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**WHAT YOU SAVE:  
CULTURES OF COLLECTING IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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## Abstract

As children, we may have collected items around us such as a box of rocks, insects, stuffed animals, stolen items from a sibling's room, or crayon drawings on sticky pieces of paper. As our curiosity grows, so do our collections, kept in the closet, soon forgotten but forever representative of a specific time in our life. While the types of objects we collect (and the way we collect them) may change, the desire to leave traces of ourselves behind doesn't.

This project explores cultures of collecting through a digital media lens and examines how digital technology and our culture of consumption have impacted users' collections and digital archives through online social media platforms. After surveying users' saved content on Instagram, I have compiled found material to digitally distort and re-contextualize the visual content in the form of an animation. In this paper, I look to the history of collecting and key media theorists to further examine the theoretical background on systems of classification and collecting for my project. I argue that as we collect digital objects they serve as extensions of ourselves, while also contributing to a communal archive of reproduced images that are inherently curated and aestheticized.

## History and Theory

### *Cabinets of Curiosity: Early Forms of Collecting and Classification*

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a new method of collecting emerged in Europe that was known as "cabinets of curiosity," which demonstrated both a memorialization and romanticization of the seemingly random but rare and extravagant objects collected during the time. These rooms, also known by their German name *Wunderkammer*, came about during a period of increased trade, as well as an age of exploration, and were used to exhibit collections of

objects such as taxidermy, shells, books, drawings, and more.<sup>1</sup> The cabinets showed how knowledge, as well as material objects, could be organized. There was a sense of organized chaos in these rooms, as objects lined the walls and covered the ceilings. As premodern forms of museums, these cabinets were often interactive and invited visitors to touch and interact with the objects on display.<sup>2</sup> Despite their random and disorderly fashion, the cabinets ironically sought to aesthetically organize objects.<sup>3</sup> With items hanging from the ceiling and spread out all over, the cabinets were excessively decorative. The main categories of the objects could be classified as products of humans (paintings and journals), products of nature (bones and shells), and products of humans' ability to overcome nature (clocks and automatons).<sup>4</sup> They often created a contradictory representation of both beauty and decay through their display of both mortality and art. While some cabinets of curiosity may have primarily shown taxidermy, skeletons, and other preserved specimens, thus evoking feelings of claustrophobia, death, and decay, others may have contained predominantly ornate paintings and art collector items, serving as an expansive sight of high-class art and wealth.<sup>5</sup> The cabinets of curiosity were encyclopedic, eclectic, overwhelming, and vibrant. They served as a turning point towards the emergence of the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Zytaruk, "Cabinets of Curiosities and the Organization of Knowledge," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.80.1.001>.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Lubar, "Cabinets of Curiosity," Medium, September 9, 2019, <https://medium.com/@lubar/cabinets-of-curiosity-a134f65c115a>.

<sup>3</sup> Zytaruk, "Cabinets of Curiosities and the Organization of Knowledge."

<sup>4</sup> Wolfram Koeppe, "Collecting for the *Kunstkammer*," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, October 2002, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd\\_kuns.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd_kuns.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Zytaruk, "Cabinets of Curiosities and the Organization of Knowledge."

museum, but also an introduction into the way we think about collecting and its organization of knowledge, ideas, identity, and culture.

These cabinets of curiosity reveal the inherent human impulse to classify and collect; social order thrives on classification and on various systems of labels and organization.<sup>6</sup> The way in which people and things are classified is reflective of the culture through which they are passed down. Social status or class is just one example of categorizing groups of people. However, there is an important distinction between classification and collections, which is described best by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal:

If classification is the mirror of collective humanity's thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited.<sup>7</sup>

Collecting exists as more than a representation of collected thought, but as an extensive practice of organized knowledge and taste. In the case of the cabinets, they represented a taste for the extravagant and abnormal, as seen through an overabundance of objects displayed for all to see. Not everybody had access to these cabinets, however, which were usually visited by wealthy patrons and acquaintances to these artists and noblemen.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the collections were limited to the elite spaces in which society could classify its most marvelous objects. While the cabinets were made up of an eclectic range of objects, they were also highly selective in representing the most extreme sides of oddity and opulence. As a result, the individualized

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<sup>6</sup> John Elsner, ed., *The Cultures of Collecting*, Critical Views (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Elsner.

<sup>8</sup> Koeppel, "Collecting for the *Kunstkammer*."

collections remained and were classified within the context of a curated space for the public.<sup>9</sup>

The cabinets of curiosity suggest that not only do collections function as visual documentations of objects and information, but also as expansive and artistic spaces through which high-class culture is defined.

Collections are commonly composed of tangible objects; thus, it is important to define what is meant by “object,” and to consider the effect that collecting has on said object. In *Cultures of Collecting*, media theorist and sociologist Jean Baudrillard references the French definition of the term *objet* as “anything which is the cause or subject of a passion. Figuratively and most typically: the loved object.”<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard goes on to describe the idea of *objects of passion*:

It ought to be obvious that the objects that occupy our daily lives are in fact objects of a passion, that of personal possession, whose quotient of invested affect is in no way inferior to that of any other variety of human passion. Indeed, this everyday passion often outstrips all the others, and sometimes reigns supreme in the absence of any rival. [...] In this respect, the objects in our lives, as distinct from the way we make use of them at a given moment, represent something much more, something profoundly related to subjectivity: for while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, an object has two main purposes, its material functionality and its subjective meaning upon being collected. When a person acquires an object, their identity and possession instill the object with a new meaning. This new meaning is determined by the individual and promotes a new affective characteristic of the object that is one of passion and attachment. An object can be used, and it can be possessed. Once it is possessed, it is consequently romanticized.

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<sup>9</sup> Debora Lui, “Public Curation and Private Collection: The Production of Knowledge on Pinterest.Com,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 2 (June 2015): 128–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1023329>.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner, Repr, Critical Views (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 7–24.

<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard.

The object is then often referred to as a “piece,” rather than the object itself, which further suggests how an object’s meaning is determined by the owner.<sup>12</sup> Because of this, we continuously define the objects around us and their meaning through our everyday collecting.

As a result of this possession, objects that are collected also begin to reveal much more about the collectors themselves. Not only does the collector give an object its meaning, but the object gives meaning to the collector’s identity in return. As we choose the objects that surround us, they begin to add to a growing collection that defines our personal taste. These objects serve as a mirror of the self.<sup>13</sup> We are not only shaped by the people and communities around us, but also the physical objects we choose to acquire. Existing in a capitalist society encourages us to not think much about the history or process from which an ordinary object came, but after acquiring such object, we romanticize and possess them regardless. As Baudrillard describes above, the object “is all my own,” and we do not have much regard for its meaning outside of our own possession.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the cabinets of curiosity, which served as abundant reflections of culture, personal collections act as material representations of a collector’s taste and identity. As children, collecting is one of the first ways we establish a sense of personal identity through objects such as dolls, rocks, insects, or other trivial items. Collecting is also one of the first ways we learn to exercise control over the outside world. By grouping and handling objects, we begin to actively choose tangible items to hold onto and classify as we build our sense of self.

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<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>13</sup> Elsner, *The Cultures of Collecting*.

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting.”

*Digital Collecting: The Abstraction and Aestheticization of the Digital Object*

Now that we are living in the digital era, what we collect becomes abstracted and digitized, but remains just as relevant to explore. Social media sites like Friendster, MySpace, Facebook, and now more commonly, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and TikTok, serve not only as digital databases of information and content, but as platforms for an abundance of digital collections. Bookmarked tweets, Spotify playlists, Instagram saved folders, and Pinterest boards are just a few examples of modern digital collections that people seem to compulsively curate. These folders of content are often reflective of both the identities of those who create and use them, as well the qualities of the social media platforms themselves.

In contrast to how physical objects work to shape an individual's identity, digital collections are heavily shaped by the social and public nature of the social media platforms themselves. Philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, "the medium is the message," in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, where he discusses the importance of a medium to shaping the greater society.<sup>15</sup> McLuhan uses the introduction of the railway to describe how this form of transportation served as the "message," or the reason in which human functions shifted. While movement and transportation existed prior to the railway, the design of cities were drastically altered as a result of this medium.<sup>16</sup> Applying this theory to present day, we can think about new media, such as phones and social media, as the same extensions of ourselves, in that it directly shapes the way we interact with others, the world around us, and how we think about ourselves. While we would ordinarily collect physical objects, the introduction of digital objects, or images saved to social media collections,

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<sup>15</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," in *Understanding Media* (London: The MIT Press, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> McLuhan.



drastically affects the way we engage in these archival practices. In the case of Instagram folders, there is an interesting convergence of public and private viewing, where the collections are saved privately in a user's account, but the images themselves may exist publicly and shown to a wide range of users. As a result, private acts of collecting meld simultaneously with public acts of display.<sup>17</sup> This creates an important juxtaposition between a seemingly personal reflection of one's identity and the curated public domain it exists within, consequently affecting the content of these individual collections.

The affective and hyper-saturated qualities to these visual platforms is another example of how the medium itself promotes a passionate and aesthetic collection of digital objects that comprise a user's digital identity. One of the most important features of social media that draws users in is the emotional nature of its content that provides enjoyment even when we think we are not conscious of it. Platforms like Instagram contain a plethora of images that serve as nuggets of satisfaction, which encourage a heightened response to and circulation of the content itself.<sup>18</sup> Through their continual collection, these images turn into the *objects of passion* that Baudrillard defined. The more we interact with these images and content, the more mesmerized and entranced we become, "inscribing ourselves in the images we see."<sup>19</sup> By saving an Instagram post, for instance, we add one of these affective digital objects into a growing collection of media that not only shapes our digital personas, but also contributes to an algorithmic loop that encourages us to consume and collect even more. These digital objects of passion, as Baudrillard defines, is described similarly by Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim in their writing on the aestheticization of domesticity on Pinterest. "Pinterest is littered with 'happy objects,'" they

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<sup>17</sup> Lui, "Public Curation and Private Collection."

<sup>18</sup> Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Polity, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Dean.

write, “as pinners curate objects that point to and hold the promise of happiness: inspirational or funny quotes, books one loved or hopes to love, recipes one plans to try, and so on. It is a social network that thrives off and capitalizes on the contribution of happy packets and the free labor of promoting ‘a few (million) of your favorite things.’”<sup>20</sup> Visual platforms like Pinterest and Instagram allow users to neatly organize and pin the perfect life, even if it is unattainable. This romanticizing of the everyday object reveals how social media collections subconsciously shape an individual, while simultaneously contributing to a growing digital economy of consumption.

While these images that are consumed everyday help transform users’ identities into digital objects of passion and taste, they also are constantly reproduced and collected on a mass level. Although social media collections are important for individual identity construction, they are also indicative of the widespread reproduction of images in this new age of technology, which consolidates the otherwise private collection of tangible objects. When removed from the individual user and added to a wider range of collections, the content and curation appears increasingly similar as a whole. This effect is echoed in Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where he argues that through the invention of mechanical innovations such as the camera and printing press, the organic and authentic patina, or what he calls the *aura* of analog media is lost.<sup>21</sup> In the digital era of collecting, the images saved invite a gaze from users and encourage them to possess them as their own, even when they may be saved and shared across a large population of individuals. While we may think “it is all my own, the object of my passion,” it is in fact just one object of enjoyment in the consumption of content

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<sup>20</sup> Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, “Pinning Happiness,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn : Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, vol. 1 (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 232–48, <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252039577.003.0013>.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” ed. Hannah Arendt, *Schocken, Illuminations*, 1935, 217–51.

that is the message of social networking sites.<sup>22</sup> And yet, we consume and collect regardless, because of those nuggets of enjoyment that they provide for us. Through social media collections, we begin to curate our own versions of the *Wunderkammer*. These images are highly curated, but exciting nonetheless, prompting users to continue building their digital identity and collections through visual online platforms.

### **Production Assessment & Reflection**

#### *Social Media Account*

The first part of my project is comprised of acquiring the digital collections of users around me in order to curate an extensive set of digital objects, or images collected within a digital medium. Through an Instagram account, @whatyousave, I asked participants to direct message any and all content they had saved on social media. While I initially asked for content from any social media platform, including TikTok, Spotify, and Pinterest, the majority of the messages I received were posts on Instagram, which I ultimately focused on as my primary platform of interest. Given the level of ease in which users could respond within the app itself through direct message, I expected Instagram to be the most dominant platform for submissions. It is also one of the most popular sites for creating, posting, and consuming images as it is primarily a visual-based platform. Right away, I noticed a variety of methods in which people engaged with my request; some only sent a single post, others sent a long thread of saved posts all at once, and a few continuously sent individual posts over the course of many weeks. At the

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<sup>22</sup> Elsner, *The Cultures of Collecting*.

same time that I was receiving these posts, I began to repost content to the account. Each post is unaltered from its original source, except for the caption which simply states the type of platform and the user that it was posted from (i.e., “Instagram post from @millennial.therapist”).

Through my encouragement of “any and all” content and the posting frequency, I sought to limit the presence of curation in both my role as poster and the users’ role as participants; however, I quickly realized that curation was in fact the unifying factor across the entire process of the account. My initial goal was to document an unfiltered reflection of collections to gain insight into users’ digital identities. But in asking for content that others have saved, I also asked them to go through their self-selected collections and, again, curate a series of posts to send to me, whether I wanted it to be consciously selected or not (I did not). Additionally, by choosing which image to repost, I myself underwent a secondary process of selection and curation. While

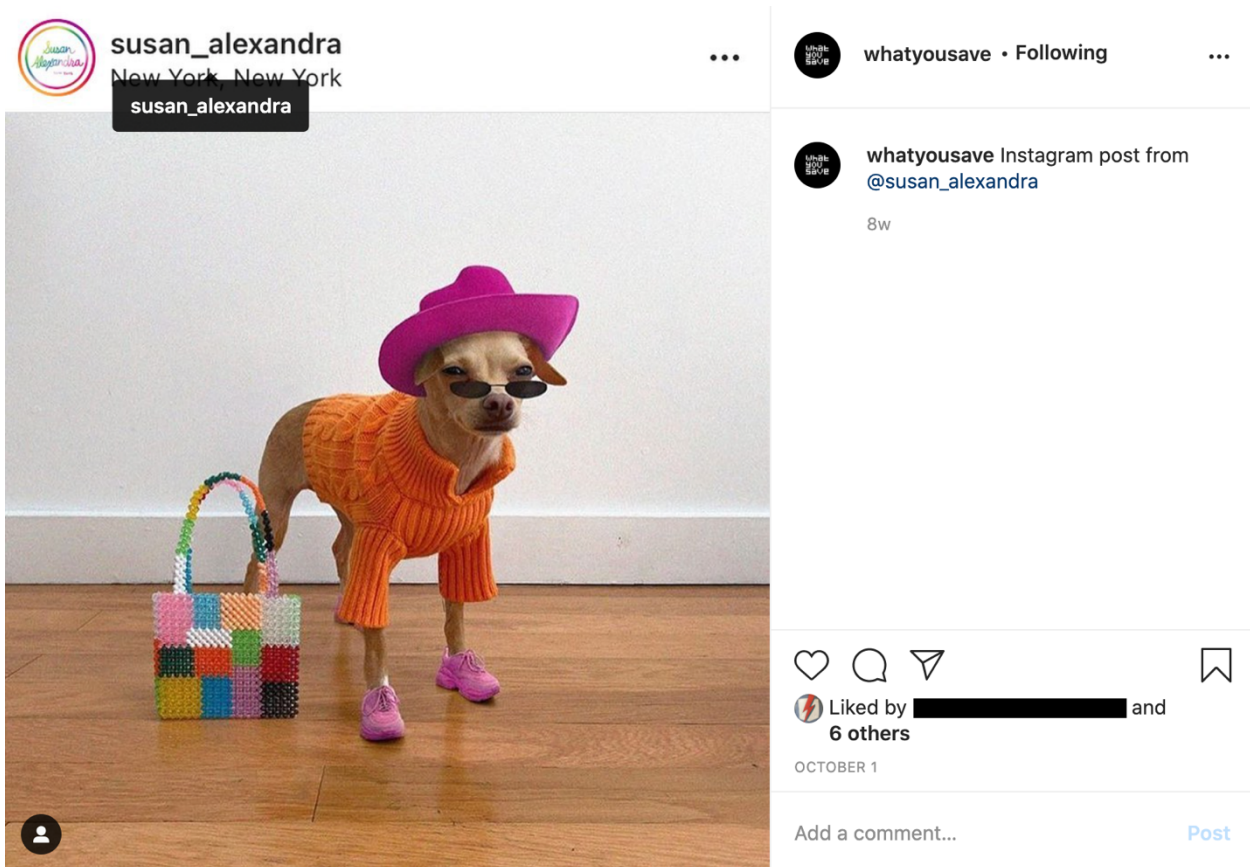


Fig. 1: Reposted image from @susan\_alexandra on *What You Save* Instagram account @whatyousave.

I could have reposted each person's submission chronologically, which would likely be the most random form of documentation, I wanted to show the variety of collections from different users, so I inevitably had to pick and choose which posts to document. Visual social media platforms like Instagram encourage users to consume, collect, and curate, and this curation is hard to avoid, even in the case of my archival account. Through re-filtering content back into the platform itself, I created a meta version of collecting wherein I continued the process of curating digital images of passion that were saved by others on social media.

As the messages with collections came in, I also observed the different types of posts that were being sent, and proceeded to organize them into categories, or rather, my own collections of content. This process acted like nesting dolls of collections as I created folders within folders of images and videos. I classified the received content into the following categories:

- Animals
- Arts > Architecture, Crafts/DIY, Drawing/Painting, Dance,  
Fashion/Makeup, Film, Interior Design, Music, Photography,  
Tattoos
- Celebrity
- Education > Infographics, Voting, Mutual Aid, Statements
- Fandom > Music, TV/Film, Celebrity
- Fitness
- Food
- Memes
- Mood board/Aesthetic
- People
- Products
- Text posts > Tumblr, Inspirational Quotes
- Travel
- Tutorials

Motifs of consumption, nostalgia, escapism, and affect were common among the wide range of categories of content sent to the account. These themes and emotions make sense given that a visual platform like Instagram structurally encourages these feelings as a result of its affective nature, as I discussed earlier in referencing Jodi Dean's *Affective Networks*. Images related to food, products, and fashion signify the consumerism category, with users saving literal

objects to their collections. Then, in categories like art, travel, and people, I noticed a trend of emotions implied by these images such as escapism, longing, and nostalgia. It is especially interesting to note these implications in today's time of COVID-19, where human touch and feelings of community may be lacking. As we experience real life feelings of longing, it makes sense that we consume images that might mitigate that. This pattern further applies to my argument that while digital collections serve as an extension of the self, they also reinforce the collective patterns of users, as the images become commonly shared and collected by the larger community.

### *Animation*

The social media account @whatyousave was an important element in my process—not only did it give me insight into the analysis of digital collecting by surveying users, but it also served as the way in which I acquired found visual material for the second part of my project, an animation. This animation is not only a visual representation and snippet of the types of content users save, but it is also a reflection of the mass consumption of media and the digital objects one possesses, as I discuss above in the theoretical portion of this paper.

My animation is structured around specific categories of saved collections—yet another process of selection I went through—including food, art, and infographics. I wanted to include categories that were trivial as well as ones that prompt closer examinations into their implications. For instance, while the art category includes images of photography, music, crafts, and other art forms, they point to larger themes of nostalgia and love that are present across the saved collections. In another section composed of educational infographic threads, I structure the animation around the repetitive swiping nature of these types of posts. This stylistic choice does not focus on the actual content of the images but instead on the aesthetic and redundant qualities

to them. I wanted to emphasize that while these posts may prompt internal reflection and outward conversations, they are first and foremost neatly packaged aesthetic objects that circulate on Instagram.

Through its manipulated content and collaged style, my animation utilizes elements of *pastiche* to create a new digital identity and emphasizes the reproduction of images through social media. I again refer to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* through my use of found material. While I distort and create my own composition, flow, and animation with these images, my work is ultimately not fully original as I am utilizing imagery from other sources. I disagree with Benjamin, however, in that I do not see the "aura" of the original source being lost as a result of my appropriation.<sup>23</sup> Benjamin argues that the essence of a unique piece is lost in mass reproduction and mechanical innovations; however, my animation purposefully removes the content from its original source.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the case of social media, I would argue that the content inherently does not have an aura, as no image is completely original. Even the first user from where the image was posted often partakes in a process of editing, cropping, and filtering to fit the specific structure and aesthetic of the platform. In my animation, I aim to recontextualize and perhaps even strengthen the message behind these curated digital objects by collaging them together in a new space and context. In taking apart and putting together pieces of images almost like a puzzle, I demonstrate how these individually saved digital objects are a synecdoche, or part of a larger whole that is the collective circulation of images on Instagram. Although users may privately save images they are drawn to, these images are catered to a public platform which encourages an affective process of sharing content. While the individual collections of users do serve as a form of identity construction, my

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin.

animation acts as a new kind of collection that reflects the *objects of passion* that are inherently curated and aestheticized on social media.

### **Conclusion**

Having completed my assessment, research, and animation, I assert that, like most technological innovations, there is no turning away from social media as a means for informing our relationships and selves, whether that is a true reflection of our identity construction or not. As I look at what the people around me have saved, I notice how many similarities there are, but I also know that this is partly due to both the types of people I surround myself with, and also the way that the platform itself encourages the sharing of a certain type of aesthetic image. The goal of this project is not to completely push back against the curated nature of social media, because I also believe that it has opened up a new age of collecting that is more expansive than ever before. Just as the objects in the cabinets of curiosity were emblematic of defining culture within the narrow context of a pre-museum space, digital collections on social media are just as informed by the public medium as they are by the individual users. Instagram and visual social platforms alike are unique in that the practice of collecting is heavily reliant on a process of curation, which borders the line between public and private. I have come to realize through this project that if there is one thing that is true, it is that our tendency to save, organize, and consume objects and images around us has persisted over time and will continue to exist, taking new forms, but continuing to be representative of ourselves and our participation in cultures of collecting.



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