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The Personal Is the Historical: Souvenirs, Relics, and Living Exhibitions

Steven Conn

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Personal Is the Historical: Souvenirs, Relics, and Living Exhibitions

Steven Conn (bio)

Teresa Barnett. *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 264pp. Notes and index. \$40.00.

William L. Bird, Jr. *Souvenir Nation: Relics, Keepsakes, and Curios from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History in association with Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2013. 176pp. Illustrations, notes, and credits. \$24.95.

William S. Walker. *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013. 304pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$80.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).

If years of watching “Antiques Roadshow” has taught us anything, it is that one person’s garage-sale junk is another person’s treasure—worth somewhere in the five figures.

We Americans like to collect stuff, and whole industries have blossomed promising to help us deal with it all. You can shop at the Storage Store or the Container Store to buy various kinds of storage (or, if you prefer, “container”) systems. If, however, you need to get the stuff out of your life but you can’t actually part with it, you can rent an off-site storage unit in one of those desolate places just off the exit ramp that resemble a cross between a cemetery and a trailer park. Still our stuff proliferates, and it threatens to bury us—like those freakish folks we enjoy watching on the A&E show “Hoarders.”

We have always liked to collect stuff—for the better part of two centuries at any rate. What has changed over the years is the sheer volume of stuff there is to collect, its ready availability, and the expansion of stuff we now see as worthy of keeping in the first place. The impulse to collect, to accumulate, even to hoard has been with us for a long time. After all, those Victorian parlors looked even more cluttered than my living room—but of course they didn’t have the advantage of the

If it is true that one person's tchotchke is another person's heirloom, then it is also the case that one woman's cluttered chaos is another's carefully constructed system. Most people who collect do so according to some notion of system, taxonomy, or classification—however obscure it might be to the rest of us. Years ago, the art historian George Kubler observed that before we can make meaning out of things, we must have form; that we need to create some sort of organizational framework in order to understand the world around us. “We can grasp the universe,” Kubler wrote, “only by simplifying it with ideas of identity by classes, types, and categories.”¹ Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff agreed when he wrote, “the human mind has an inherent tendency to impose order upon the chaos of its environment by classifying its contents, and without the classification knowledge of the world. . . would not be possible.”²

In different ways, each of the books under review here wrestles with this issue of categories: how they are defined, what goes into them, and what's at stake in those parsings. William L. Bird Jr.'s *Souvenir Nation* and William S. Walker's *A Living Exhibition* both examine aspects of the Smithsonian Institution, the nation's single largest collection of stuff. Teresa Barnett's *Sacred Relics* examines personal collections made by nineteenth-century Americans.

By anyone's best guess, the Smithsonian houses nearly 140 million separate objects. That is a staggering figure and one that frankly few of us can actually comprehend. Those 140 million range across every conceivable category of material thing: fine art, decorative arts, biological specimens, detritus from outer space, cores from the bottom of the oceans, pieces of technology, archaeological artifacts, ethnological objects, hand-made crafts and mass-produced consumer items, plus some that defy easy categorization altogether. Like a lock of Sir Walter Scott's hair. That last is among the featured “souvenirs” in Bird's charming book. Bird serves as a curator at the National Museum of...

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observation area from extraneous noise, we will immediately see that the angular distance
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