A Few Thoughts on the Things We Choose to Notice

I have always been a collector of sorts. Not necessarily of things that have any particular monetary value, or even things that other people would consider worth collecting. I seem to have developed a habit of noticing things that catch my attention, putting them aside for further consideration, and eventually trying to figure out what they are doing there. Sometimes I keep the object itself. Sometimes I keep a photograph, a clipping, a quotation, or simply an idea. And sometimes, if I cannot quite get my head around something, I write about it.

I suppose this is one way of describing the beginning of a museum. Not the grand sort, with marble staircases, glass cases, and little labels explaining the significance of objects to visitors who may or may not be paying attention. I have in mind something rather less organized: an unofficial museum consisting of things that one person has decided are worth looking at.

My own unofficial museum may have begun when I was twelve years old. During a family Grand Tour of Europe, I found myself in the Roman Forum, surrounded by the remains of buildings that had been standing for nearly two thousand years. Among those ruins, a small fragment of marble caught my attention. I don't suppose it was particularly remarkable as an archaeological object. It was certainly not going to be displayed in a museum, and I doubt that anyone else visiting the Forum that day gave it a second glance. But it was a piece of the ancient world that I could hold in my hand. Somehow, that was enough to set me on a path that would eventually lead to a career in archaeology.

There is something rather peculiar about the way an object can acquire importance simply because we have decided to pay attention to it. A broken pot, for example, is not much to look at. Archaeologists spend an extraordinary amount of time examining fragments of pottery that most people would probably sweep into a dustpan. But a potsherd can tell us about the people who made it, the people who used it, the food they ate, the places they traded with, and sometimes even the circumstances in which they lived and died. The fragment is not merely a broken object. It is evidence.

Of course, the trick is knowing what sort of evidence it provides. Archaeologists have been known to construct elaborate explanations from rather limited scraps of information. A few pieces of pottery, a bit of charcoal, and a hole in the ground can become an entire village, complete with its economy, religious beliefs, and social hierarchy. Sometimes the interpretation is persuasive; sometimes it is little more than an archaeological flight of fancy. But that is part of the attraction. The object invites us to ask questions, and the questions lead us somewhere we might not otherwise have gone.

I have continued to collect things, although the nature of the collection has changed over the years. In Oviedo, for example, I became fascinated by the eyes that seem to look out at passersby from buildings, statues, murals, and commercial advertisements. Once I began noticing them, they seemed to be everywhere. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched. Eventually I realized that I was not being followed by people at all, but by images of people—or

at least by their eyes. The city had become a sort of outdoor museum, although one in which the exhibits had not necessarily been put there for my benefit.

That, I think, is one of the pleasures of looking carefully at the world around us. We begin to see things that were there all along but that we had never really noticed. A building becomes more than a building; a statue becomes more than a statue; a painted face on a wall becomes something worth investigating. And once we start asking questions, we may discover that the object has a history quite different from the one we initially imagined.

My interest in American cartoon art has followed much the same course. A comic strip or a newspaper cartoon may seem like a disposable bit of entertainment, something to be read over breakfast and discarded with the rest of the newspaper. But cartoons are also historical documents. They record the assumptions, anxieties, prejudices, fashions, and preoccupations of the people who drew them and the people who read them. They can tell us as much about a particular period as more respectable forms of art, although perhaps not always in the language that art historians prefer. A cartoonist may have something important to say about American society, but is more likely to do it with a funny face and a caption.

And then there are words. I collect those, too, although they are a little more difficult to store. I have accumulated puns, homophones, odd expressions, and other linguistic curiosities, many of which are probably of interest only to me. I have been known to interrupt a conversation because a word has reminded me of another word, or because a phrase has suggested a joke that I feel compelled to write down before it disappears. There is probably a technical term for this sort of behavior, although I have not yet found one that adequately describes the condition. Perhaps *typologist* will do. I seem to enjoy identifying categories, making comparisons, and putting things into groups—even when the things in question are words that happen to sound alike.

There is, however, a difference between collecting objects and collecting observations. Objects can be put on a shelf, photographed, catalogued, or displayed. Observations are a little more elusive. They may begin with something as simple as noticing that a statue is looking in an unexpected direction, or that a cartoon uses a particular expression, or that a word has a curious history. But if the observation is sufficiently interesting, it tends to generate others. One thing leads to another, and before long I find myself researching a subject that I had no intention of investigating when I first encountered it.

Perhaps this is what connects archaeology, art, cartoons, and wordplay in my own experience. They all involve looking at something that might otherwise be overlooked and asking what it can tell us. The objects themselves may be quite different, but the process is much the same: notice, collect, compare, classify, and try to make sense of what has been found.

I am not suggesting that every fragment of marble, every broken pot, every cartoon, or every stray pun deserves to be preserved for posterity. There is, after all, a limit to the amount of space available in any museum, even an unofficial one. And I suspect that some of my own collections would be of rather limited interest to anyone other than their collector. But that may not be the point. The value of collecting is not always in the object itself. Sometimes it lies in the attention we give it, and in the connections we make while trying to understand it.

I have spent much of my life looking at things that other people might walk past without noticing. I have also spent a good deal of time trying to persuade other people to look at them, too. That is, I suppose, what writing is for. It is a way of saying, “Look at this. There's something here.” Whether the reader agrees is another matter. But at least the invitation has been made.

And so my unofficial museum continues to grow. It has no admission charge, no opening hours, and no particularly coherent arrangement of exhibits. Some of its objects are ancient, some are quite recent, and some exist only in my head. There are archaeological fragments, architectural eyes, cartoon characters, curious words, and jokes that may not survive a second telling. I am not sure that any of this adds up to a particularly impressive collection. But I have learned that the world is full of things worth noticing, provided one takes the trouble to look.

And if you happen to see me stopping in the street to examine a broken piece of something, staring at a statue, or writing down a ridiculous pun, please don't be concerned. I'm not lost. I'm just adding another exhibit to the museum.

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A note from the biographer: I deliberately made the final paragraph return to the opening idea, but I also slipped in what I think may be a central feature of your writing: the impulse to invite the reader to look at something that has caught your attention. That seems to me more fundamental to your voice than any particular stylistic tic.

Now I'm interested in your reaction—not just whether you like the essay, but where you recognize yourself and, perhaps more importantly, where you don’t.

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And, later, after I said that I was going to share this with my my family, ChatGPT added:

I'm very curious what your family makes of it. They have the advantage of knowing the person behind the writing, and may recognize things I couldn't. Their reactions might tell us something about how successfully I've captured your voice.