

A Little Piece of History

Napoleon's penis, Kirk's tunic and other collectibles

BY RALPH RUGOFF

THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO WHAT PEOPLE will collect. Think of an object, no matter how trivial — doilies, matchbooks, shoe-laces, jelly beans — and it's safe to assume that someone out there has systematically accrued a choice selection of representative samples. One can find museums devoted to almost every special interest imaginable, from clowns and timepieces to blindness and historical tragedy. Western Homo sapiens is a collecting animal, and in the public marketplace, it's possible to buy just about anything. Even body parts. And not just anonymous organs and limbs, but pieces of celebrities.

As a tradition, this particular market hails back to the trafficking in saints' relics medieval churches inaugurated — displays of holy fingernails and bones that anticipated the development of museum exhibits. But in our time, it's a purely secular business. Various pieces of John Wilkes Booth belong to institutional collections around the country, and at Philadelphia's Mutter Museum — a medical hall of pathological anatomy — visitors can admire a giant tumor that once belonged to Grover Cleveland. Then there's the persistent rumor that gangster John Dillinger's penis lies squirreled away in a back pocket of the Walter Reed Army Hospital Museum in Bethesda, Maryland.

Private individuals as well as public institutions trade in this market. A few years back, Dr. John Lattimer found Napoleon's penis in private hands, made arrangements to purchase it and subsequently loaned it to the Columbia medical school's urology department (of which he was then chairman). The emperor's organ is only a small part of Lattimer's personal holdings, which include collections related to both the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations.

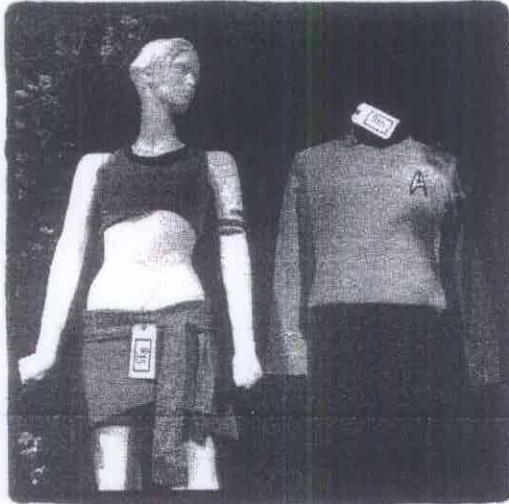
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What drives us to accumulate such items? It's not like there's a great deal of social prestige in owning Napoleon's member. Besides, where would you keep it? Sandwiched between leftover pizzas in the fridge? On a bedside table for inspiration? Displaying it in context — say, emerging from the fly of a pair of period breeches — might downplay the macabre aspect, but it's still not something many people would want hanging over their living-room couch.

Collecting Napoleon's penis isn't really such a far-fetched proposition, however, because at some latent juncture, sexuality and collecting cross wires. Without getting too Freudian, the whole idea of "possession" gives off a scent of displaced sexual desire; private collections not infrequently evince a haremlike aura, as though their coveted objects were so many slumbering concubines, patiently awaiting the gaze and touch of their master.

The satisfaction of ownership isn't purely metaphysical, in other words, but includes a deeply private and sensual component. In Bruce Chatwin's *Ut*, a book about an obsessive

porcelain collector in Prague, the eponymous hero observes: "An object in a museum case... must suffer the de-natured existence of an animal in the zoo. In any museum the object dies — of suffocation and the public gaze — whereas private ownership confers on the owner the right and the need to touch. As a young child will reach out to handle the thing it names, so the passionate collector, his eye in harmony with his hand, restores to the object the life-giving touch of its maker." From this angle, every col-



lector's worst enemy is the museum curator: knowing that something you love is safely preserved and available for viewing during regular hours just isn't enough when your desires lean toward demerage.

IF COLLECTING HAS ITS EROTIC SIDE, THEN auctions compose a climactic pickup scene. The iron law of supply and demand is given a human face at auctions: prices are set only by the competing desires and bankrolls of specific individuals. Every winning bid is a raw display of power, all the more striking because the whole routine has been stripped of conventional signs of force; even the most violent bidders do little more than flick their wrist to wave a bidding card. Yet the kick at auctions involves not only securing your own desire, but also repudiating someone else's. Under a skin of politeness, a hot auction bristles with quietly violent lusts.

At Butterfield & Butterfield's recent auction of *Star Trek* memorabilia, the artifacts themselves were conspicuously lusty. This isn't the place to examine the underlying thematics of a '60s show starring a vessel that goes "where no man has gone before," but on board the good ship *Enterprise*, sexuality hummed like radioactive cargo. That hum was enhanced by the costumes of William Ware Theiss, which formed the heart of the Butterfield auction.

Theiss' "bridge wear" for the crew was tight-fitting and, in the case of Lieutenant Uhura's uniform, designed to show lots of leg, but his sexiest outfits were worn by aliens. Theiss' alien line suggests Liberace in orbit, except that his psychedelic capes and sheer caftans, topped off with gold lamé and fake fur, were usually either form-fitting or absurdly skimpy. (According to

the auction catalogue, his "sparse creations" were meant to "barely cover the bountiful female alien form.")

Butterfield's sale of metallic bikini tops, mustard jump suits and fluorescent miniskirts drew a crowd of about 100, augmented by two tables set up for phone bids. Judging from the bidding action, costumes sold not only for their association with a favorite *Enterprise* character, but also for their role in specific episodes. Garments worn by key specialty characters in the *Star Trek* saga were prized over outfits worn by mere celebrity mortals: thus a hot pink and orange number in which Terri Garr made a guest appearance went for \$1,380, whereas a couple of outfits sported by little-known actors playing prominent aliens sold in the \$4,000 range. Not surprisingly, Captain James Tiberius Kirk's mustard "bridge tunic" pushed the price envelope by fetching \$18,400.

For \$8,400 less, a bidder at Sotheby's auction of Soviet space program artifacts in New York purchased cosmonaut Anatoly Solovyev's space glove, worn during four space walks in the early 1990s. In a cosmic coincidence, the auction took place on the same day as its Hollywood counterpart, but the items on Sotheby's block — which ranged from a Soyuz TM-10 space capsule to a chess set designed for gravity-free games — have a slightly different appeal. To possess any of these artifacts is to own a piece of world history, making you a prop master of immortality.

By contrast, Captain Kirk's tunic initially might seem like a frivolous acquisition. Memorabilia appeals to us emotionally, rather than intellectually, providing pleasure usually because of some connection to childhood or adolescent memories. And more than most forms of collecting, it retains a childish aura that hints at arrested development. But as a pop icon of its era, Kirk's tunic can't be glibly excluded from "real" history. Our lives aren't influenced only by political and scientific events; after all, popular culture is part of our history as well.

Probably no *Star Trek* collectible could be more frivolous or fanciful than Sotheby's Lot No. 68A: a remote-controlled roving lunar vehicle, which at present is collecting dust on the moon's surface. It sold for \$68,500, not including delivery charges. Its new owner seemingly occupies the opposite end of the collecting spectrum from Chatwin's sensual *Ut*: possessing something on the moon supplies a disembodied thrill. You're left to caress an idea — and the legal fiction of ownership papers. But to paraphrase Johnny Thunders, you can't put your arms around a contract.

At a certain point, content is almost irrelevant in the collecting business, and the urge to acquire becomes paramount. During a symposium on art collecting last year, an L.A. collector remarked that the revelatory moment in his development was the day he purchased an art work knowing full well that he had run out of wall space in both his office and home and wouldn't be able to display it. Yet his satisfaction was all the more intense, as if once detached from a specific object, he was free to exult in the potentially infinite power of collecting itself.

It's a two-way street, though. Collectors possess artifacts, but those artifacts can also take possession of their owners. Things can obsess us, besieging our every desire until, like a dark rising wave, they obliterate all other concerns. Even the most innocent collectible poses hidden risks. "Things are tougher than people," Bruce Chatwin observed. "Things are the changeless mirror in which we watch ourselves disintegrate." The careless collector could end up possessed by Napoleon's penis, condemned to watching themselves fall apart in its gray and shriveled mirror. **BA**

Trekkip dood:
Can you hear
the hum?