

The Patsy Mullen Collection

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Museums and collectors

Museums are defined and shaped by their ability to interpret the material culture of their audiences past, present and future. Museums, as we in Western Europe know them, cannot exist without objects, and they cannot exist without collectors. From the breathtakingly prolific and expansive (and expensive!) collecting of a Pitt Rivers to the humble efforts of a local history society or to the collections of toys begun in childhood, collectors make museums.



Patsy Mullen at the centre of his collection

Of course, museums are collectors as well. In their first phase of foundation they will often actively receive and encourage donations from a variety of sources. Once founded, they move into a more considered and targeted phase of collecting, when they establish themselves as collectors, sometimes (for instance in the expensive art world) competing with other collectors for possession of treasured items. Local museums still encourage and indeed, rely on donations of material from the local area, although they too, when established will pursue a more limited and focused form of collecting.

Museums need collectors, but in the Western museum tradition, collectors also need museums. The donation of a collection to a museum brings the efforts of the collector to a wider audience than will have previously known about his or her work. Museums with their aim of holding and preserving objects for the public in perpetuity, bestow a kind of immortality on collectors. Donating objects to museums and seeing them on display vindicate the time, effort and money the collectors have outlaid on their pursuit.

Despite the interconnectedness of the relationship between museums and collectors, relatively little attention has been paid to theories of collecting until recently. Biographies of famous collectors have been written, and studies of the foundation of famous museums, but the examination of why people collect, what kinds of things different people collect and of how societies and museums value collectors was limited until the 1970s and 1980s. Then, a new field, 'collection studies', emerged as an important element of cultural studies. As our modern world examined its own definitions of culture, and placed increasing value on popular culture and the expressions of popular culture from pop music to TV dramas, so museums began to realise the importance of collecting material from the present as well as the past.

The Victorians, from whom we get many of our ideas about what constitutes a museum, knew the importance of contemporary collecting. Their museums showed off the technological expertise of their present as well as the treasures of their past. But somehow, until recently, our museums did not value contemporary collecting. When they woke up to the need to do so, they realised more than ever the importance of the work of the collector.

As museums were starting to value the collection of expressions of contemporary life and culture, they also began to value the notion of community museums as keepers and interpreters of local life. These two concerns highlighted both the work of local collectors and the importance of museums working in conjunction with them, to preserve and interpret expressions of community identity.

Patsy Mullen's Collection

This study is an examination of the work of an important County Down collector, and of how his

collection was built up and developed. It is also a study of how the collection operates today in Down County Museum. The study utilises some of the theories of collections studies to interpret the collector's collecting style.

In late 1994, ten years after its opening, Down County Museum acquired its largest single collection of objects. The collection, numbering 627 items, had been built up in the market town of Castlewellan over a period of thirty years. Patsy Mullen had made both collecting and the organisation of that collection (by documenting, conserving and arranging) a major part of his life since the 1960s.

The collection was broadly speaking, a social history one. Items in it ranged from Victorian costume and household artefacts, to farm implements, shop posters and nineteenth and twentieth century electrical objects. The diverse nature of the collection was deliberate. It was designed to have a geographical and cultural bias rather than a thematic or material one. It was intended to reflect the development of a community rather than the aesthetic appeal of objects themselves or their design and technological development. This is particularly the case when we consider the amount of time Patsy Mullen dedicated to his collection. It was not big, either by the standards of other more selective collectors who might concentrate on say, bicycle lamps, or by the standards of more eclectic collectors, who might collect all kinds of Victorian household items.

After an initial period of large scale collecting took place, the collector's emphasis moved from adding items, to the organisation of the collection. In the language of collections studies, he moved from behaving like a collector to behaving like a curator. This often happens with collectors. Some see the expansion or completion of the collection as being their main aim, others begin to organise, catalogue and build up background material on their collections. Patsy Mullen took the organisation of the collection one step further and opened a museum in his home that was intended to encourage local people to examine and celebrate their material heritage.

The development of the collection

The study of collections looks at the ways in which different groups of people collect items. Broadly speaking there is a gender bias in what kind of objects people collect. Generally, more men collect items relating to work, industry, sport and transport than women. Far more men than women collect stamps, tokens and badges. More women than men collect costume, decorative household items and things like figurines and dolls. Both men and women collect fine art and decorative art. The collecting of these items is traditionally bounded by wealth rather than gender.

In common with most male collectors, Patsy Mullen's initial interest in forming a collection was related to his occupation. In about 1950, he opened a garage where he restored motor cycles and cars. In the 1960s he began to collect old motorcycles, cars and associated documents and accessories. The nature of this collection was primarily related to his own lifestyle and was characterised by what collections studies calls 'souvenir hunting', connecting the artefacts and experiences of other motorists and car and motor cycle enthusiasts to his own.

In the late 1960s he decided both to widen and narrow the collection. He began to acquire artefacts relating to the development of the town of Castlewellan and its surrounding hinterland. The geographical base of the collection was to be very specific, but the thematic one was to be wide ranging, from trade objects, to costume, to toys and old posters. He acquired the collection from a variety of sources, local people clearing their houses of 'old junk', small rural shops closing down, his own family. From the beginning, he only acquired objects he could, in museum terms, provenance. Every acquisition was accompanied by documentation and an interview with the donor.

When Patsy Mullen retired in the 1980s, the collection occupied him almost full time. He began to exhibit the collection locally, encouraging schools and community groups to visit. The conservation of the collection was one of his main interests, no doubt stemming from his days as a motor cycle restorer, and he took extraordinary steps to ensure that objects requiring restoration were done properly. He took advice from a variety of museums and professional conservators, and built up a workshop of materials and tools for the purpose.

The haphazard souvenir type collecting which characterised his first collection had no place in this one, which was defined by an almost scientific organisation. In everything he did the

collector reflected the practices of 'proper' museums, rather than those of non-scientific 'sentimental' collectors. His reasons for doing this were related to the overall rationale of the collection which was to help forge the identity of a community.

The purpose of the collection

In 1986 Patsy Mullen published a book entitled 'The Ins, Outs and Whereabouts of Castlewellan'. The book was an exhaustive account of the growth, decline and regeneration of the town from the 1890s to the 1960s. It used many items in his collection for information and illustration, and was aimed at a predominantly local audience. The book is a tribute to the many characters of the town, the trials and tribulations of the community, and to the importance of preserving evidence of the past, both objects and oral testimony.

By this stage, Patsy Mullen was recognised in the community as its foremost local historian. He wrote in the local press, maintained his collection, kept documentary evidence about the town, and freely shared his information. All of this, and the book, clearly identified him as the major repository for the community's history. He was both the source of much information on the past and the interpreter of that information. The material evidence of the community gathered by him, at a time when collecting 'old things' was neither popular nor profitable, also made him the keeper of the town's identity. The exhibitions created by him out of this evidence made him the major interpreter of the community, both to itself and to outsiders. All of this helped to give the community a sense of value, through times of economic and social decline and political tensions. His collection, museum, and writing, pointed to a time when the small town was a bustling, busy place, an attractive centre of shops, cinemas, amateur drama groups, racing car clubs, Church clubs and so on; where the cultural and religious divisions of the 1970s and 1980s were muted in an atmosphere of mutual help and respect.

In terms of collections theories, we might say that the collection built up by Patsy Mullen had a political and social rationale. One of its major purposes was to shape the identity of the community and engender a sense of pride in the achievements of the past. As in other areas, here the collector was echoing the kind of purpose behind the collecting plans and policies of many important regional and national museums over the centuries.

The collection in Down County Museum

Down County Museum acquired the Patsy Mullen collection in late 1994. Patsy Mullen decided to donate for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these was the fact that a wider audience would have access to his life's work through exhibitions in the museum than could be accommodated by the small displays he was putting on in his house. Other prominent residents in his area (including local historians and councillors) urged the move and argued for the importance of wider access to the collection.

The museum was anxious to acquire the collection for a variety of reasons. The background information on the collection was of a kind rarely displayed by other smaller donations; the majority of the objects were in a very good physical state; the acquisition of the collection would make a larger selection of objects available for educational and handling purposes; and the collection did truly reflect important elements of the development of the Castlewellan region.

The collection's move to a recognised museum presented important issues for both the museum and other local collectors. Collecting on the scale that Patsy Mullen had been doing, was recognised as something with widespread value for local communities, both in boosting their self image and in presenting themselves to outsiders. It also recognised the important achievements that dedicated individuals can make towards building a repository of community history.

In return for the gift of such a collection, the museum had to ensure that the work of the collector would be remembered and valued, and that the collection would retain its 'personality' and its links with its founder.

The collection is gradually being integrated into the rest of the museum's collection system. Duplicate material is being prepared for educational workshops and conservation work is taking place on other items. The store of documentation built up by Patsy Mullen has been incorporated into the County documentation systems, and exhibitions of the items have been mounted in various localities. The initial publicity drive, which accompanied the handing over of the collection resulted in a higher profile for the museum in the Castlewellan area and, an

opportunity for the community to reiterate its gratitude to the collector for his work in preserving the past.

Over the next couple of years, the museum will be making further efforts to recall to people the collection's status as an important cultural resource. This will be done through more exhibitions, the publication of articles about the collection and the continuing work of conservation and documentation. Collections built up by people like Patsy Mullen are hugely valuable resources for community museums, not just because of the nature of the material collected but because of the background information the collector builds up. They are a unique way for museums to learn more about both their communities and about themselves.

This collection had always been identified in the public eye with the collector. It defined his life and was correspondingly defined by his life patterns and life style. Taking the collection into the museum has far reaching implications for those links, and it behoves the museum to respect the integrity of the collection as it was created, as well as to use it to further its educational aims among a wider audience.

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