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Book Review: Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture 1800-1940

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Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture 1800-1940. 2008. Dianne Sachko Macleod. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 310 pp. (Includes Illustrations, Index). \$45.00 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Beth Muellner¹

Dianne Sachko Macleod's well-written, richly-illustrated and intriguing study is a welcome addition to the history of women in the arts. Like the scholarship of art historians Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, and Marsha Meskimmon, Macleod sheds light on women's multifarious contributions to cultural and artistic practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In her focus on elite American women's collecting activities, the author considers how the psychological attachment to art moved privileged women out of their private consumption and enjoyment of art and into a desire to share their collections with others, and thereby into independent thinking and an engagement with public life. Using interdisciplinary tools in a case study approach, Macleod pursues the question of how gender functions in the activity of collecting, probing the traditional understanding of collecting and the collector. The author takes issue with binaries of male/female, civic/personal, professional/amateur, serious/casual, premeditated/accidental, etc., and proposes to define collecting from a female perspective against patriarchal notions of collecting as being "an ordering, sense-making, modernist pursuit" (6). Macleod considers the "more intimate, subjective, and impromptu relationship" that exists between collectors and objects (6), and looks, for example, at the collector's penchant for tactile objects, such as porcelain, glassware, embroidery, carpets, etc. (the so-called minor or "decorative arts") as an example of this relationship. Based on psychoanalytic, philosophical, and sociological theories that consider play and creativity as crucial to discovering the self, Macleod proposes the theoretical model of "collecting-as-play" to describe the more "pragmatic and quotidian" relationship that defines some women's collecting practices (14). This relationship suggests that women collected objects more for their personal "use value" rather than for their "exchange value" (9). In engaging with the ideas of personal and public value in the collecting of art, Macleod's study is intrinsically tied to the debate on possessive individualism vis-à-vis the emerging market economy that shaped American identity during this period.

The individual case studies of women represent significant phases in the making of American culture, beginning in the antebellum period, and continuing through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The overarching themes that run through each chapter reflect the "playful" ability of art collecting to provide psychic release, to foster individuation, promote empowerment, and to "gender" American culture and cultural codes. The book is organized chronologically into five chapters. The first chapter focuses on the tension of women's public and private personas in the antebellum period, looking closely at the example of Eliza Bowen Jumel in comparison with Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt and Mary Telfair. In addition to Jumel's business acumen, the power of attorney she was granted in 1826 over her first husband's business and property enabled her to show New Yorkers European art in an era before the city's museums were founded. Colt and Telfair challenged the male cultural sphere by filling in the gap created by the Civil War,

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mixing, like Jumel, masculine and feminine inclinations in collecting art and presentation, and thereby stretching the definition of “womanliness” in their time.

In the second chapter, Macleod’s theory of the “collection-as-play” takes root in the analysis of postbellum women’s return to the home front and their collection of domestic, “intimate” objects that reflects the era’s cult of true womanhood. Macleod compares the twenty-two women collectors included in Earl Shinn’s three-volume survey *The Art Treasures of America (1879-82)* with several women he had neglected, seeing in their exclusion a “conspiracy of silence” perpetrated by male arbiters of culture against women collectors.

The third chapter, “Art and Activism,” looks to New Women in the Progressive Era and their carving out of space in the public cultural arena. She looks specifically at Phoebe Hearst of San Francisco and Bertha Honoré Palmer of Chicago and their encouragement and promotion of women’s works in the international exhibitions in their cities. Macleod sees two further examples of women’s public cultural works in Alva Vanderbilt’s and Louisine Havemeyer’s artfully built and decorated mansions that became important settings for suffrage meetings. Macleod sheds light on the struggles of women such as Abigail Aldrich Rockefeller, Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in the fourth chapter, “The Gendering of the Modern Museum.” She explores how the Hewitt sisters’ pragmatic definition of modernism differed from other women museum founders’ aesthetic visions, although a general wish to insert elements of the personal (domestic, intimate) into the public enjoyment of art united their approaches. Clashing with male arts professionals who continued to wield authority, these women founders of New York’s modern art museums were brushed aside.

Chapter five looks at the sexing of taste in the examples of Gertrude and Leo Stein’s embrace of modernist painting and the Steins’ relationships to and influences on American women collectors who visited them in Paris. As second generation New Women who profited from the Stein’s forays into the world of avant-garde art and non-traditional gender roles, Etta and Claribel Cone, Emily Crane Chadbourne and Mabel Dodge found the inspiration necessary to pursue changes in their own lives. Gertrude Stein’s bold sense of self in particular pushed Dodge to a re-birth through her involvement in the Armory Show in New York. A uniquely intact sense of modernist aesthetics from the Cone sisters’ perspective is found in the separate wing that houses their collection of over three thousand works at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

The final epilogue of Macleod’s study looks at the lives of four women who reflected on the Jungian concepts of interior (domestic) space as an extension of the self and art as a key player in the psychic process. In the post-WWI period of backlash against women’s forays into public space, Edith Rockefeller McCormick, Mary Hopkins Emery, Mabel Dodge and Marion Koogler McNay reflected a “modernist nostalgia” that Macleod understands as a simultaneous engagement and disengagement with the modern world. While McCormick and Emery “conceived model communities where ordinary people could own property and nourish the creative skills that were devalued by technological modernism” (207), Dodge and McNay sought authenticity and community in Native American Pueblo culture, sharing their expertise as art patrons with local artists.

One of the most laudable aspects to Macleod’s study is her careful and laborious study of private archives in order to bring readers a glimpse of this unknown history.

Without such patient and tenacious work, we would still be asking why there are so few women art collectors. Equally impressive is the amount of art history she covers. As a European cultural historian, I found especially intriguing her discussion of the embrace and rejection of European artistic, political, and social vision in the shaping of American identity. A further compelling aspect of Macleod's work is also the potentially most contentious one. Her intelligent navigation of the tricky terrain of gender analysis in connection with psychoanalysis works well because of her careful selection of case studies. The reader is left with the understanding that gendered behavior shaped through ideological, political, legal, and historical circumstances is at the crux of Macleod's argument, and that in the end, men's behavior is not necessarily to be excluded from the redefinition of collecting that she explores. However, it would be intriguing indeed to find a book about men's collecting habits in which the psychological attachment to art would feature as prominently as in Macleod's study on women. Furthermore, in a project that challenges stereotypes about aesthetics and gender, a few statements appear that seem to unintentionally reinforce the very associations that Macleod is fighting, such as a comment about the "masculine" Gertrude Stein, who attempted to "[e]schew [...] the emotionally freighted decorative arts" and prefer "the more intellectually challenging art of painting" (180).

Macleod's text would serve well in an undergrad art history or women's studies course on American women in the arts, as well as in interdisciplinary humanities seminars for upper-class undergraduate and graduate students. In particular, her provocative analysis of gender, art, and aesthetics would be of interest to psychology students, and would her discussion of gender and collecting be interesting to students in sociology and anthropology. Her work is a welcome addition to scholars in different disciplines interested in the discussion about the history of collecting and collectors. For feminist scholars keen to challenge patriarchal notions dominant in the history of collecting, Macleod's theory of "collection-as-play" offers a welcome and long-overdue shift in how to include more women in the conversation.