Title: The nature of collecting in the Classical world: collections and collectors, c.100 BCE - 100 CE - Volume 1

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Abstract: Contrary to general traditional belief, the origins of collecting, as a systematic activity that refers to the satisfaction of symbolic rather than actual needs, was not an invention of the Renaissance. Collecting made its first appearance in European prehistory, was a subject of interest and debate for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and has been present continuously ever since. This thesis aims to address a gap in the history of collecting and to contribute to the discussion of its origins and nature through an analysis of collecting in the classical Graeco-Roman world. As a result, the subject of this thesis is the nature of classical collecting as this is illustrated by the works of four Latin authors, M. Tullius Cicero, Gaius Plinius Secundus, M. Valerius Martialis, and T. Petronius Arbiter. This analysis aims to take a long view of the collecting attitudes in the classical world, and trace the seeds of this practice and mentality in a shared tradition that runs through European thought. Consequently, the views on collections and collecting expressed by the four writers are seen within the longer Graeco-Roman tradition, and are approached through four parameters that have been identified as fundamental for structuring the collecting discourse: the notion of the past and the role of material culture as a mediator between people and their perception of it; gift-exchange as a social tradition with deep social roots, that structures relations between people, people and the Gods, and people and material culture; the notion of identity, at a communal and individual level and the capacity of objects to shape and structure it; and finally, the notions of time and space, our understanding and appreciation of which require the mediation of material culture. The discussion of each of those parameters comes together in the four chapters on the Latin authors. The reading of the ancient texts has been influenced by philosophical concerns about issues of interpretation and appropriation, and in particular by the ideas of Barthes and Ricoeur.

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The phenomenon of collecting as a systematic activity undertaken for symbolic rather than actual needs, is traditionally taken to originate in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the first cabinets of curiosities appear in Italy. Yet it is clear that the practice of c...