

MAP COLLECTING PRACTICES

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There has been only limited comparison of the different contexts in which maps have been brought together, and hardly any critical consideration of the contours of map collection. This paper aims to begin to correct some of these gaps by starting to chart the changing contemporary significance of map collecting, to explore its variations and to explain differences in individual map collecting practices. It is grounded in social theoretical approaches to the wider world of collecting and in the literature around post-Harleian critical cartography. The unique characteristics of map collecting are explored, and a detailed comparison of map collecting practices of British antiquarian and everyday map collectors is presented, following an investigation of textual sources and an ethnography of collecting practices and spaces.

The collecting fields of antiquarian and everyday mapping in the UK are largely separate and practices reflect the spaces and social contexts through which artefacts circulate. Dealers shops, map fairs, auction rooms, libraries, collecting meetings and social events complement virtual collecting spaces on the internet and private spaces and impact upon the social norms attached to different collecting behaviour.

Antiquarian collecting is characterised by inherently conservative values: authenticity, verified historical rarity, beauty, and the display of taste by a largely aging and wealthy group of collectors, who sometimes value their collections as investments. Only the very rich are now able to amass significant numbers of antiquarian maps or atlases. Despite the impacts of globalization and modernization dealers remain an important part of this trade and social contact remains important. Collecting requires specialist knowledge and is well regulated.

In contrast the worlds of the everyday collector are altogether less aspirational. Maps are cheaper and easier to acquire and the detail of amassing and completing a collection becomes more important. More maps are acquired. The pastime is less regulated and trade is less of a business. Collectors value their own specialist knowledge, rather than relying upon expert opinion. Collecting activities and spaces are more local, and everyday collectors are disproportionately male, with a much wider spread of social backgrounds.

These differences suggest that we need to understand map collecting practices as 'placed behaviour', in which economic relations are mediated by local culture and places. A reassuring conclusion in an increasingly uniform globalized world.