



Collecting things My grandmother's elephant

By Chris Wilson

My grandmother had a beautiful elephant carved out of sandalwood on her dressing table which I secretly used to covet. I wanted it more than anything in the world. It was about the size of a football and had a cheeky smile. It was inlaid with tiny circular mirrors and mother of pearl, and had real ivory tusks and toenails. One day my sister said "Oh Grandma, please can I have it?" and, to my fury and disbelief, she just gave it to her! I immediately made two resolutions: 1) never to speak to either of them ever again. 2) To find another elephant just like it.

Ever since I have been scouring the world. I have rummaged round junk shops and antique shops all over Europe, I have been to garage sales and flea markets in America, I have hung about in Arab souks and Indian bazaars, but I have never seen anything quite the same.

Along the way, however, I have acquired all sorts of other elephants and my collection has grown and grown. I have got black ebony elephants from Malawi, and a couple of ivory – all, I hasten to add, made a long time ago, before the ebony trees were chopped down and the ivory trade was made illegal. I also have soap stone elephants from Zimbabwe, and an exotic Congolese one carved out of bright green malachite. I have a whole family of wooden Thai elephants marching along the top of my piano – sometimes when I sit and play I could swear they are marching in time to the music. I have two very heavy, long legged elephants which I bought in Khan el Khalili, in Cairo, which I use as bookends, and an enormous fat one from the Sudan which I use as a coffee table. My search goes on, but it gets more and more difficult to find really good pieces. On recent trips to Africa I have noticed how the quality of the workmanship has deteriorated. In craft markets all over the continent you can find thousands of elephants, but they are nearly all shoddily made, churned out for tourists by people who probably have never seen a real elephant in their lives.

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Why do people collect things? Probably many, like me, don't set out to do so. You just acquire something, then another and another and then, once you've got a small collection you just keep adding to it. I have an uncle who collects key rings – he has hundreds of them from all over the world – but he can't remember how it started. Other people collect stamps, stones, beer cans, beer mats, match boxes, all sorts of things. For some it can become a total obsession and they will go to any lengths to get something. One of my colleagues collects Royal memorabilia, which to me is the ultimate in bad taste! Her house is crammed full of kitsch things like Coronation mugs, ashtrays with pictures of Charles and Diana, British flags, tea towels printed with Windsor Castle and even a toilet seat cover with Prince Andrew grinning widely up at you. What is this urge to possess all these things?

I recently discussed this question with a group of students in Mozambique and what rapidly became evident was that few of them had such an urge.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know" said Antonio. "It's just not in our culture".

"Does that mean you're not as materialistic as Europeans?"

Antonio laughed. "No way! We want cars and houses and fancy things just like anyone else, but we don't collect knick knacks, things we can't use".

"I think it's because of our recent war" said Maria "and the state of the economy. For many years there was nothing to collect, except shells off the beach perhaps".

"I collect shoes" said Teresa, who comes from Angola.

"I have over seventy pairs. But I buy them to wear, not just for the sake of having them".

"Anything you don't actually need you have for the sake of having it, and you can't possibly need seventy pairs!"

"I do, I need every single pair!" she insisted.

"So you are a collector!"

"No I'm not!"

"Yes you are!" shouted the whole class.

Paula stuck up her hand. "I'm a collector" she said. "I am a fan of Julio Iglesias and I have all his CD's, everyone, even the latest which, I have to admit, isn't very good at all".

"So why did you buy it?" I asked.

"Well, because I've got all the others of course" she said. "And my son collects those little plastic dinosaurs you find inside cereal packets. He's only got to get T Rex and then he's got the whole set."

"They are exploiting you" said Antonio. "They encourage children to become collectors so that you keep buying more and more. This is something new in our country. Soon we will all be fanatically collecting things, just like everyone else in the world".

Harshill, who is of Indian origin, had been silent all this time. He cleared his throat. "One good reason to collect things is that a collection is worth more - how do you say in English? More than the sum of its parts. If you sold your elephants one by one you wouldn't get nearly as much as if you sold the whole collection. So it is a way of saving money, a good investment."

On the way back to my hotel a young boy was selling a badly carved elephant by the side of the road. I didn't want it but I bought it because I felt sorry for him. Later I thought I should just have given him some money and let him try to sell it to someone else. It would never be part of my collection, each in its own special place in a different part of my house. I imagined walking round looking at them all and thought about what Harshill had said - it's a way of increasing the value of what you already have - but as usual there was that nagging feeling that my collection, no matter how valuable, would never be complete.

Not without my Grandmother's elephant! What a waste for it to be with my sister when it could be, should be, with me! "Oh well, never mind, try not to be obsessed" I told myself.

Ever since though, I have been lying awake at night, thinking of it standing there on a brass table in her hallway, next to the window she always leaves open for her cat. Her dogs know me, so they won't be a problem when I climb over the wall in my gloves and balaclava. The whole operation will be over in less than five minutes. The only problem is, having acquired it, what will I do when my sister comes barging in to nose around, as she periodically does, and sees it in pride of place in my house? I'll have to keep it hidden and then what will be the point of having it? Oh dear. Perhaps I could have a special alarm that would only ring when my sister is on her way. No that's silly. I'll just have to move. To another country, under another name, far, far away. But even then, knowing her, she'll track me down.

Oh ! Dear Reader, what would you do if you were me?