

Een van de recente artikelen, die ik in de Journal of the Oughtred Society gepubliceerd heb, gaat over mijn opvattingen betreffende het begrip "verzamelen" in een breder verband. Omdat veel verzamelaars van nature individualisten zijn, wil ik ook onze MIR-lezers de gelegenheid geven dit artikel (onvertaald) te lezen en te overdenken. Elk commentaar is, zoals altijd, zeer welkom.



On Collecting, Preservation and Stewardship

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(overgenomen uit de Journal of the Oughtred Society
Vol. 16, No. 2, 2007, p. 50 – 52
met toestemming van de redactie)

Summary

This paper discusses the world of collecting from the viewpoint of the "collectable" objects, focusing on slide rules. Collectors play a role in the preservation of these objects, apart from the pleasure they take in their collecting pursuits. The collector's role –and even duty– as "Steward" is emphasized: not only physical storage, restoration and maintenance of the objects is involved, but also building and integrating knowledge about the collectables, and sharing this with the public.

Introduction

How many collectors have already written about the phenomenon of collecting, their own approaches to building a collection, their special experiences and the satisfaction derived from their pastime? In this paper we will take a more global and philosophical view of collecting, an approach that is more centered on the collectables than on the individual collectors who temporarily own those collectables. The Oughtred Society's by-line provides a perfect guide for collectors:

"Dedicated to the Preservation and History of Slide Rules and Other Calculating Instruments"

This clearly subordinates the private collector's interest to the longer term importance of preserving the history and specimens of those calculating instruments that have become obsolete within a time span of only a few decades.

For the sake of this paper, we will confine ourselves to the "slide rule" class of calculating instruments. Similar arguments can be presented for others.

Slide Rules as Collectables

Among all collectable objects, slide rules take a special place.

In the first place, they were designed for their specific calculating function, not in the first place as collectables. This in contrast to objects of art like paintings or sculptures, or more commercial objects like stamps or Swarovski crystal especially produced for collectors.

While "art" collectables are created for esthetic pleasing of the senses, slide rules were functional tools designed for efficient usage: it is therefore rare to see "embellishments" on slide rules, with the exception perhaps of graphic art in the maker's name or logo. This is also true of calculators in general, where the famous rule of "Form Follows Function" was applied.

The only calculators with striking embellishments were prototypes or gifts designed to impress (like Leibniz's mechanical calculator), or calculating machines destined for a public space. For example, cash registers often used to be heavily ornamented with gold plated cast iron foliage.

The esthetic appeal of a slide rule however is reserved for the connoisseur who appreciates an innovative scale design, a clever construction detail, a rare field of usage.

Secondly, the slide rule is not so well-known to the general public, like a carpenter's plane is, or a farmer's plough (all collectables too). The underlying principle of logarithmic functions makes the slide rule more difficult to explain to those who have not been exposed to slide rules in profession or education. By the 2040's almost no one alive will actually have used a common slide rule at school or

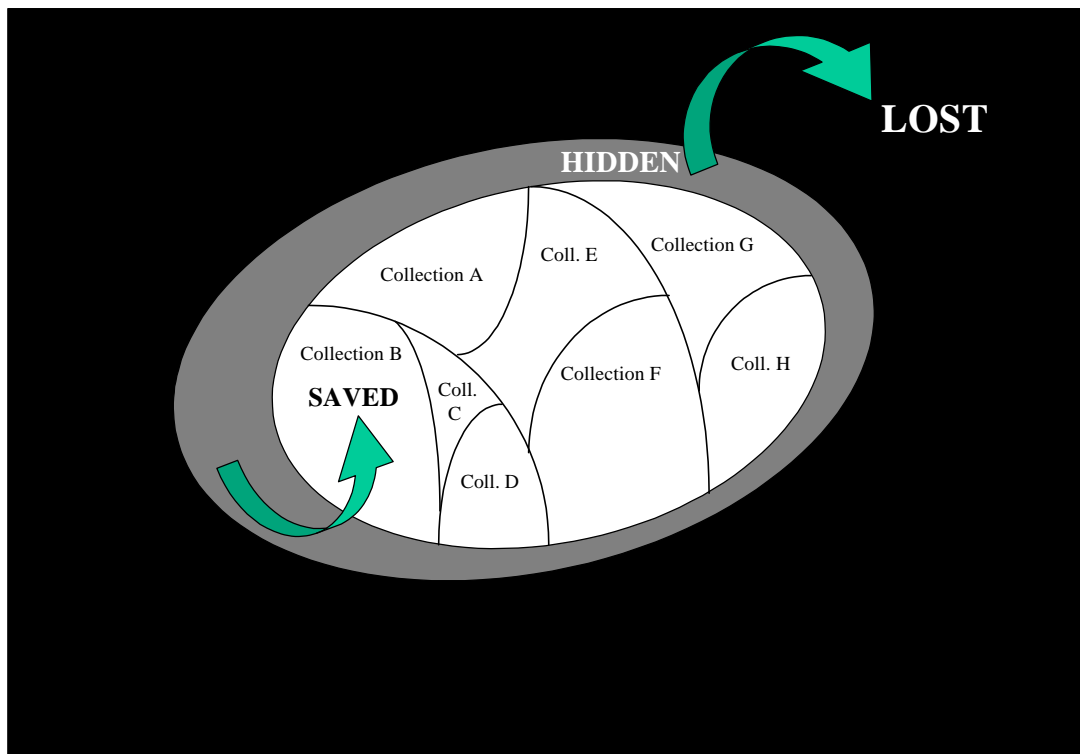
work. Then it will be only the collectors who are left to preserve knowledge of the slide rule, and its remaining specimens.

Lastly, slide rules have a well-defined window in time: mainly from the 1620's, after the invention of logarithms, to the 1970's when the electronic calculators ended the monopoly of slide rules as portable calculators. This in a way makes it easier for collectors to focus on those periods in the history of science and technology which formed the context of slide rule production and usage.

A Theory of Sets for Slide Rules

Let us consider the set of all slide rules produced between the 1620's and the 1970's.

It is difficult to estimate numbers. Hans Dennert has reported that D&P-Aristo has mass-produced after WWII more than 5 million student slide rules and at least as many professional ones. This was only one of the 10 or more major slide rule manufacturers in the world, so we can safely assume that many tens of millions, probably more than 100,000,000 have ever been produced. That is the extent of the total set in the Venn-diagram in the following figure.



Venn Diagram of all Slide Rules produced between 1620 and 1980

Of course, most of the produced slide rules have been lost by now, spent, thrown away, burned in waste incinerators, irretrievably hidden in garbage heaps.

These lost slide rules have gone to the black set titled "LOST".

The next set of slide rules is a most interesting one, named "HIDDEN" in the gray band, consisting of slide rules still waiting to be found in flea markets, attics, cellars, desk drawers and more improbable places.

This is the hunting scene for collectors who still find hidden slide rules, though at an ever decreasing rate. Every slide rule found by a collector is SAVED into one of the many thousands of collections depicted in the center of the Venn diagram.

But collectors compete with that other migration, from HIDDEN to LOST, whenever the unaware public, by accident or intent, throw away some, or even heaps of slide rules.

The gray band is destined to grow smaller and smaller in either of the two directions.

Eventually we will approach the situation that most slide rules that still exist are in one or another collection, the white set of all collections at the center of the Venn diagram.

Private Collections and Museums

Every collection has an owner who has assumed the pleasures and burdens of his collectables. The private owner takes pleasure from contemplating and studying his objects, organizing and cataloguing his collection and showing it to fellow collectors or to the public in a most attractive form. The burden is often in finding storage space (although slide rules are in that respect easier than, say, vintage automobiles). Another burden may be the creation of an optimal storage and retrieval system, which can range from labeled cupboard drawers, or even illuminated glass showcases, to mere carton boxes in the attic.

Slide rules in a museum form another type of collection, owned by an institution that presents its collection to the world via a curator. Slide rules in museums are either on display, in a more professional setting than most private collectors can afford, or in "depot".

A museum depot can be a place that is worse than any space in a private collector's home, there have been horror stories about that, like inundated cellars. But most museums have well-organized depots that can be made accessible by curators to the serious collector and researcher. Some museums even have opened depots to the public by showing their contents in a less organized, but still recognizable form (open depots).

Sometimes there is friction between curators and collectors: expert slide rule collectors may find insufficient knowledge in curators - who generally cover a much larger area in science or technical fields. And curators may be annoyed by collectors who take too much of their time with too detailed questions, or even unwelcome suggestions on collection composition and display.

Still a fruitful cooperation - beneficial in both ways - has been proved possible on many occasions between private collectors and museum curators.

Preservation

One of the responsibilities of a collection owner is preservation - whether it is considered as a pleasure or a burden. Preservation involves keeping a collectable intact, in good condition and most importantly: within the "set" of collections. It also includes taking care of the future of collected slide rules. Many collectors at a certain age start worrying about the future of their collections. They will make sure that the collection migrates - as a whole or piecewise - into another collection, either private or museum-owned.

If no such measures are taken, it will fall to the estate to find a destination for a collection. The greater the value of a collection, the better chances are that its collectables will find a new owner by selling or auction. High prices for slide rules actually create a positive incentive for preservation because new owners very likely will take better care of more expensive "investments".

Estate handling is a critical point because slide rules may slip back into the HIDDEN or even the LOST area, when a collection is very small, has low value or is perceived as such.

The Oughtred Society wants to play a supporting role in preservation of slide rules at these critical points in time.

While a collector tries to preserve a collectable during his ownership, the borders between collections A, B, C etcetera are shifting continuously. In other words: slide rules move between collections by swapping and trading among owners. Each collector does this to build, focus and tune his collection. The resulting volatility however only involves collections. The collectables individually remain unchanged, being preserved by the successive owners.

Therefore it is better to consider the superset of all slide rule collections as one super-collection that is owned by all collectors together. In this view a collector is just a temporary owner and keeper of the slide rules in his collection, until the next owner takes his place. The super-collection is thus preserved by all collectors over a period exceeding the lifespan of a single collector.

In this view museums form a special type of collectors, with a longer lifespan than the individual collector, but rarely with the eternal life that they are sometimes credited with.

Composing a collection has the objective to select, organize and present slide rule specimens according to the owner's tastes or to the trend of the day. Compositions of collections will change over time, either by the same owner or by a next owner. Even museums occasionally have their rounds of drastic changes in collections and exhibition displays. Preservation of individual collectables is considered more important than preservation of collections.

Stewardship

The collective ownership described above is usually called "stewardship" for objects or other entities of acknowledged cultural heritage - to which the slide rule decidedly belongs.

The approach is to preserve the heritage collectively, over a span of generations.

Stewardship has an additional aspect that is focusing on the knowledge available on the object of heritage. Such knowledge must be collected, inventarized, documented, extended, and –most importantly- communicated to the interested public. This is exactly what collectors of slide rules - and in particular members of The Oughtred Society - are trying to accomplish with respect to their calculating instruments.

Conclusion

As a consequence of the preservation and stewardship principles described above, one could define the following responsibilities of a collector:

“with the acquisition of a special item, a collector acquires at the same time the responsibilities of its stewardship, to preserve the item well until a next owner has been found to assume stewardship, to assemble and preserve knowledge about the object, and to share this with fellow collectors and with the general public”

Let us make sure, by the way we fulfill our collector's responsibilities, that the archeologist of a future millennium, discovering the remnants of an Anolon in the dig at Lakeville CT, will be able to supply more information on that find than the mere label: “Artefact, Early Post-Industrial, Purpose Unknown”.

BLADVULLING: Sluitzegel (met dank aan Huib)

