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SOME TIPS FOR **NEW**  
COLLECTORS

## ARE YOU A COLLECTOR?

How do you know you're a collector? Friends of ours have said that more than three of any similar object was a collection. Their apartment was filled with collections of more than three: old lawn sprinklers, Staffordshire pottery, pug dog statuettes, old cigarette lighters, candlesticks, architectural prints, and so on. A good sense of design and uncanny neatness kept the place from looking like a junk shop. They had an eye for making things work, and they enjoyed themselves immensely without spending a great deal of money.

If you chose your grandparents well, you can collect impressionist paintings or Philadelphia rococo furniture. If not, there are many beautiful, interesting objects that, as our friends found out, can be collected, enjoyed, and cherished.

What's the difference between a collector and a pack rat? Focus, knowledge, enthusiasm, and discipline. A collector is interested in a specific kind of object, which he or she has studied and sought out. The chase is half the fun. A collector knows when to step back, evaluate, and sometimes leave an object on the table because of issues with quality, rarity, condition, or cost.

If you are new to collecting, you might consider the following rules of thumb, based on the experience of people who have been collecting antiques for many years.

1. COLLECT WHAT YOU ENJOY.
2. MAKE A MISTAKE.
3. DO YOUR HOMEWORK.
4. BUY THE BEST YOU CAN AFFORD.
5. DON'T BUY AN "INVESTMENT."
6. DON'T BE SHY.
7. PROTECT YOUR COLLECTION.
8. IGNORE THE RULES.
9. HAVE FUN!

## 1. COLLECT WHAT YOU ENJOY.

If you decide to start a collection, remember that these objects are going to be taking up space in your house and that you will see them every day. Whatever you collect should be something that speaks to you, something that makes you smile when you look at it, something you enjoy. You'll know you're a successful collector when you remodel the house to make room for the things you've found.

How do you know what you want to collect? Look around. Find something that speaks to you. Do some research to see if it has potential to become the basis of a collection—the utterly unique object may be a must-have, but if it's completely *sui generis*, you'll spend many frustrating hours prowling antiques shows looking for another to keep it company. Buy it anyway, but don't collect it.

Once you start looking carefully, you'll be surprised at the number of things that appeal to you, that may fit into your scheme, or that may pull you in a different direction. You'll know you're a collector when, despite tired feet and a complaining spouse or partner, you decide to nip into one more booth “just for a quick peek,” telling yourself that you'll find something there, for certain.

## 2. MAKE A MISTAKE.

The best collectors have bought whoppers. Even Henry Francis du Pont bought some things that cause Winterthur's curators to scratch their heads in wonder. Any enthusiast can be blinded by the pursuit and capture of the elusive grail that will complete a collection. You will make mistakes. If you're lucky, they won't be whoppers. (See Tip 3 for one way to avoid this.) But don't be afraid. A good fake can teach us as much about craftsmanship, style, and connoisseurship as a masterpiece.

And if you do make a mistake, you may have a remedy. A reputable dealer will take back any piece he or she guaranteed (and often one that was not explicitly guaranteed). If you buy at auction, it's less likely the house will take back an object that wasn't as described in the catalogue.

## 3. DO YOUR HOMEWORK.

This is where the pleasure begins. Learn about what you like, and you'll come to know and understand the variations and themes that will lead you down other collecting byways. The methods are simple: look, read, look, ask, look, repeat.

Become a careful examiner. Look carefully, look often, and look around. When you start, you'll probably be taken by the overall aspect of an object, its first impression. As you learn more, you'll look more carefully for imperfections, variations, craftsmanship, and for the small differences that distinguish an ordinary object from a masterpiece.

Read a lot. There are numerous resources, depending on what interests you. Winterthur's bookstore has hundreds of books covering furniture, jewelry, metalwork, ceramics, fabrics, sculpture, fine art, folk art, maritime art and artifacts, and dozens of other fields. There are also many generalist price guides, such as *Miller's Antiques Price Guide* (issued annually), *Kovels' Antiques & Collectibles Price Guide* (issued annually), and *Miller's Pocket Fact File: Antiques, Collectors and Enthusiasts*. Many Web sites, such as the one for Winterthur's Research Resources and Academic Programs ([winterthur.org/research/research.asp](http://winterthur.org/research/research.asp)), have useful links. Auction catalogues are informative, and many major auction houses leave their catalogues online with hammer prices, a helpful guide to the cost (or value) of objects. If you want to learn to look with a professional eye, read *Winterthur's Evaluating Your Collection: The 14 Points of Connoisseurship*.

Look again, using what you learned by reading. This time you'll look more carefully and see things you missed the first time. Pick brains. Find people who know your area of collecting and ask questions. A good dealer who specializes in your area is one of the best sources for information and guidance. Dealers know the market, and part of what you buy from them is their knowledge and expertise. Look again. Particular attributes will stand out, and you'll start to see with a connoisseur's eye. Repeat often.

## 4. BUY THE BEST YOU CAN AFFORD.

Quality counts, and good quality costs more than bad. As you become comfortable with your expertise, you should buy better pieces. The top of the market keeps its value, and the middle and lower segments suffer in bad times. When the time comes to sell, there will be someone out there who wants the best.

Some collectors enjoy trading up and are constantly culling pieces of lesser quality from their collection in order to buy something better. Others could no more part with one of the first objects they bought than they could take an old pet to the

pound to get a new one. Some of us take pleasure in seeing how our taste and judgment have improved over time.

Buy what you can afford; but remember, that one “best” piece will keep its value, while five average ones may not. Some day you’ll find the object for which you’re willing to eat mac-and-cheese for a year in order to afford. Go for it.

## 5. DON'T BUY AN “INVESTMENT.”

Value is one of the most difficult issues to tackle in talking about antiques. Old does not mean valuable. Much that is old is junk. However, many otherwise ordinary things are valuable because they became rare by surviving. Why is a chair made in 1770 more valuable than one made today? Obviously, value derives from what a buyer is willing to pay for any given thing. Many craftsmen today make objects as beautiful as eighteenth-century pieces, but they do not command the same prices. Collectors open their wallets for the pleasure they derive from owning an object, from its beauty, its rarity, its condition, its history, and how it complements other things they have collected. All of these things affect value.

It’s easy to say, “Let your brain control your heart,” when collecting, but almost all collectors can name an object they regret having passed up, stating precisely the time and place they didn’t buy. Collecting is about objects and what they have to say to us, as well as the enjoyment of owning a thing of rare beauty and quality. Look carefully, but buy with enthusiasm.

Unless you can afford to buy at the very top of the market, do not look at antiques as an investment. You should be looking at the quality of construction or manufacture, the beauty of form and design, the warmth that age imparts, and the history the object brings with it. These things survived because someone else treasured them, and they will outlast us because we think they are worth preserving. But buy because you enjoy a particular piece, not because you think it’s an alternative to the stock market. Buy something you really want. If, during your mid-life crisis, you decide to buy a good tall clock instead of a sports car, the clock will not lose value when you take it off the lot, nor will it rust and eventually end up as scrap. It will keep you company at sixty, and it will likely keep its value. But by then you won’t be willing sell it. (If the car assuages your despair at turning forty, buy the car.)

## 6. DON'T BE SHY.

Most antiques dealers are more than happy to talk about the wares in their booths. They are not to be feared (except those who, once started on a topic, can’t stop until you’re as enthusiastic about it as they are). Remember, these people spend a lot of time waiting around in a booth, and they are usually delighted to talk to someone interested in what they have. Yes, they want to sell you something, but they also understand that the best way to get you to buy is to share their interest and excitement about the things they have. They don’t expect a sale with every conversation. They know that getting you interested is the best way to make you come back later in the week, or next year, as a buyer.

Other collectors are a good source of information as well. Getting collectors to talk about their objects is about as difficult as getting grandparents to talk about their grandchildren. Find out how others do it, and borrow freely from their experience.

## 7. PROTECT YOUR COLLECTION.

This stuff has survived a long time, and the least you can do is protect it for the next generation. Light, water, dust, sunlight, and small children can all damage antiques, but there are ways to protect against them, and there are many resources that can help. First among them are *The Winterthur Guide to Caring for Your Collection* and the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (<http://aic.stanford.edu>). If you amass a valuable collection, insure it. Some insurance companies (e.g., Chubb) specialize in collections. When you need professional conservation help, the AIC has lists of certified conservators in just about every field. Their Web site provides valuable guidance on caring for specific kinds of objects as well as how to cope with disasters.

## 8. IGNORE THE RULES.

Collecting is about the pleasure you take in finding, buying, and owning objects. It’s meant to be enjoyed. If rules stand in your way, ignore them.

## 9. HAVE FUN!

Obviously. Go to shows, go to auction previews, go to Winterthur and have a good time.

## TRADE SECRETS

**Get to know dealers:** A dealer you know and trust will serve you well. You can rely on the dealer's expertise and connections to find objects for you. A good dealer will want to work with you, without pressure, to help you assemble your collection. Let your dealer know if there's something particular you want, and you will have an extra set of eyes looking for it.

**Negotiating and discounts:** Remember, most of what you may collect are luxury goods. They aren't necessities, and with few exceptions they cost more than similar, mass-produced, modern objects. That said, almost every dealer will give some kind of discount—usually five to ten percent of the asking price, often more, depending on the piece, the price, how long the dealer has had the object in inventory, and whether you've been a client before. Ready cash is more valuable to a dealer than credit.

**Negotiating is highly situational.** If you're at a flea market, you can haggle as if you were in the souk. If you're in the booth of a reputable dealer at a well-known antiques show, it's more subtle; but there's always room to maneuver. You can open the conversation by asking, "What are you willing to take for that?" If your heart is set on having an object and it's still more than you can afford or you're willing to pay, continue the conversation. But remember, the best is expensive, and much of what you'll see at a good show is the best on the market.

**It never hurts to ask.** The very worst that can happen is the word "no."

**Credit:** Many dealers will allow you to buy expensive items on credit, making a down payment and paying over time. See Tip 6.

**Trading up:** Many dealers will accept a piece in trade as partial payment for another object, especially if it's something you bought from them in the first place. You may not get full value for what you paid (sometimes you do), but it's all part of the deal.

**Auction price versus show prices:** Auctions are a useful gauge of value. It used to be that buying at auction was a wholesale transaction and buying from a dealer was retail. This is no longer true, as many collectors buying at the top of the market now buy at auction (often with a trusted dealer firmly planted in the next seat). More affordable pieces usually bring less at auction than a dealer would charge, and auctions can be a good place to add to your collection once you know what you're doing. Until then, expect to pay retail. It's obvious that dealers are going to sell you a piece for more than they paid for it. When you buy from a dealer, you're buying his or her expertise and, often, a guarantee. A good dealer's experience and knowledge are valuable (see Tip 2).

**Receipts:** Always get a receipt that describes the object in detail, including (if known or if represented during the sale): maker's name; date and place of manufacture; condition, including repairs or restorations; price; the guarantee as to authenticity the dealer is willing to give; and anything else relevant to your decision to buy. If the dealer makes a specific representation about a piece, get it in writing. If the dealer refuses to give you a detailed receipt, walk away.

**You are in control:** Remember, you hold the money. There are other fish in the sea.