

SOL CALERO selects from the Hiscox Collection
Desde el salón (From the Living Room)

Whitechapel Gallery
06 May - 12 June 2021

To Create a House for Art to Live In
Sira Pizà with Sol Calero

Walls, doorways, patios, windows and halls: brick and stone build a demarcation that indicates all that it holds inside, by isolating it from the rest of the world. All buildings create an area of signification. The house, albeit a minor category in the scope of architecture's most transcendent pursuits, persists as a reminder of our way of inhabiting: possessing.

It is by owning all the separate things in a house – all the furniture, the dishes, the clothes, the tablecloths – that one can claim it in its entirety, as a whole. But we don't relate to all things in the same way. According to an already classic definition, a *utensil* refers to the world, while an *object* is abstracted from its function and made relative to me, the subject.¹ The less functionality an object has, the greater its potential to signify status. It is our passion that defines the object, and the pattern of our passions creates a narrative that goes beyond the everyday and is transfigured into poetic discourse – an image of ourselves that radiates from material things, detached from their original contexts and put together in a series where they define each other. That is the act of collecting.

Objects move in a space of hierarchies of value and in systems of exclusion and discrimination, some of which rely on the idea that 'identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience)' built on accumulation and appropriation.² Possession, property and patrimony are consequent levels of this dynamic when it intersects with the element of time. Collecting is a way of consecrating personal memory by means of a *souvenir*, worth salvaging from the passing of time and treasuring in a glass bubble for its safekeeping.

But collecting is first and foremost a way of domesticating the exotic, a form of colonisation: it discovers something extraordinary and Other, and its taxonomical nature

¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'A Marginal System: Collecting', *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict, Verso, London, 1996, pp.85–105.

² James Clifford, 'On Collecting Art and Culture', *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, p.218.

enforces order upon it. The famous *Kunstschränk*, popularised in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, presents a perfect illustration of the disintegration of the confines of the known world: a mobile cabinet that contains an eclectic combination of the planet's wonders in a microcosm. It incorporates things so diverse that they only respond to a time-specific system of knowledge: jewellery, relics and artefacts are revered alongside coral, coconuts from the Seychelles, or the much-treasured bezoar, a calcareous formation from the stomach of a Persian goat in the shape of a ball, often mounted in gold and thought to have miraculous properties as an antidote. Elements of *naturalia* and *artificialia* were considered two aspects of the same thing, either genially made by nature or by man.

The *Studiolo* or the *Kunstkammer* was an expanded version of this, appearing in private homes as an exhibition room designed for the organisation and viewing of a particular collection of antiques and treasures: literally, a tiny museum inside a home. The *Studiolo* combined erudition with curiosity in the increasingly scientific spirit of the Renaissance. In major commercial empires like the Venetian and Dutch ports, the exploration of the New Worlds through advances in navigation allowed for a paradigm shift: from the beauty of the emblematic and familiar, to the quest for the incomprehensible. A more secular approach to life, no longer perceived as only the antechamber of eternity, favoured a focus on science, nature and domesticity as attributes of the present.

Despite its untraceable origins, we find domesticity being shaped in 1600s Dutch society alongside the introduction of art into the citizen-scale home, both as a depiction in the famous genre of domestic interiors and in the popularisation of collecting itself. On a less individualistic trajectory, domesticity in non-Western contexts, such as the Mesoamerican tradition, was built around open spaces that constituted a neural epicentre of private life, conceived intrinsically as a communal affair. Environments were linguistically designated in terms of the spatial association of subjects who shared a constructed habitat. Many of these words of affiliation in indigenous languages are still spoken among a number of ethnic groups in Mexico today, such as *cemithualtin* in Náhuatl, 'the people of a patio', and the Otomi *datak'amawathi*, 'to be together in the patio'.³ Cultural practices and moral principles emanate directly from architectural arrangements, and vice versa.

On the other side of the spectrum, the tradition of Protestant principles that rejected public ostentation encouraged austerity in public appearance: here, the home's facade hid the display of its owner's status and taste indoors. It was during the Dutch Golden Age that an emerging class of tradesmen in a republic without aristocracy came to embody the democratisation of collecting, which was earlier reserved to royalty and the

³ David M. Carballo, 'La casa en Mesoamérica', in *Arqueología Mexicana*, no.140, July–August 2016, pp.30–5.

nobility.⁴ This culminated, in the 1800s, in the large-scale entrance of the bourgeoisie into the art world, driven simultaneously by motives of social distinction, capital and philanthropic transcendence.⁵ The growing interest in a more human-scale type of art, both in subject matter and physical dimensions, alongside a shift towards privatisation, supported the consolidation of practices that lay outside the institutional, nationalistic and historical agendas of academia and state. Expanding beyond the Paris Salon, through private dealing, independent exhibitions and the acquisition of works overseas, art relied ever more heavily on private patronage in its search for autonomy, becoming forever dependent on subjective systems. The more autonomous it became, the weaker its ties with the mundane world.

And as we know, art is the paragon of the process of subjectivation, paradigmatic of the inverse proportion between functionality and status. So this remarkable *thing* is placed in a series, entering the home as an object and the art market as a commodity. Value systems flatten its political substance and wear away its contextual implications, the same way walls and shelves swallow paintings and sculptures, collapsing their uniqueness into the commonness of chairs, fridges and bowls. Nothing escapes this all-encompassing force. The stories of what we preserve and surround ourselves with go hand in hand with the colonial ethos: narratives of cultural identity, the domestication of knowledge, the taming of the exotic and the perpetual search for authenticity.

⁴ Philipp Blom analyses this phenomenon in his book *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting*, Penguin, London, 2003.

⁵ Eva Rovers, 'The Art Collector: Between Philanthropy and Self-Glorification', in *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol.21, no.2, November 2009, pp.157–61.