PUBLIC AND PRIVATE: THE MAIN CATEGORIES OF ART COLLECTION IN FINLAND

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The following article addresses a paradox that lies at the heart of every public art collection. The public nature of the institution leads one to assume that collections are compiled on what might be called «public principles.» Thus the selection process is supposed to be «objective,» while also being guided by «good taste.»

The expectation of objectivity stems from the public art collection's role as a custodian of the nation's memory. There is a desire to read history – in the present instance, art history – as one monolithic truth, not as an illustrated narrative recording personal choices made by individuals. I would contend, however, that the public institution and the private collection cannot be compared as such, because a public institution is not analogous to an individual agent.

The content of every public art collection has its roots in privacy and private choices. Every art museum in Finland has a thin public facade, beneath which we discover the private taste of one or several individuals.¹ In other words, the compilation of a public art collection can only be discussed in relation to individual decisions. My argument partly disagrees with views put forward in collection studies concerning private and public collecting.²

In this article, I hope to shed light on the compilation of a public art collection from three different angles. I will analyse, firstly, the special character of art within the field of collecting; secondly, the demarcation of boundaries between the public art collection and the private collection; and thirdly, the classification of different types of collection. The classification I propose is based on Finnish art museums and their institutional history.

MEANINGFUL DISTINCTIONS: ART COLLECTING AS A FIELD

The private collector can only survive this cooperation [between the museum and the private collector] if the museum refrains from devouring the private collection by incorporating it into itself. Where the private collection is thus incorporated, the private collection simultaneously perishes, insofar as its most important distinguishing element is precisely the subject collecting and controlling it.

- 68 Contemporary incarnations of Benjamin's collector as positive anti-type can only survive as long as they keep their distance from the museum. The death of such a type is, however, unlikely in the extreme: no museum has the imagination or the resources to cover all the forms of collecting that private individuals have embraced over and over again.³

These are the words of the Finnish scholar *Ari Pöyhtäri*, whose study of collecting, published two years ago, explored sociological and philosophical perspectives. Pöyhtäri's discussion of private collecting rests on the assumption that the museum as public collector and the individual as private collector are, by definition, polar opposites.

Pöyhtäri juxtaposes the institution (an inactive subject) with the individual (an active subject). He uses the image of an «unimaginative institution» as a foil, so as to valorise private collectors. However, the comparison is unsound: private collectors have their counterpart, not in the institution itself, but in the individual collectors within it.

Pöyhtäri's examples are mainly drawn from *object collections* in museums and in private hands, and his arguments, such as the following, are not directly applicable to the art world:

The museum lacks the power, peculiar to the private collector, of finding meaning in what most people regard as mere junk.⁴

In the art world, the field of collecting is circumscribed (and curtailed) differently compared with the world of objects. Not everything is possible in the art world, because the art institution draws its own

boundaries – whether collectors like it or not.

Pöyhtäri's outlook is collector-centred. *Susan M. Pearce*, on the other hand, has approached the field of potentially collectible objects from a market perspective. She illustrates the relation between object valuation and market exchange by dividing the field into four sectors. The highest level is *intellectual material – a-market*. The second level is *art – art market*, the third is *ordinary shopping* and the fourth is the *spurious collecting market*. The opposite poles of the qualitative continuum are «the museum» and «rubbish.»⁵ Actors in the field, whether they represent themselves or an institution, navigate within this market, making choices. «The museum» is an institution that finally houses the items chosen by the actors.

Thus the art collector and the object collector operate in markets that are quite different. When it comes to art, there are no «general stores» where a collector might find collectibles that no one else had thought of. There are simply two types of work: those that belong within and those that belong outside the art institution. Regardless of their quality, all the works inside the art world are art, whereas the works that are left outside belong to the world of objects.⁶

The art market also comprises several different sectors. In the model I have outlined, the higher category of so-called institutional art falls into three parts: (1) museum art, (2) trend art, and (3) *débütante* or «newcomer» art. Collectors who confine themselves to this higher sector are on safe ground. The artists in question have either already made a «name» for themselves or are about to do so, and all

the collector has to do is to sift the stronger works from the less strong. The lower category includes (4) marginal art (risks, borderline cases, anti-art), (5) commercial/popular art, and (6) non-art. With the exception of the last heading, these lower forms of art also belong to the art world, although the artists and works in question are not «endorsed» by the art world.

Members of the art world are interested not just in institutional art but also in the margins: collectors can enhance their own standing by discovering or raising the status of a new artist or work of art. In other words, the market is open to control and manipulation: the representatives of art museums and galleries can alter the classification of risky or borderline cases and even elevate them to the highest status.

In the art world, the ability to make *meaningful distinctions* entails an ability to evaluate, trust in one's judgement, an ability to react, and sheer daring. In the last two areas, the private collector is often more agile compared with the representative acting on behalf of a public collection. Private collectors also have the right freely to delimit the range of object(s) in the collection, and they enjoy free discretion to alter their acquisition policy. Collectors working for a public institution face a different situation: they operate between the current market and the existing collection, which is of a permanent nature – what is already there cannot be altered. Nevertheless, in both cases, the choice of works to be acquired is a personal one.

The art market comprises several different sectors.

*THE PUBLIC ART COLLECTION:
MAIN TYPES ACCORDING TO
CONTENT*

The public art collection is always and without exception the sum of individual choices. Finnish art museums are closely bound up with private collecting: it is to private collectors that we owe the number and quality of the country's art museums. Accordingly, the «public» nature of the collections can be seen as a thin facade; the term mainly refers to the manner in which the collections are funded and displayed.

To penetrate beneath this facade, public collections can be divided into main types according to *content* and *origin*.

Collections can be divided into five main categories on the basis of content:

- collections of contemporary art
- collections of modern art
- collections of old art
- general art collections
- and
- various combinations of the above.

Contemporary art collections focus on the art of the present day, and mainly acquire current Finnish and foreign art. However, in time, contemporary art settles into the historical context provided by the collection.⁷

In Finland, modern art collections focus on the art of the first half of the present century (1900-1960), illustrating the developments of Finnish art, often interspersed with sample works by major foreign artists.

Finnish collections of old art are mainly devoted to the nineteenth century. In Finland, there were so few active artists

before the nineteenth century that it has not been possible to establish numerous comprehensive collections of old art. The nineteenth-century collections also often include foreign works, sometimes from earlier centuries.

General collections such as the Finnish National Gallery cover all the above-mentioned areas, from old art to modern and contemporary art. Other combinations are also possible – in fact, they are very common. Thus the average type in Finland is a twentieth-century collection with an emphasis on contemporary art, possibly including a few historical sample works. Such collections come under the category «various combinations.»

Why is it that mixed collections dominate the art museum field in Finland? The main reason is that *even today, acquisition policy is rarely subjected to open definition and analysis.*⁸ There is a sense that demarcating specific boundaries would obstruct creative thought and intuitive action. The people in charge claim an indispensable right to freedom and refuse to spell out the motives for their acquisitions. In the long term, however, a loose acquisition policy leads to a situation where the collection piles up aimlessly, instead of expanding coherently.⁹ Where this happens, the collector has in effect relinquished responsibility for the task at hand.

There is a *wish to keep public collections open to strong works* in any category. Donations often include works that lie outside the chosen museum's purview, but in order to secure an attractive contribution, the museum will accept the donation as it stands.¹⁰ The process escalates when the collection becomes self-generating: the new departures occasioned by donations

Akseli Gallen-Kallela: Portrait of Dr H. F. Antell, 1886. The Museum of Finnish Art, Ateneum.
H. F. Antell, one of the most important collectors of his day, bequeathed his art collection «to the people of Finland.» It included 44 paintings, 28 sculptures and 10 drawings and prints, and a substantial fund, which allowed the Ateneum as custodian to extend the collection over the years. Photograph: Central Art Archives, Helsinki.

72 in turn motivate future acquisitions outside the museum's main field.

Upon receiving a donation, a private collector would be entitled to sell, donate or exchange uninteresting individual works, whereas a public collection is almost invariably saddled with the whole donation. Given that all donations contain some «dross», the inviolability of the donated collections causes a major problem: over the years, museums accumulate a sizeable number of sub-standard works.¹¹

A third reason why mixed collections dominate in Finland is that *museums fail to improve their profile through «brand consciousness»*. There is no desire to create a distinctive profile based on the strengths of the collection, or consciously to manipulate the public image or «brand name» of the collection. Where a distinctive profile is created, it is not an active choice on the part of the museum, but the work of the museum audience and the media.

The lack of «brand consciousness» represents a failure to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pertaining to a particular collection. Museums thus lose an opportunity to analyse their profile in relation to their counterparts in the field – that is, in relation to their competitors. A content analysis would enable the museum institution to spell out an acquisition policy as well as a basic philosophy that would provide a distinctive profile for the collection. For the reasons described above, such analyses are rare.

THE PUBLIC ART COLLECTION: MAIN TYPES ACCORDING TO ORIGIN

When a collection is strictly defined as focusing on either old, modern or contemporary art, or simply devoted to a single artist, the above-described fundamental problems should not arise. The definition automatically pinpoints the strengths and opportunities offered by the collection, as well as its origin. In other words, origin and content also interact and mutually influence one another.

Public collections can be divided in three main categories according to origin.

- Several donations, of different sizes, from different sources. The museum independently purchases works of art, expanding its collection. Donations received can be (or are) taken into account in the acquisition policy. Acquisitions are made by representatives of the institution. (Example: The Finnish National Gallery.)

- One major donation forms the core of the collection. The collection is later expanded on the basis of the core collection and its profile. Acquisitions are made by representatives of the institution. (Example: The Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere.)

- One major donation plus an acquisition fund, on which the donor (or trustees nominated by the donor) draws to extend the collection further. The representatives of the institution pursue an independent acquisition policy from a separate fund. (Example: The Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection and Rovaniemi Art Museum in Rovaniemi.)

The first and most general of the above categories aspires towards universality. As a result, the collection is difficult to control: the area to be covered is enormous, and acquisitions can never fully cover past and present developments in art. The collection succumbs to a vicious circle: there are always «gaps» to be filled. The museum must consciously decide to take control of the future of its collection, instead of acting as an inert repository for the burden of history. Otherwise the compilers of the collection find themselves merely pondering the order in which to fill in the gaps.

A sizeable museum provides the most fertile soil for privately donated art collections. A large collection can accommodate large entities, including unfocused private collections.¹²

The second category is typical of the twentieth century, during which several Finnish art museums have been founded around a single private collection. Their focus is clearly defined and the acquisition policy is designed to complement the original donation, giving priority to the same artists. The donor may also have voiced an opinion regarding the future development of the collection, but decisions are made by representatives of the museum. In other words, the donor has delegated to the institution the responsibility for making acquisitions in his or her name. This category also includes museums devoted to a single artist.

The third category represents the most modern (and perhaps the most inconsistent) model for merging a public institution and a private collection. The responsibility for expanding the collection donated to the museum lies entirely in the

hands of independent trustees, who use an annual grant from the donor to make regular acquisitions, so as to expand the collection indefinitely.

For example, the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Collection, donated to Rovaniemi Art Museum, is accompanied by an annual grant which in fact exceeds the Museum's own acquisition budget. The grant is controlled by two art experts nominated by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation: it is they who choose the acquisitions. Rovaniemi Art Museum focuses on local art, and does not compete with the donated collection, which is dedicated mainly to contemporary Finnish art. The situation is problematic for the local art community, which would like to see local artists benefit from the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation. The hopes and expectations of the local art community conflict with the aims of the Foundation and its representatives.¹³

As the above example illustrates, the local art community and «tax-payers» can seek to interfere with the public collection's manner of recording our cultural heritage. Evidently, the illusion persists that the public collection is «objective» – that it comprises a neutral narrative that anyone can help to shape.

In such cases, the local art community implicitly denies the museum representatives the right to exercise personal taste in a public context. The public and the private merge under a single identity. Against this background, it is easy to credit the claim that a private collection donated to a museum can only survive if it is not subsumed and devoured by the museum's own collection.

74 In other words, blurring the distinction between the concept of the private collection and the concept of the public collection is just as ill-advised as setting up a sharp contrast between the two. To avoid such conceptual confusion, in order to see the field clearly, we need precise models of classification. The central question concerns the relationship between private and public, and our perception of it.

The psychological models employed in collection studies suggest that almost all private collectors have at least some *desire to publicise or exhibit their collection*. By parading their treasures, collectors satisfy their narcissistic and exhibitionistic needs.¹⁴ The craving for publicity culminates when the collection is sold to an institution, or when it is donated or bequeathed.

Collectors feel strongly drawn towards the museum institution, whose approval can lend them the art world's official stamp of approval, recognising their labours and endorsing their taste. Even the most astringent critics of the art museum institution have taken this path: a recent example in Finland is the artist *Jan-Olof Mallander*, who violently criticised the personnel appointed to head the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, rubbishing the institution itself and lamenting the «squandered future.» Around the same time, he himself benefited from the art museum institution, selling his private art collection to the City Art Museum of Helsinki.¹⁵

The private collector's urge for publicity not only complements and nourishes existing museums, but also spawns new ones. The institutional history of the Finnish art museum is a catalogue of cases where a

private collection has been enshrined in a purpose-built museum – a monument maintained by public funds. The most famous examples are the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere, Pori Art Museum in Pori (Maire Gullichsen Collection), Aine Art Museum in Tornio (Veli Aine Collection), the City Art Museum of Helsinki (Leonard Bäcksbäcka Collection), Rovaniemi Art Museum (Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation Collection), and most recently, Hämeenlinna Art Museum, where a new building was inaugurated in the autumn of 1997, to house a modern art collection deposited for fifteen years by Henna and Pertti Niemistö.

PRIVATE OR PUBLIC

Museums overarch the system of collections; they are the final, eternal resting-places of the collected objects which are deemed to be paradigms of their kind within the framework of value, as this is created through the dynamic of making meanings. The museum as institution is both at the apex of the system and its crux because museums and their material provide the point of reference against which the rest of the collecting system can operate.¹⁶

Public art collections are often dubbed objective, faceless, colourless, and impersonal. In collection studies, the public collection is denigrated as a castrated form of collecting. This general preconception has largely shaped the concept of the public collection, in Finland and elsewhere.

As my classification by origin suggests, an objective, faceless collection cannot even exist. Every public collection is a mosaic of personal tastes, whether of private collectors whose collections have been

annexed by the museum, or of the museum's own representatives. This raises certain questions concerning the concept and definition of collecting. For instance, why do theories of collecting falter when the private meets the public under a single rubric, i.e. in the context of a public collection?

The present discussion is an outline towards a systematic understanding of the distinction between public and private collecting, which I intend to develop further in future research. The present article explores two angles: *the identity of private collecting* and *the identity of public collecting*.

Let us begin with the hypothesis that every private collection has an identity similar to that of its collector. The collection is a reflection of the collector's passions, desires, and tastes, as well as a record of thwarted hopes and compromise. The identity of the collection comprises the reputation of the collector, the works in the collection and the collection's status in the art world.¹⁷ The collection lives and changes with its compiler; new works are added and others are sold or exchanged. Private collections in a given field compete for status in the art world.

The identity of a public collection, on the other hand, consists of a variety of factors, including: the quality of the works, donated collections, collecting policy, the collection's national and international standing in the art world, the status of the institution, the public image of the collection, and public opinion. The identity of the collection will be examined below in relation to the category according to content. A collection of modern art or Finnish contemporary art will be com-

pared with its international equivalent; a collection of old foreign art will be examined against its counterparts elsewhere in the world.

Merging the identities of a private and a public collection gives rise to hopes and anxieties on both sides. The private collector surrenders his or her «collector's identity» to the public collection. Conversely, by accepting a donation in the name of their institution, the representatives of the public collection underwrite the choices made by a private collector.

Private Collection:

- the hope that the collection will be accepted by the museum
- the hope that the collection will receive the attention it deserves in the art world
- the hope that the collector will attain «prestige» status as a collector
- the hope that the value of the collection will increase (the collection remains intact and on display, and bears the collector's name)
- the fear that the institution will devour the collection
- the fear that the collection will lose its identity
- the fear that the name and identity of the collector will be lost
- the fear that the value of the collection will diminish
- the fear that the collection or individual works in the collection will not be prominently displayed.

Public Collection:

- the hope that the profile of the museum's collection will be strengthened by the incorporation of the private collection

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- the hope that the collection will receive increased attention in the art world
 - the hope that the status of the museum's collection will be enhanced
 - the fear that the museum's «own acquisitions» will be eclipsed by the private collection
 - the fear that the identity of the collection will be fragmented, forming «sub-identities»
 - the fear that the public image of the museum will be fractured
 - the fear that the value of the collection will diminish
 - the fear that the museum will be forced to accept sub-standard «compromise» works.

Since museums are the overarching community manifestation of the sacred set-aside, an emotional response which we all attribute to our individual collections, it follows that deposition in a museum, through which sacredness and significance are guaranteed, is the goal to which many collectors aspire for their material. As we have seen, museums offer individuals the hope of recognition and a kind of immortality: it is the individual's chance to join the great game. With this, however, goes a kind of ambivalence. Those who seek acceptance also court refusal, and the consequent strain fosters a certain love/hate relationship between established museums and private collectors, which finds expression in a wide variety of particular arrangements and relationships.¹⁸

Of course, not every collector is thus drawn towards the public collection. The history of private collecting is varied: an Egyptian pharaoh would order himself to be buried with his collections (eternal ownership); Chinese and Japanese collectors are known to have burned their col-

lections of paintings and calligraphy before they died (preventing others from profiting from the works); yet others release their collection back into circulation (sharing the enjoyment). Many collectors simply seek alternatives to the museum institution, which they find distant and frigid.¹⁹

The history of the museum institution hinges on a symbiotic relationship with private collectors, and public collections continue to be willing to embrace private collectors. From the point of view of the custodian of a public collection, donated private collections are both warmly welcomed – and awkward to receive.

There are three types of potential donation: wholly desirable, partially desirable and undesirable. The first and last cases are clear-cut. Unfortunately, the majority of donations belong to the problematic middle category.

From the point of view of the public collection, it is problematic that most private collectors are unwilling to permit the representatives of the museum to select individual works from their collection. As a result, second-rate works appended to high-quality works must also be incorporated into the public collection. Furthermore, the public collection is forced to give an irrevocable commitment to the donor, undertaking never to sell individual works from the collection.²⁰

There have been many attempts to solve this dilemma. For example, in the United States, museums offer expert advice and training to private collectors, thereby preemptively assimilating them.²¹ Apprentice collectors are, as it were, indoctrinated in museum policy. The aim is to shift the content of potential donations from the

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE – ART COLLECTION IN FINLAND

The earliest public art collection in Finland was founded by the Finnish Art Society. It was first permanently opened to the public in 1863 and transferred to the Ateneum in 1888, upon the completion of the Ateneum building. An early photograph of one of the galleries. Photograph: Central Art Archives, Helsinki.

78 second category (partially desirable) to the first (wholly desirable). The strategy presupposes a coherent acquisition policy and a planned and determined approach on the behalf of the museum. This encourages private collectors to adapt the identity of their collections to the identity of the museum collection.

The above phenomenon concretely exemplifies the way in which theories of collecting falter when the private meets the public in the context of a public collection. When the identity of the public collection meets the identity of the soon-to-be-annexed private collection, they should merge into a single whole, under the general rubric provided by the identity of the public collection. The identity of the public collection is in any case the sum of its constituent collections, each with its respective identity: the annexation of a new private collection does not represent a substantial philosophical or structural change.²²

The private collection, on the other hand, instinctively clings to its right to a separate identity so as to avoid the perception that it has been simply absorbed into a larger whole. Paradoxically, private collectors also expressly yearn to attach their collections to a large museum, which in a sense entails surrendering their identities as collectors along with the identity of the collection. This inevitably means a change in the identity of the private collection. However, that identity need not be lost altogether.

SUMMARY

I rest my analysis on the hypothesis that the compilation of a public art collection can only be studied in relation to private collecting and the personal decisions of individuals. The «institution» does not constitute an objective operator in the field; how could it, when it lacks the knowledge, skill and heart for evaluating art? And yet, especially in the context of collection studies, the institution is routinely set up as the polar opposite of the private collector, as though the two were commensurable entities.

Research which valorises the private collector fails to see beneath the public facade of the museum institution. By contrast, in-depth analysis of the structure of the public collection always reveals either one or several private tastes. Tastes are developed by private collectors, who become drawn into the orbit of the institution, and by the museum representatives entrusted with the right to make acquisitions and to accept donations.

The interplay between public and private is a source of confusion in collection studies. When the identity of the public collection meets the identity of a private collection in the context of annexation, the two are supposed to merge under a single identity, namely, that of the public collection. According to most authors in collection studies, this is tantamount to the destruction of the identities of private collector and private collection alike.

Such solicitude on behalf of the private collector is to be expected, given that private collecting has been subjected to more research than has public collecting. We lack the concepts to analyse the latter; its

inner workings are unknown. The question is: how to define the process by which a public art collection is compiled? Should we, for example, analyse public collecting as a form of private collecting which takes place on a public stage?

To sketch a possible answer, I have begun by identifying the main types of public art collection in Finland, both by content and by origin. The categories are not analogous, because they are based on different parameters: content reflects acquisition policy, while origin reflects the structure of different museum collections. However, the two categories are mutually dependent: the origin of a collection largely determines its future content, and the existing content dictates how the collection can expand.

In future, I intend to discuss the compilation of the public art collection in relation to (1) the museum institution and power, (2) desire and motives and (3) taste. My aim is to unearth the concepts pertaining to public collecting, and to investigate how these concepts are formed and where they stem from.

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- of Contemporary Art was placed at 1960. At the same time, it was argued that it should be possible to move the date forward as the need arose. This would mean transferring the older portions of the collection to the Museum of Finnish Art.
8. Recurring phrases about «filling in the gaps» and «major contemporary works» do not represent an adequate definition of acquisition policy.
 9. See Pöyhtäri 1996, pp. 17-18. «A definition of 'collecting' only has meaning if it facilitates a distinction (even in specialist literature) against stockpiling and hoarding – borderline phenomena with which collecting is often confused.»
 10. Numerous examples could be cited. For example, in 1993, the Museum of Finnish Art accepted the so-called Eila Walli bequest, a collection which includes both major Finnish art and works by unidentified foreign artists. See Sariola 1996, p. 46.
 11. Selling the works is out of the question because it would alienate the private donor as well as possible future donors. After all, collectors identify strongly with their collections. See, for example, Baekeland 1994.
 12. Some donations do not even constitute collections in the strict sense – the works may have simply accumulated instead of being deliberately collected. In museological research, it is important to distinguish between purposely compiled collections and other donations.
 13. See also Pettersson 1996.
 14. See Baekeland 1994.
 15. The museum acquired the collection on 11 May 1990. The Museum of Contemporary Art was founded in the autumn of the same year.
 16. Pearce 1995, p. 387.
 17. If the collector wants to remain anonymous, keeping his collection out of view, the public identity of the collection will not take form before the collection comes into the public domain.
 18. Pearce 1995, p. 390.
 19. Baekeland 1994, p. 217.

NOTES

1. Private taste falls into two distinct categories: (1) the taste of the private collector, and (2) the personal taste of a museum functionary or member of an acquisition committee.
2. See, for example, Pöyhtäri 1996, p. 100; Crimp 1995. Both these authors work from a so-called Benjaminian premise.
3. Pöyhtäri 1996, p. 100.
4. Pöyhtäri 1996, p. 97.
5. Pearce 1995, p. 375.
6. In this context, it would be interesting to analyse «haymarket art» in relation to popular culture (e.g. Richard Shustermann and David Novitz).
7. For example, when the collections of the Foundation of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland were nationalised in 1990, the works were divided between three museums. The chronological starting-point for the collection of the Museum

- 82 20. This rule applies to Finnish art museums almost without exception. It bolsters the image of the museum as a secure, permanent institution promising eternal life to all the works in its collection.
21. For example, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum all maintain a carefully built network of potential donors.
22. Assuming that the content and quality of the private collection are up to standard.

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