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Curators From the Cradle: Marbles, Bugs and Warhols

By RALPH GARDNER Jr.

PICASSO'S "Boy With a Pipe (The Young Apprentice)" sold at Sotheby's last week for \$104.1 million, setting a record for a painting purchased at auction. But another notable development came with the first lot of the sale, when a 13-year-old boy waged a spirited bidding war for a Degas horse drawing.

The teenager, whose parents asked that his name not be used, eventually lost out — the drawing sold to another bidder for \$300,000 — but his participation nonetheless demonstrates his precocious grasp of the market. He is so familiar with the art market, in fact, that his parents (who are also his backers) found it unnecessary to attend: they were at the ballet that night, leaving him in the care of a Sotheby's employee. "He might as well have been an adult next to me," said Peggy Race, Sotheby's director of protocol. "He didn't need my guidance."

For their part, the boy's parents, who live in Midtown Manhattan, take his outing as a matter of course. "He's really more of an old master connoisseur," his mother said, "but he loves Impressionists as well."

These days, the stamp and coin collections of the baby boom childhood seem as quaint as Norman Rockwell. But the acquisitive urge burns as strongly as ever among young collectors, thanks in part to the advent of eBay and to television shows like "Antiques Roadshow," which has 600,000 weekly viewers under age 18. The Internet has many appeals, of course, but few of them compare with the thrill of buying low and selling high.

"We're seeing today that kids are more educated about collecting," said Dan Neary, eBay's director of collectibles.

Collecting may be a wholesome pastime, but it is, unavoidably, also about amassing cold, hard value, and that can present some sticky parenting issues. Leigh Keno, an American antiques dealer and a regular on "Antiques Roadshow," tries, with mixed success, to play down the financial aspects when discussing antiques with his son, Brandon, 6. "Nothing is talked about value," he said, passing down a policy upheld by his own parents, who were antique dealers in Mohawk, N.Y.

Nonetheless, Mr. Keno can't help boasting of Brandon's purchase last summer of a marble board, circa 1850, for his marble collection. "He got a really good deal," Mr. Keno said. "It was walnut or mahogany."

"I think it was maple," Brandon said, gently correcting his father.

"Right, maple," Mr. Keno said.

Brandon said, "It was the first thing I ever used my wallet for. I paid \$5."

As with many parent/child collecting teams, it is the adult whose enthusiasm fuels the quest to fill out the collection. While marbles "are suited to a 6-year-old's budget," as Mr. Keno put it, the pièce de résistance of the approximately 130-piece clay, glass and plastic collection is a large 19th-century marble that Mr. Keno bought for \$350.

In a daring departure from convention, Mr. Keno's own parents believed that the best way for children to learn to appreciate antiques was to handle them, a lesson he now passes along to Brandon, even when the object in question is a 400 B.C. limestone votive relief bought at auction for \$70,000. "People say, 'And you let your son handle that without a rug underneath?' " he said.

As the Kenos demonstrate, collecting seems to run in families.

"I think it's in people's genes," said George Wachter, worldwide head of the old masters department at Sotheby's, whose 14-year-old son, Brahm, collects everything from baseball cards to a Rembrandt etching he bought last year at the Maastricht art fair with bar mitzvah money.

"I spotted it and immediately knew that was the kind of thing I wanted," Brahm said of the etching, "The Agony in the Garden." "It was really a stunning piece. You could see the expression on Jesus' face, how passionate it was. It's above my bed."

But when Brahm wakes up in the morning, his sense of accomplishment is not based on the beauty of the etching alone: he persuaded the dealer, David Tunick, to knock several thousand dollars off the price. Brahm said he believes his age disarms dealers, and works to his advantage. "I love to bargain," he said.

The new child connoisseurship is driven in part by a parental desire to distract children from the cheap thrills of popular culture. "Anything that you can share with your kid that you love is terrific," said Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist and an author of "The Over-Scheduled Child" (St. Martin's Griffin, 2001). "Because your kid wants you. It doesn't matter how the passion is expressed, as long as you have a passion."

That passion can take unlikely forms. Chris Van Allsburg, the author and illustrator of "The Polar Express" and more than a dozen other books for children, finds common bond with his 13-year-old daughter, Sophia, through insects. It isn't household bugs that they enjoy, but exotics from the tropics and their jewel-like structures.

"I just thought, these kids are freaked out by bugs and fascinated by them," he said. "It would be a valuable thing to have a giant, creepy bug inside a box, completely nonthreatening, so she could get in there and see what an amazing designer Mother Nature is."

The bugs are mounted in shadow boxes on the wall of Sophia's bedroom, including a large praying mantis that forms the cornerstone of the 16-piece collection.

Mr. Van Allsburg's hunting range isn't the forests of Cambodia, home to some of the largest insects on earth, but the Internet, where he pays \$60 to \$120 for mounted specimens.

Almost more elusive these days than bugs are the floaty pens that Dominique Grelshamer collects. Inspired by the guitars and 60's memorabilia that her father, Ronald, collects, Dominique, 15, decided to claim the souvenir pens as her own. The challenge is that she seeks pens depicting places — the fog rolling in over San Francisco or a cable car ascending a Swiss mountain — rather than the typical hula

girl who loses her skirt. "Some places are very difficult to find," she said.

According to Nancy Samalin, author of "Love Without Spoiling" (Contemporary Books, 2003), one of the benefits of collecting is that it helps children become more organized. "I can pretty much guarantee that no matter how messy his room is, he pretty much knows exactly where each item of his collection is," she said of the typical young collector, "and that it helps foster a sense of camaraderie between a child, his parents and especially his peers."

So it is with Rachel Mullahy, 10. When she embarks with her parents on one of their quarterly trips to Disney World, Rachel couldn't care less about the rides. Her mission is to lead her parents through the theme park, negotiating trades with fellow tourists for Aladdin, Nemo, Bambi and Mickey pins. Rachel's mother, Laura Kane, said the going rate ranges from a few dollars to more than \$30 for Grumpy, who seems to be an extremely elusive dwarf.

"Now it's, like, obsessive," said Ms. Kane of Rachel's 200-pin collection.

The fixation began when Ms. Kane amassed her own 75-piece collection of Disney animation art, hand-painted celluloid images from movies like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Finding Nemo." She bought them at auction at prices ranging from \$850 to \$1,700.

Today Ms. Kane and her husband, Bill Mullahy, are more likely to forage among the 19,000 Disney pins for sale on eBay, looking for ways to fill holes in Rachel's collection rather than their own.

Rachel's Disney pins are unlikely to put her through college. But collecting does present a way for parents to transfer wealth, as well as culture.

Ann and Lee Fensterstock assembled an art collection for their daughters, Jane, 12, and Kate, 15, which includes works on paper by Alex Katz and Chuck Close, and a pair of Andy Warhol prints worth \$20,000. The collection's value is beyond question, though it may not be so useful as a bonding experience with other children. A Matisse nude hanging in the living room seems to present particular challenges. The problem, explained Kate, who can discuss the merits of Damian Hirst and other contemporary artists like a seasoned collector, "is trying to convince them it's art."

For the Kunhardt family, collecting is a way of passing on something more valuable than money — a family legacy. Peter Kunhardt, a documentary filmmaker and a creator of the series "The American President" on PBS, started collections of presidential autographs for his four children after meeting several of his subjects.

"We did a 10-hour program on the presidency which they got very into," Mr. Kunhardt said of his children, Peter Jr., 21; Abby, 19; Teddy, 18; and George, 16. "So I asked the living presidents to sign pictures to them."

After that, it seemed only logical to start collecting the dead presidents as well. These days the walls of their bedrooms in Chappaqua, N.Y., are covered with historical artifacts.

Christmas mornings have grown competitive in the five years since the family started collecting presidential memorabilia — usually letters or short documents in the \$300 to \$1,000 range. "He has a tradition of always wrapping them himself and hiding them behind the couch, and then slowly handing them to us," Peter Jr. said of his father. "We know what will be inside — we know it's going to be a president — but not which one."

If your children do not have the collecting gene, there's not much you can do about it, as Dr. Lawrence Cutler discovered when he tried to tempt his daughters, Jackie, 15, and Elizabeth, 13, with everything from coins and stamps to Beanie Babies.

"When it wasn't cool they wanted no part of it," he said. "The day the Beanie Baby craze was over it was like a light switch. I was heartbroken. It took me a long time to get over it."

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