

Sometimes decadent, often secret, but never just one: the compulsion to collect.

MATT CASTLE

Possession Obsession

Owning a collection presents the need for places in which to store it. Right: A stationery container by Australian design studio Daniel Emma.

The Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti was an obsessive collector of exotic animals and birds. He filled his London home with owls, armadillos, peacocks, parakeets, kangaroos, wallabies, a Japanese salamander and a wombat named Top, whom he described as “a joy, a triumph, a delight, a madness.” The actor Tom Hanks collects vintage typewriters and was famously bribed to appear on a podcast by means of a crimson 1934 Smith Corona portable.

The urge to collect is deeply embedded within the human psyche. By the age of two, most children grasp the idea of ownership and will go on to acquire one or more “attachment objects,” whose perceived specialness depends largely on the fact that the objects are theirs, or were theirs first. A study by Bruce Hood and Paul Bloom explored this phenomenon by asking young children to swap their attachment objects with identical duplicates produced from a mocked-up “copying machine.” The idea horrified most of the children, with some even refusing to allow their objects to be “copied” in the first place. Others dutifully agreed to the swap, before bursting into tears.

The enhanced value we ascribe to things we own persists into adult life and is pervasive in the

western world. It's known as the “endowment effect,” but it doesn't explain why people are attracted to certain items in the first place. For some—connoisseurs of sports team memorabilia, for example—the acquisitive urge may originate from a sense of loyalty or identity, before it morphs into the need to reach ever more ambitious collecting goals.

The tendency of collectors to seek groups of objects was examined by Kate Barasz, a former doctoral student at Harvard Business School, and her colleagues. They demonstrated that arbitrary items framed as a set—which they termed a “pseudo-set”—became more attractive to collectors, who would readily pay more for the set than for the same items presented individually. The researchers did add an important proviso: Don't make the pseudo-set too large. The goal should be achievable.

Sometimes, even the most over-the-top collectors learn to recognize the limits of their desire to acquire. When Rossetti's beloved Top expired scant months after coming into his possession, he had the marsupial stuffed and mounted. History records a short-lived replacement—but thereafter, the painter-poet sought no further wombats. The joy and the madness must end somewhere.



Photograph: Rodrick Bond



JUST YOUR TYPE

by Pip Usher

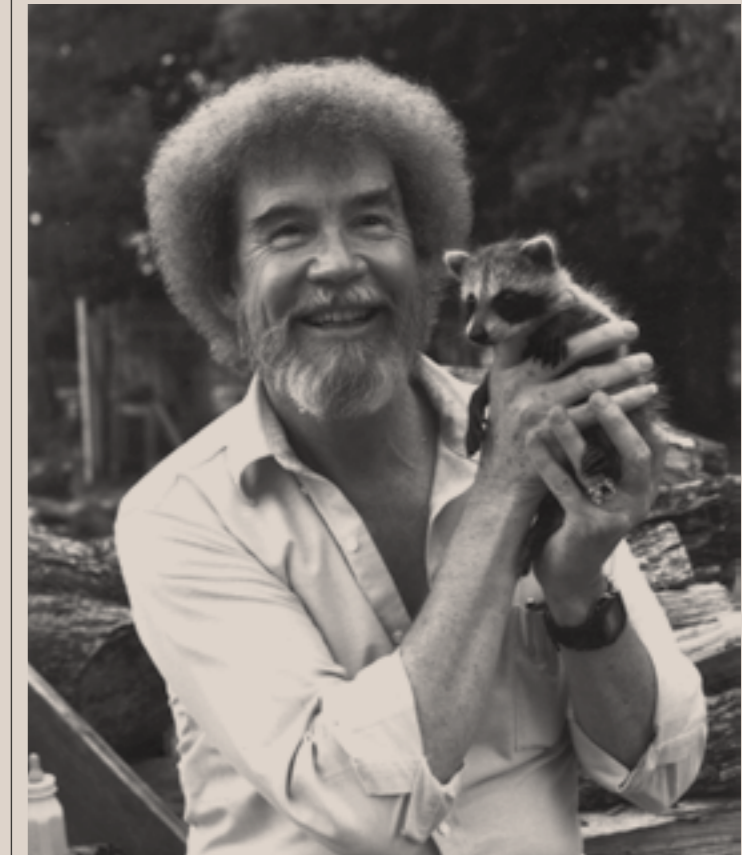
Of all the things a Hollywood star could choose to blow enormous sums of money on, manual typewriters do not seem an obvious choice. “I probably have 250-plus typewriters in my collection,” announces Tom Hanks in *California Typewriter*, a documentary about typewriters that documented his obsession and debuted in August to critical acclaim. Tapping away on a Smith Corona, numerous other models in camel brown, bottle green and gray displayed neatly on shelves behind him, Hanks displays a collector's paternal pride. “I would say that 90 percent of them are in perfect working order,” he adds. It's a 40-year-long obsession that started with a humble Hermes 2000—his first investment. “I ended up just having them around because they're beautiful works of art,” Hanks told NPR. Since then, he has not only amassed a substantial collection from “every ridiculous source possible,” but has translated his passion into the digital age with the launch of *Hanx Writer*—a best-selling iPad app that recreates the genteel typography and clackety-clack experience of a manual typewriter. Should other purists worry, Hanks' latest tribute takes a more traditional format. In a new collection of short stories, *Uncommon Type*, published in October, Hanks drew 17 different tales together with one common theme: the typewriter.

Right photograph © Bob Ross Inc.

JOHN CLIFFORD BURNS

Bob Ross

Learning the art of relaxation from the master of happy accidents (and accidental life advice).



It is difficult to recall any one Bob Ross painting. *Mountain Waterfall* looks a lot like *Mountain Retreat*, which looks a lot like *Brown Mountain* before it and *Autumn Mountain* before that. As the host of *The Joy of Painting*, an American television tutorial that ran for 31 seasons between 1983 and 1994, Ross painted over 400 variations on the theme. His was an oeuvre of quantity—a prolific series of boreal mirages, like New Age desktop wallpapers. “Talent is a pursued interest,” he once said.

Ross (pictured above, holding a baby raccoon) was the first to admit that his paintings comprised lots of what he called “happy accidents.” He encouraged viewers to make them too, and not to worry. Mistakes could be turned into trees, and Ross saw all trees as happy and little. “And don't make your trees straight,” he advised. “Let them bend. Trees grow in all kinds of ways. Doesn't really matter.”

Ross has gathered a wider fan base in death. Meme culture appreciates the perm that he wore like a fur hat and the cameos of

Peapod, the pocket squirrel; the ASMR community delights in the bristly tap-tap of his paintbrush and his pronunciation of “wh” as “hw” (hwy, hwere, titanium hwite). Netflix has picked up one of his shows and Target sells a Bob Ross board game.

“We're not sure that he would have imagined that it would have gotten this big,” says Joan Kowalski, president at Bob Ross Inc. (“the machine behind the man”). “He was peripherally aware that people could never watch a full episode because they would fall asleep in the middle of it.” He would have been shy and flattered, she thinks. “He could just be that wonderful person that everyone saw on television.”

The enduring appeal of Bob Ross, Kowalski believes, is the safe space he created to “explore your ability to be creative without having a lot of experience.” Perhaps it is also that any viewer can adapt his wet-on-wet painting techniques into solid life advice. For example: “If you don't like it, change it. It's your world.”