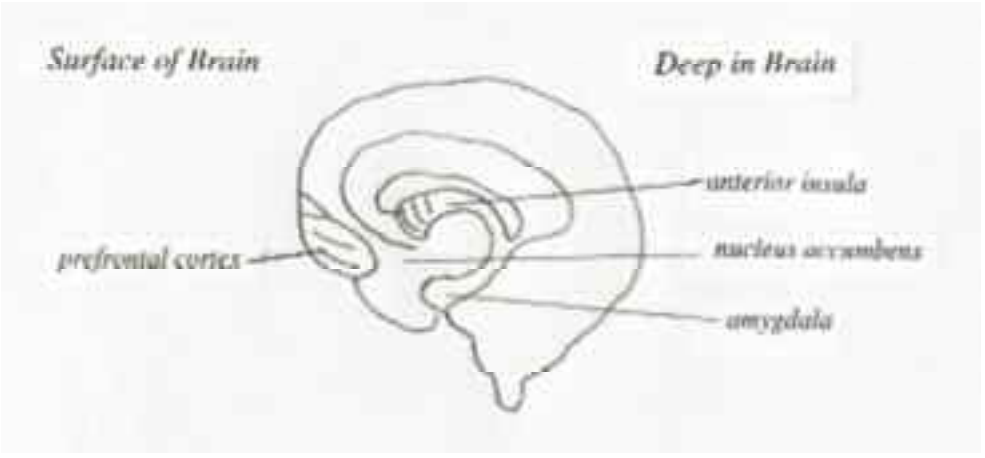
The *anterior insula*, for example, is influenced by price as well as by sadness and disgust. If the cost is excessive, it inhibits activity in the executive portion of the brain, the *prefrontal cortex*. The latter navigates between conflicting emotions to work toward a defined goal. It filters among animal spirits that include the pleasure center, a desire energizer, and depressors such as caution, fear, price concerns, sadness, and disgust. Yet it is the prefrontal cortex that makes the decision. (The brain has additional areas that make contributions, but less is known about them, so we leave them out here.)

This is how a brain conversation might go in the mind of someone interested in acquiring an antique. Her pleasure center says, "Yes, I want it." Feeding her pleasure center are psychological reinforcers (about which less is understood), which make her desire for a particular collectible unique to her. Among these are pride, love of history, legacy concerns, the thrill of the chase, intellectual satisfaction, the joy of arranging objects, and enhancing one's social life.

My particular "feeder" is intellectual satisfaction, a substitute for the rigors of practicing neurology that consumed my life before I started collecting. Reading about Asian porcelain allowed me to forget about my patients, at least temporarily. In a way, my new interest in ceramics transformed my life, giving me a passion outside my original vocation. This focus eventually released me from my need to continue practicing medicine, and only then was I was able to pursue a second



MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING (MRI) OF A HUMAN HEAD



career. One drive was replaced by another. Along the way, I discovered a whole new social life through porcelain, one involving friends and travel worldwide, another fringe benefit for the serious collector.

OTHER FACTORS

Now let's return to our hypothetical collector. Can she purchase an object with abandon due to the drive from her animal pleasure-seeking center alone? No, not if she has normal brain function. Other areas in the midbrain will automatically begin influencing her buying decision. Among these are caution and fear; for example, "Spending this money makes me fearful," or "I need to save for my child's education."

Other midbrain animal spirits might kick in, such as price sensitivity: "This object is priced four times higher than one auctioned two years ago." If the collector is sad or disgusted about another concern, price sensitivity might be further amplified, additionally depressing the pleasure center's urgings.

At this point, the modulating prefrontal cortex enters and takes into account all of the emotional urgings. Although the woman is entirely unaware of her brain's lightning-fast "conversation," the prefrontal cortex announces, "This piece would fill a gap in my collection. Nonetheless, it has been coming up at auction every two to five years at a lesser price. My need is not urgent. I can wait, as my money could be better used for my child's education."

All of this means that the brain weighs potential expenditures against rewards before a final decision is made. Needless to say, recognizing these complex mechanisms can help collectors make better decisions. For example, an emotion unrelated to a particular possession can make you long to rid yourself of it, and thereby to sell it at an illogical discount. Estate sales often occur upon the death of one or both spouses in a long marriage. Consumed by grief, the surviving partner or heir is much more likely to sell at a discounted price than she would have done prior to, or substantially after, the event that produced the melancholy. This is because sadness, an animal spirit, arises from the midbrain and influences the frontal cortex. An uneducated collector might not be able to counteract these creature instincts. Yet a collector more sophisticated about the brain's workings is better able to resist them and thus delay important decisions: She knows her frontal cortex can interact with her midbrain drives more appropriately when her animal spirits are not so strong.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So why does the collector collect? In many ways, she does it because she has to. Her pleasure center begins the process, initiated not only by the desired object, but by past emotional influences. In its nascent stage, the collector's longing allows her to imagine anything she wants about the supposed returns the object will bring. It is in this hopeful phase that the pleasure center burns most brightly. If a functional brain MRI is performed, it erupts with activity when a reward is anticipated. Once the prize is actually obtained, less is present. Essentially, *anticipation of the reward is more exciting to our pleasure center than actually getting it.* This might explain, in part, why collecting often transcends a mere pastime to become a passion. Expectation gives so much joy that the participant wants to continue the pursuit evermore vigorously. ■

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Editor's Note: Baltimore's Walters Art Museum is about to open *Beauty and the Brain: A Neural Approach to Aesthetics* (January 23-April 11). Developed in collaboration with the Zanvyl Krieger Mind/Brain Institute at The Johns Hopkins University, this experimental exhibition invites visitors to explore "aesthetic spaces" created by digitally morphing original works of art. Participants' responses will be used to analyze how 3-D shape characteristics define aesthetic preference. For details, visit thewalters.org.