

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2020

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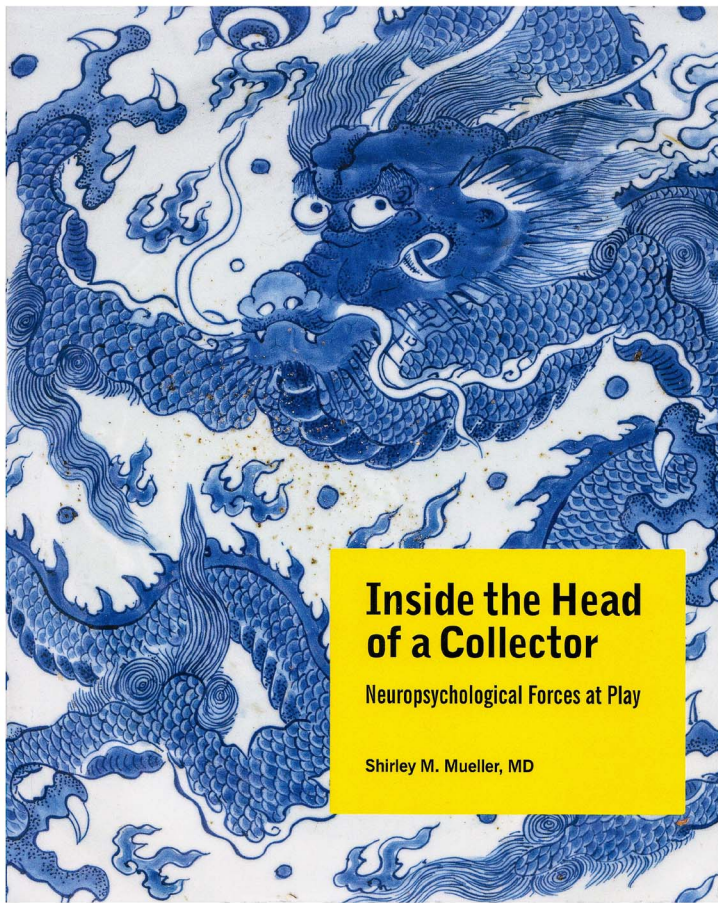
Arts of Asia

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

50

FEATURING FIFTY FAVOURITE OBJECTS

BOOK REVIEW



Inside the Head of a Collector: Neuropsychological Forces at Play, Shirley M. Mueller, MD, published by Lucia/Marquand, Seattle, 2019. Foreword, 3 parts, 15 chapters, Appendix, Glossary, Bibliography. 192 pages, 105 colour illustrations, 27.6 × 22 cm. ISBN: 978-0-9996522-7-5. US\$40 (hard cover with dust jacket).

IT MAY SEEM perverse to start a book at the back. In this case, my rationale is to cite the author's epilogue, in which she states her intention to refute earlier theories of collecting by using new information derived from the sciences of neuroeconomics and behavioural economics. Thus, the book constitutes the modern story of why collectors collect. In a nutshell, and in the words of Dr Mueller, "the drive to collect is rooted in our neurobiology".

Before readers of *Arts of Asia* turn away from what may appear a work of science, I should explain that the author's professional career as a neurologist, and subsequently a financial advisor, are complemented by her

collecting of Chinese export porcelain. The book is lavishly illustrated with a mixture of scientific drawings, and images of Chinese ceramics and works of art, many from her own collection.

Part 1 is a section entitled "Pleasure and Pain". In terms of collecting, pleasure includes "The Thrill of the Chase", "Novelty and Discovery", and "Social Benefits". Pain is characterised through "Fakes", "Damage and Loss", and "Collecting Gone Awry". The methodology for discussion of those issues is followed throughout the book. Dr Mueller writes in conversational style about an episode relating to her own life, interspersing the narrative with "Scientific Moments". These explain, in technical terms, what was going on when an action or thought took place. In the first chapter on "The Thrill of the Chase", for example, the author tells us about the impromptu purchase of a pair of porcelain tea caddies in Haarlem, The Netherlands. Her actions and thought processes during that transaction are analysed by means of a "Sci-

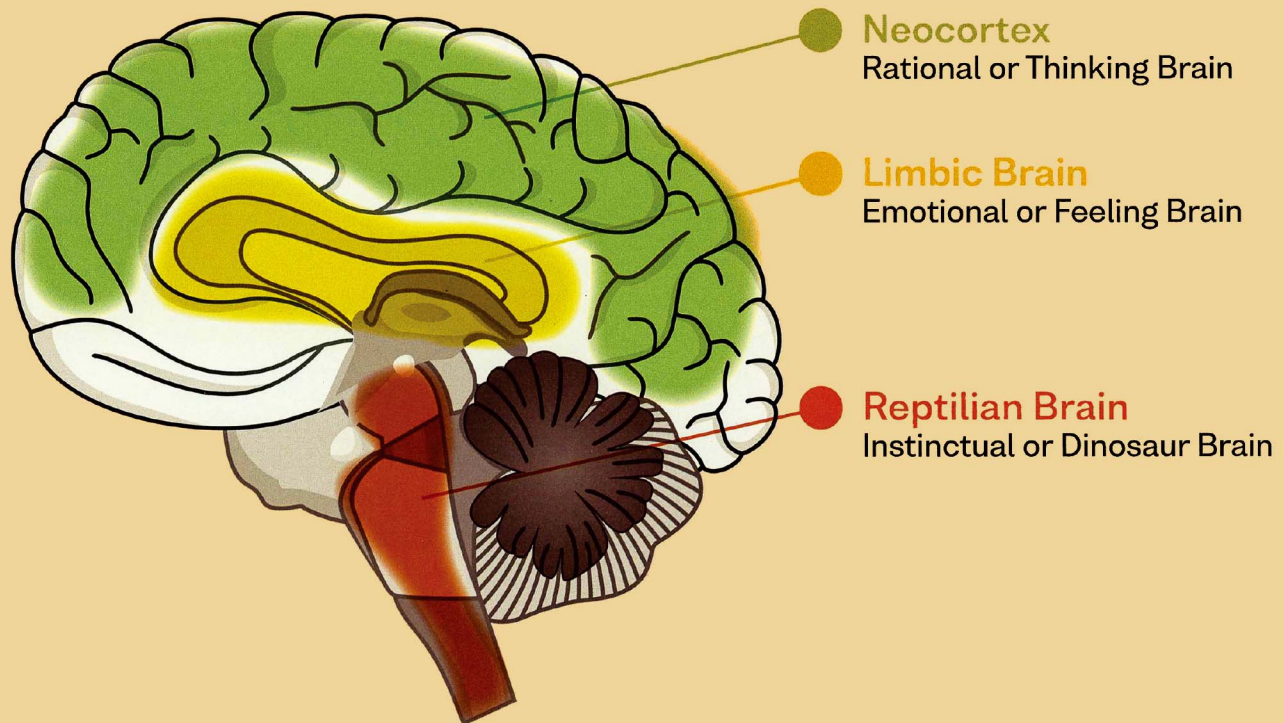
entific Moment" on risk preferences, illustrated by brain blood flow images obtained by MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), and graphs. Her descriptive text, by contrast, encompasses pictures of Chinese ceramics, Dutch paintings and historical references. At the end of the six chapters comprising Part 1 is a case study of "Pleasure and Pain", that discusses the faking of a particular style of export porcelain for America. The author possessed an example whose authenticity was questioned, and in a determined fashion sought to counter the pain caused by this doubt, through scientific analysis and detailed visual examination of a range of pieces. Proof that her platter was genuine transmuted pain into pleasure.

Part 2 is called "Enhancing Pleasure Through Understanding Ourselves". It contains four chapters on "Neural and Behavioural Economics", "Brain Mechanisms at Work", "The Collector's Decision", and "The Irrationality of It All". As this section explains, the discipline of behavioural economics incorporates insights from psychology and other social sciences into the study of monetary behaviour, including collecting. Neuroeconomics is the study of the biological foundation of economic decision-making, which also applies to collecting. In the process of acquiring objects, collectors gratify the pleasure centres in their limbic or emotional brains. Either at the point of purchase, or later, they question and justify acquisitions through logical assessment undertaken by their neocortex or rational brain. Among many topics covered in this section are auction overbidding, learning from experience, indecision caused by too much choice and the ability to cut one's losses. The case study at the end of Part 2 explores a historical relationship between C.T. Loo, the dealer, and Eli Lilly, the tycoon. The story is used to document a past collector's decision-making process when buying Chinese artefacts, when he engaged his intellect as well as his emotions. When there were no offsetting influences (such as cost), Lilly's rational brain permitted purchases to be made. When costs were perceived to be too high, the pleasure centre in Lilly's emotional brain was affected, thereby preventing purchases.

C.T. Loo's behaviour as seller was also relevant. As Dr Mueller points out, it is helpful not only to understand one's own mental processes when selling or purchasing antiques, but also to consider those of the person on the other side of the transaction.

Part 3 is concerned with "Collector Experiences". This section includes four chapters on "Bargains", "Art as an Investment", "Museum Relationships" and "Collection Dispersal". The notion of bargains is of course extremely attractive, and Dr Mueller incorporates a "Scientific Moment" that explains the process. By employing MRI to illustrate brain processes, researchers could demonstrate that their subjects did not respond as much to absolute price, but rather to price relative to what they thought was suitable. If they perceived a bargain, their pleasure centres and decision processors were energised. If they perceived a high or excessive price, these centres were subdued, and another area of the brain became active. Art as an investment is a risky business. However, it may be the only reinforcer for some high net worth individuals. What causes their pleasure centres to burn brightly is the potential profit of art, rather than the pleasure of selecting and owning objects personally. The author explains that the desire for money is universal because it is essential for survival whereas pride, intellectual satisfaction, or a connection to history can be dispensed with if needed, to ensure survival. She also discusses the desirability (or otherwise) of art as an asset class for investment.

The chapter on museum relationships touches on collectors' relationships with museums in America and Europe, on the respective expertise of curators, collectors and dealers, and on the ethics surrounding looted antiquities and art. The last chapter in this section is of relevance to all collectors, for it concerns the dispersal of collections. The fate of a collection left to a museum can be unpredictable, as demonstrated by the destiny of two historical collections belonging to Hans Syz and Benjamin Altman. Hans Syz (1894–1991) was a collector and scholar of Asian and Meissen porcelain, and a psychiatrist who researched human behaviour. He initially donated his entire collec-



The three parts of the brain: neocortex, limbic and reptilian



Chinese export porcelain Imari coffeepot, circa 1740

tion to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, but a later change of that museum's focus led to the dispersal of his collection to other museums, and the loss of his original intention to illustrate cultural interactivity. By way of contrast, Benjamin Altman (1840–1913) largely achieved what he intended when he left his collections to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The author goes on to discuss other options for dispersal, all of which involve taking positive action during life or at death, or both. One radical solution is to set up a “virtual museum” on the internet. Part 3 concludes with a case study of the experience of curating an exhibition at a museum. In 2017, Dr Mueller was invited to guest curate an exhibition at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, the exhibits comprising chiefly Chinese export porcelains. Her display employed neuropsychological insights that prompted the visitor to link their own desires and interests with those of consumers several hundred years ago. Then, as now, people searched for pleasure, intellectual stimulation, profit and social interaction. The intention

was to connect the past with the present. I did not see the exhibition, so cannot comment on its success, but can applaud a novel approach to traditional display.

What then should we learn from this book? Although its central subject is collecting, and the understanding of what motivates the behaviour of collectors, it provides interesting insights and explanations of human behaviour and thus can be read by all. Everyone who enjoys working with, visiting or collecting works of art should find something to learn.

Rose Kerr

Rose Kerr is Honorary Associate of the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, after retiring as Keeper of the Far Eastern Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum. She teaches and lectures internationally, and acts as Honorary Fellow at the University of Glasgow, Trustee of the Sir Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, and Museum Expert Advisor for Hong Kong. In 2015, she was created an Honorary Citizen of Jingdezhen. She is the author of more than twenty-two books on Chinese art, has studied and worked in China since 1975, and is a contributing editor to Arts of Asia.