

Nov-2017

# Collecting Thoughts

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## Recommended Citation

Heretz, Leonid (2017). Collecting Thoughts. *Bridgewater Review*, 36(2), 13-16.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol36/iss2/6](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss2/6)

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For as far back as I can remember myself I've loved old people and old things—mainly because they were different. Old people's stories put me on the path to becoming a historian. Much of my scholarly work has involved oral history, and in my teaching I have students work with memoirs and interviews. I haven't yet figured out a way to incorporate old things into research, but from the beginning of my career as a teacher, I've used historical artifacts in the classroom. The editor of the *Bridgewater Review* has been kind enough to let me present a couple of my favorite teaching props.

As a child, I first learned to admire old things in places like the Children's Museum and the Oneida County Historical Society in my home town of Utica, New York. I began acquiring them in fifth or sixth grade, when my grandfather, John Smoley, took me to Tony's Swap Shop, which we in our innocence called the "junk store" (decades later the *Utica Observer Dispatch* reported that Tony was in charge of

burglary and loan-sharking operations for the local mob). The shop no longer exists, and the building that housed it on South Street has been torn down, along with many of its neighbors, as is typical of downtown areas in post-industrial upstate New York. But back in the day, South Street was a big deal, and one of my earliest memories is of my grandparents dressing up in formal clothes to take us shopping there. By

the time my grandfather brought me to Tony's, the area was already in decline (or I maybe I just had become old enough to perceive it). Whether by fair means or foul, Tony had assembled the most amazing collection of old things I had ever seen. Just to give you an idea—there was a conquistador helmet, there were feather boas like the kind Marlene Dietrich wore in the movies, and there were enough accordions of various calibers to equip the Lawrence Welk champagne orchestra (not that I liked Lawrence Welk, mind you, but my grandparents on the Heretz side sure did, so I saw a lot of him when I was a kid). In retrospect, it's lucky for me that I got such a powerful thrill from my first impressions of concentrated bric-a-brac, and not, say, gambling (no doubt Tony would have arranged that, along with the financing), or you might be reading now about a life misspent at the dog track. After a couple of very happy hours searching through the store, I chose what I took to be 12-pound Civil War cannonball (although it might actually be a shot-put) and a curved Moorish dagger, which seemed impossibly exotic and attractive to my young mind, formed as it was at a time when Orientalism was still



Figure 1. Paper money of the French Revolution.



Figure 2. Medal issued to commemorate the assassination of Francis Ferdinand.

doing its work unhindered in the world. My grandfather bought these for me, after some efficient haggling with Tony. Since then I've tried doing a bit of haggling myself, but the results have generally been laughable—I just can't feign contempt for something I really want the way my grandfather learned to at market in the old country. At any rate, the cannonball and dagger have been in my office in Tillinghast since my first days at BSU (please don't let that keep you from stopping by—the dagger is rickety and duller than a wooden ruler, and I've never been much of an athlete).

Soon after, I started collecting coins. Stamps didn't work out as well—the title of philatelist struck me as vaguely unseemly (it was probably my wisecracking cousin John who pointed that out), and I soon got bored of sorting through the endless tinted portraits of Queen Elizabeth and Francisco Franco that made up the bulk of cheap stamp grab bags. Later, I discovered paper money, and then my life-long favorite—commemorative medals (not to be confused with military decorations, which are

frankly rather boring to look at unless you or someone close to you earned them). From the start, I taught myself to collect on a shoestring, because my allowance and any incidental income from odd jobs also had to cover pizza and trips to the video game arcade at Riverside Mall. I look for quirky things that are not that expensive, and I've gotten years of amusement at little cost. It's important to know that there are many such things around even today—you can buy a perfectly presentable Roman coin for \$10, or a World War I postcard for \$5 (maybe I shouldn't be giving this away—part of the interest for students comes from the thought of handling something very rare and valuable).

By the time I arrived at Bridgewater in 1995, I had gathered all sorts of old things, mostly related to topics in European history that were of personal interest to me. They had already become a mainstay of my teaching, alongside anecdotes that I myself had heard from eyewitnesses of various events (that way there is a living and short chain of transmission from the history under discussion to the classroom). While at BSU, I have acquired many more, often with an eye toward pedagogical application. In my experience, what works best are artifacts related to particularly dramatic events, and ones that have many elements or details of composition that can be taken apart. Illustrated here are a couple

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that I use very often in class, with a few of the highlights that come out in presentation and discussion.

Figure 1 shows two fine examples of the famous *assignats* of the 1790s. The French Revolution had been precipitated by the bankruptcy of the Old Regime. Once they were in power, the revolutionaries implemented a complicated scheme that made sense to them but ran into trouble in practice. The extensive property of the Catholic Church was confiscated, creating “national domains” that could be purchased by individuals willing to accept *assignat* (in the sense of a transfer of title) in payment of government debt. Rather than resolving the fiscal problems of France, the *assignats* turned into a force for monetary and economic chaos. The *assignat* still shows the sunny side of the Enlightenment (justice and natural law in Grecian garb), but already the Republic is baring its teeth: on the left, it reads “The law punishes counterfeiting with death,” and on the right, “The nation rewards snitches.” The second dates from the height of the Terror. It makes no mention of national domains—this is money and you had best accept it if you’re not a traitor. It justifies violence within the revolutionary camp—Robespierre sent the more-moderate Girondins to the guillotine on the accusation that their policy of federalism was a plot to dissolve France, so we have in the upper-left “Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic.” In the upper-right, “or Death” is added to the Revolution’s immortal slogan “Liberty–Equality–Fraternity.” The threats against counterfeiting are presented even more starkly, though we know from history that they didn’t work, and certainly not against the British, who printed fake *assignats* by the shipload (maybe one of these is a British counterfeit).

The commemorative medal (Figure 2) was issued in the summer of 1914 as propaganda for Austria’s attack on Serbia that would escalate into World War I. The person depicted has the advantage of almost total recognition—he might appear in a Western Civ mid-term exam answer as “air to the Austrian thrown,” or with one or the other half of his name missing, but students have all heard of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his fateful assassination in Sarajevo, and the imagery on the medal lends itself well to discussion. On the other hand, the anagram and inscription on the reverse is something that students couldn’t possibly know, so I have to explain it to them. Years ago, I enjoyed learning that Frederick III (1415–1493), the first

been offered. What we have here in Latin is “Austria will be the last [empire] in the world”—the most hubristic and apocalyptic of the various attempted readings.

In collecting, as in most of my activities, I’m a dilettante by nature. In contrast, my colleague, Mike Ierardi, is a pro, and his field happens to be coins, of the ancient Greek and Roman variety. Once, when the two of us were at the Bay State Coin Show (back when it was held in the Park Plaza Hotel in downtown Boston, which made for a fine outing), we stopped at a booth with some unusually beautiful and expensive (prices in the four and five digits) Greek coins. Mike started telling me all sorts of interesting things about them, things I never would have

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of the Austrian Habsburgs to be elected Holy Roman Emperor, liked to put the formula AEIOU everywhere he could fit it, so I was very excited to find it here. Frederick himself was eventually convinced to reveal that the mysterious letters mean *Alles Erdreich ist Oesterreich untertan* (“All earthly realm is subject to Austria”), but many have suspected him of holding back, and over the centuries other interpretations have

guessed at or even seen on my own. This piqued the dealer’s curiosity and he started a conversation. It was one of the high points of my collecting life when the dealer did a double-take and asked “Are you THE Ierardi?” on hearing Mike’s name.

At this year’s show (now much reduced, and held far out in Metrowest), Mike, with his unerring eye, spotted the



Figure 3. Medal commemorating the abolition of the slave trade.

medal at Figure 3, and I bought it right away for its intrinsic interest and classroom potential. It was issued to publicize and celebrate Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807. History Department Chair Keith Lewinstein, our go-to person for help with texts in Middle Eastern languages (and he's no slouch with the modern European ones, either) was kind enough to provide me with the following translation of the Arabic writing on the reverse: *The sale of slaves was prohibited in England in 1807 of the Christian era in the reign of King [literally: Sultan] George the Third. Truly, we are all brothers. We will be discussing the medal in class this semester, and I invite the reader to think about it as well.*

For many years I had students bring in artifacts to my upper-level classes, first for extra credit and then as a requirement. So as not to put a financial burden on the students, I made it clear that they should look first among their own possessions, that digital artifacts (images found online) were also perfectly acceptable, and that no purchases should cost more than \$10. One of the

best things that has come from this activity is that students often learn new things about their own families' experiences connected to the history covered in class. One student brought her grandmother's ration booklet from World War II, and it was very interesting for the class to see the products and quantities listed. Another brought her grandmother's report card from a grade school in the newly independent Ireland of the 1920s. Visually most spectacular was a grandfather's bomber pilot jacket (imagine being and wearing the real thing) with a beautiful, brightly colored silk map of Europe in the pocket—sad to say, only a few people chuckled when I asked to see the location of Stalag 13.

As of last year, I no longer have students doing this activity. Basically, it was ruined by the Internet, which gradually became students' almost exclusive source for artifacts and images. I hasten to add that I'm not a complete Luddite—the Internet has done fantastic things for access to books, for example. Nevertheless, it has definitely

taken most of the sport out of collecting, which, for me at least, has to have the element of serendipity and the unexpected find. *eBay* has a bit of that, but it's not nearly as interesting as finding something in your grandparents' attic, or in Tony's Swap Shop.



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