Collecting of Glass - a Multi-Sited Ethnography

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In this study, glass collectors express their passion for Swedish glass from the 20th and 21st century. The purpose of the study is to view collecting of glass from a multi-sited perspective. It is of interest to try to understand different and multiple interpretations of glass collections and glass collecting encompassing not only the collector’s perceptions, but also glass designers, glass workers blowing, painting or engraving glass, marketers, retailers, and auctioneers. By contrasting different perceptions, also incorporating different contexts, we may better understand the meaning of collections.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to understand different and
multiple interpretations of Swedish glass collections and glass
collecting encompassing not only the collector’s perceptions, but
also glass designers, glass workers blowing, painting or engraving
glass, marketers, retailers, and auctioneers. By contrasting different
perceptions, and also incorporating different contexts, we may
better understand the meanings of collections. Some preliminary
findings are presented in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Collecting as a research area has over the years attracted many
researchers’ attention (e.g., Belk 1995a; Belk et al. 1988; Pearce
1995; Rogan 1998). Studies have focused on contemporary collect-
ing or historical aspects of collecting, often from the collector’s
perspective. A collector’s motives to collect can be to conserve,
assemble, preserve, or rescue things (Belk et al. 1991). The collector
can be looked upon as reigning as an absolute sovereign among
his/her collected objects (Belk et al. 1991). Possession of a collec-
tion can be a way to control the world (e.g., Belk et al. 1991). Also,
“by focusing on collecting rather than the fads and fashions of the
general consumer marketplace, the collector is opting out of the
broader commodity and fashion rat race and instead finding mean-
ing, knowledge, and self through the pursuit of collecting (Belk
1995b, p.486-487).”

Companies in a consumer culture mass-merchandise collect-
ibles to consumers, thereby reinforcing the social and economic
significance of collecting by pre-packaging the experience for
consumers (Belk et. al 1991). Even though collecting is predomi-
nantly about consumers negotiating meanings, it is also of interest
to understand the meanings predetermined by actors involved in
designing, producing and marketing collectibles. This study fo-
cuses specifically on Swedish glass from the 20th and 21st century.
The purpose is to view collecting of Swedish glass collections and
glass collecting from a multi-sited field (Marcus 1995). Collectors,
glass designers, glass workers blowing, painting or engraving glass,
marketers, retailers and auctioneers have been interviewed. The
study is inspired by literature on collecting, but also by literature on
material culture (e.g., Attfield 2000; Miller 1987).

SWEDISH GLASS DESIGN

Glass is a material which often is perceived as magic. Zerwick
(1990, p.111) writes: “In modern times, glass has retained its
traditional fascination—its magical ability to capture and reflect
light and its solid transparency, of being and not being at the same
time. In Remembrance of Things Past, the French writer Marcel
Proust said that glass is 'real without being actual, ideal without
being abstract’”. The paradox between the fragile and terminal
nature of glass and the fact that it is still kept and saved by collectors
is fascinating. The visual experience of glass is manifested among
glass collectors in that their collections are displayed visible and
seldom put away.

An understanding of how Swedish glass has been developed and
perceived at different periods of time during the 20th century is
expected to help us understand the relations people have to glass


collections and collecting of glass. Des Chene (1997, p.79-80)
writes: “It is by making historical connections between places that
we can both make theoretical advances and better learn about the
people and social phenomena we study.” The 20th century was a
time period when Swedish glass industry flourished and received
Swedish glass was shown to the world at the Paris Exhibition in
1925, it became clear to everyone that a new nation had entered the
world of fine glassmaking.” Swedish glass also received recogni-
tion during the World exhibition in New York 1939 when the
concept “Swedish Modern” was established (Huldt 1999). The
Second World War was a difficult time period for the Swedish glass
industry facing limited raw material and lack of export possibilities
(Huldt 1999). Demand for Swedish glass increased significantly
after the War and it was in particular during the 1950s when
Swedish glass became an essential profile for Swedish design
internationally. Sandon (1999, p.176) writes: “During the 1950s
Swedish art glass spawned a new approach to glass throughout
Scandinavia and also many other countries.” Sweden had a large
number of glass factories during the 20th century, a majority of
them situated in the southern province Småland. Examples of glass
factories in Småland which are internationally well-known are
Orrefors, Kosta, Boda and Åfors.

Glass collectors can through their collections express their
identity. Possessions are not only part of the self, but can also be
seen as instrumental for development of the self (Belk 1988).
McCracken (1988, p.113) states: “Collectibles, unique or very rare,
must be hunted down, brought out of hiding, won away from other
collectors. When goods have this special elusiveness, they can once
again become bridges. It is now possible for the individual to treat
them as things to which certain displaced meanings adhere. They
have the all-important quality of being beyond one’s grasp and can
therefore serve as bridges to displaced meaning. The individual can
now pretend that there is a distant location for his or her personal
ideals and that these ideals will be realized when the bridge to them
is obtained. In short, collectibles make it possible once again to
dream.” Design is used by societies to express values (Forty 1986).
Through their collections, collectors express values articulated by
glass designers representing contemporary or times past. Zerwick
(1990, p.111) writes: “In the era when glass is taking us to the very
edge of outer space, it has become a medium for exploring inner
space as well—as an art medium with which the artist may transform
a personal vision into a statement of universal meaning expressed
in terms of transparency and light. In the coming decades, glass may
well reveal not only more about our world, but also, as art must,
about ourselves.”

DESIGN AND METHOD OF THE STUDY

The meanings of glass as a material, glass collections and glass
collecting are likely to differ for people having different relation-
ship to glass. Marcus (1995) describes the emergence of multi-sited
ethnography in anthropological research and discusses that it is
used in particular in new spheres of interdisciplinary work, for
example, various strands of cultural studies. He states (1995, p.97):
“…..such interdisciplinary arenas do not share a clearly bounded
object of study, distinct disciplinary perspectives that participate in
them tend to be challenged.” Collecting represents such a sphere of
interdisciplinary work. There are different techniques for conduct-
ing multi-sited ethnography such as follow the people, follow the

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things, follow the metaphor etc. (Marcus 1995). In this study, the focus is on following the thing, i.e. tracing circulation of glass collectibles in different contexts.

In-depth interviews (e.g., Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) were conducted in order to understand the different actor’s relationships to and experience of glass objects and collecting as an activity. 24 glass collectors (23 men and one woman, middle aged or older) have been interviewed. A few of the men shared their collecting interest with their wives. In five of the interviews, the wives were also interviewed together with the men. In addition, 24 interviews have been conducted with glass designers, glass workers blowing, painting or engraving glass, marketers, retailers, and auctioneers. The interviews were semi-structured and each interview took approximately 1.5-2.5 hours. The interviews have been tape-recorded and transcribed. The analysis is based on reading and systematizing the transcripts. Some preliminary findings are presented in this article.

**FINDINGS**

**The Glass collectors**

The glass collectors expressed their passion for glass. Both the glass objects collected and the collector’s eyes shimmered when they talked about the glass. The collectors described the material’s beauty, its ability to change with light, its color, form and transparency. Transparency, which also is related to the glass collector’s interest to search for and find the origin of their objects, also involving relations to the designer and glass workers who have created the glass. The glass collectors clearly expressed the attraction to see glass produced. The fire represents the hard work and skills required to produce glass, but also the passion they feel for glass.

The collectors interviewed collect mainly art glass. A few collectors do also collect glass for utilitarian purposes and over time this glass has become collectible. The meaning of possessions can change during life and things for everyday use become memorabilia (Löfgren 1992). For example, an auction can turn commodities into sacred collectibles (Belk 1995a; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). The glass collectors interviewed own exclusive glass. Collecting is a form of materialistic luxury consumption, because a collector hunts, searches or shops for unique useless consumer goods (Belk 1995b). Nearly all the collectors belong to a glass society which meets regularly for lectures and visits to glass factories and glass designers. Associations may reinforce the social and psychological significance of collecting and mitigate some of the alienation that consumer culture seems to bring about (Belk et al. 1991).

The interviews pointed to different motives for collecting. First of all, the collectors expressed interest, curiosity and willingness to learn more about glass. For example, one collector expressed that he will never become completely knowledgeable, because there is so much to learn. His knowledge has increased over time and he is more selective and quicker when searching for glass at antique fairs nowadays compared to when he started to collect glass about ten years ago. In general, it was emphasized during the interviews that a glass collector should have knowledge about how glass is produced. Some collectors explained that as their knowledge increase, it also results in that their requirements increase. For example, one man resembled collecting to climbing a pyramid; it gets narrower towards the top. It gets more difficult to find what you are looking for the longer you have been collecting.

Another motive for collecting appeared to be nostalgia and the glass collected symbolized links to a time which has past. Several of the collectors originate from Småland, where a majority of Swedish glass has been and still is produced. They talked about memories from their childhood when they had spent time in the glass factories. One man who collects glass from a glass factory where his father had worked stated explicitly that his collecting interest is about nostalgia. He emphasized also that his interest in glass is about self-realization, to get something unique that someone else does not have. This motive was noticeable among several of the collectors. Another collector explained that he buys drinking glasses for crayfish and Christmas parties which remind him of parties during his childhood growing up in Orrefors. He uses the drinking glasses for parties during holidays and tries to find old things from the same time period for decoration. To use the glass objects for holidays means for him joy and community, but also to pass on traditions to his children and grandchildren. It is important to use the glass pieces and it is not the end of the world if they break, but a reason to buy more.

The collectors expressed in general pride over the Swedish glass history, but also over their collections. Glass objects which a relative had produced had a particular place in the collectors’ hearts. A man who had worked in the glass industry his entire life collected things he had inherited, bought from the glass factory or received as presents from glass designers. He did not perceive himself as a collector, because he did not search for complete collections. His job had made him interested in glass. The most cherished possession was a letter press made by his father. Also, another collector emphasized that a pair of candle holders his father had made for his mother were the most precious collectibles.

Collectors help out to preserve Swedish glass history. It can be seen as something noble. The collector can by preserving things produce a valuable and lasting contribution to the world (Belk et al. 1991). A collector started his collecting after visiting a glass factory which was going to close down. He said his aim to arrange a private exhibition of drinking glasses from different glass factories was never realized, because of the difficulty to achieve a systematic collection.

Another motive for collecting was social interaction. One collector said: “you meet a lot of people at auctions who you maybe have not seen for many years.” Also, as mentioned above, a majority of the collectors belong to a glass society and they meet regularly to exchange experiences.

Collections have different values. Nearly all collectors said that they do not look upon their collections as an economical investment. A woman said that it is important that glass objects collected are beautiful, but emphasized also economic investment: “Instead of having the money in the bank, you have the objects in a cupboard and look at these items.” The affective value was emphasized by most of the collectors. One collector expressed: “...if you see something which you think is really beautiful, which gives you something, then it does not entail many seconds of reflections. It is a spontaneous feeling.” He had mainly made impulse purchases. To possess the objects was for him not as important as the excitement in purchasing and acquiring the objects. He said explicitly that his collecting is: “more an enjoyment than an investment.”

To know the glass object’s origin, provenance does often increase the value for collectors. The interviews indicated that it was essential to know where the glass objects were produced and by whom. Some collectors mentioned also the importance of having a good relationship with the glass designers they collect. A family mentioned their relation to an antique dealer who they had purchased a glass bowl from. Before selling the glass bowl to them, he had asked to see their entire home, in order to approve of the family as buyers.
Another collector emphasized that collecting involves creativity: “that you can do something new to what other people have done, by putting together the whole thing. It is about creating and learning. In collecting, there is also learning, you learn new things.” The family had recently built special shelves for the glass and carefully thought about the lighting. The man explained: “Glass which is not lit, it dies, it disappears, you can not see it.”

In general, it was noticeable that lighting and placement of the glass objects are important to the collectors interviewed. One collector emphasized the importance of enjoying the glass objects every day: “…I have never understood people who buy expensive paintings and put them in a vault where no one can see them. Such a collector is not a collector. It should not be more exclusive than that it is possible to have it visible, to look at. Every night when we sit watching TV, we can see straight into one of the glass cupboards and see all the nice objects….we switch the light on and off in the glass cupboard every day, the year around.”

Dusting was also important for the collectors in order to keep their glass objects shiny. One exception is a collector who has glass in his entire house and has converted six wardrobes to lit glass cupboards. He resists dusting, because he is afraid that the glass objects might break: “better with dust and whole objects than broken and clean objects.” Different degrees of order and structure were visible in the collector’s documentation and display of glass.

Collections can be classified as vertical/horizontal, and structured/unstructured (Belk et al. 1988).

As might be expected, the collectors did not want their collections to be complete. A fear of completion of a collection can be avoided by upgrading the standards for the collection, branching into related areas of collecting, or by starting a completely new collection (Belk et al. 1991). Some of the collectors collect glass which is very rare, no one knows how many objects have been produced and the objects made are not signed. Their collections can never be complete. Also, a collector collects art glass from 1920 and onwards, a very wide definition with no risk for completion. Another collector who is interested in a particular glass designer says that he after writing a book or making an exhibition about the glass designer is ready to get rid of the objects and start another glass collecting project.

As mentioned above, the majority of the collectors interviewed were men. In some families, the wives also share their interest and participate by giving advice and making decisions. It appeared, however, as if the men are responsible for the purchases in the majority of the families. There might be several reasons. The wives might not be interested in the collection, have their own collection or other interests. Several of the men interviewed have their roots in Småland and may therefore have a personal interest in glass. Another reason could be that art glass often is costly. Men have historically had higher incomes than women and been able to afford expensive purchases. Most areas of adult collecting is still dominated by the economically advantaged and by males (Belk 1995b).

The glass designers

The interviews indicated that the glass designers in general did not think of collectors when designing glass. They emphasized the creative process of designing glass where the ideas originate from the designer him/herself. A designer expressed that his/her design of glass “originates from his/her soul without compromises.” Some designers mentioned that the miniatures they designed were sold as collectibles. Also, the designers discussed that limited editions were helpful in order to sell glass as collectibles. Nevertheless, it seemed to be primarily the marketers rather than the designers who focused on collectors.

The interviews with the designers also indicated that people buying glass can be categorized into different groups of consumers, consumers who after a while might become collectors. First, there are consumers who buy mass produced glass in shops. These consumers are in general not collectors, even though they might still feel a strong attachment to the objects purchased and to the designers. Second, there are consumers who visit the glass factories and the glass designers, looking for glass objects to buy. Some of these consumers are collectors. Third, there are consumers who buy very exclusive art glass at the galleries and this is where the very serious collectors buying exclusive glass can be found. The interviews with the designers also indicated that serious collectors apart from feeling strong attachment to the glass objects can also purchase for reasons such as investments and status. Some designers sell expensive art glass to collectors in galleries abroad, for example in the United States. These collectors are quite wealthy and relationships are sometimes established with the glass designers. Consumers sometimes shift upwards to the next group, for example consumers who have bought mass-produced glass in shops may decide to purchase unique art glass after some time.

A designer mentioned that a collector is someone who has a genuine interest in glass and not someone who purchases second quality cheap glass. Another designer mentioned that a collector is someone who purchases exclusive art glass to save for the next generation. A collector was, in other words, not seen as someone who has the kitchen cupboard filled with mass-produced glass.

Some glass designers meet consumers in shops selling mass-produced glass being aware that they are often not serious collectors. The designers sometimes meet collectors who visit the glass factories. In particular, the galleries play an important role for the relationships formed between collectors and designers. The staff at the galleries guides the collectors by giving them advice on potential purchases. The staff has sometimes more knowledge than the collector him/herself. One glass designer mentioned that the galleries often talked about who had purchased a specific glass object to let other potential customers know about it. The influence of reference groups is hereby evident for exclusive art glass. Some designers had visited collector’s homes and seen the placement of their art glass.

It appeared as critical that the staff in the galleries is knowledgeable. A designer also emphasized that the staff in the ordinary glass shops need to be knowledgeable. The placement of glass in shops was also discussed. One designer expressed the opinion that an exclusive glass shop should not sell cheese cutters and dust-brushes, but focus on glass. Another designer pointed out that unique art glass should not be sold in shops selling mass-produced glass.

In general, several designers seemed aware of that in order to sell glass as collectibles, it is beneficial with limited editions. Also, some designers expressed the opinion that collectors are interested in stories about the glass objects, to hear about the glass objects’ provenance. This is also noticeable in the marketing of glass objects which often include stories. One designer emphasized that it is important that the stories are true. Another designer said that his/her creation process of designed glass is in itself a way to tell the story.

The prices were also discussed. One designer emphasized that prices over time must go up. You cannot set a price and then lower it. Also, for glass designers selling art glass on different markets, there is a need to balance the prices between buyers in Sweden and other countries.

The designers emphasized that it is important to get to know the glass material. One designer talked about “the glass material’s
soul” and emphasized that it is important to live close to the glass factories. Another designer mentioned the cooperation in the glass factories and said that good results required a symbiosis between the designer and the glass workers. The designers expressed that they respected the knowledge among the glass workers and emphasized that they are a team.

Glass workers blowing, painting and engraving glass

The craftsmanship to blow, engrave and paint glass takes very long time to learn. The glass workers talked also about working together with the glass designers in teams. The glass workers blowing, painting and engraving glass did not think of collectors when producing glass, but explained that they focused on making high quality objects. Someone said that it had happened that he/she wondered where the glass he/she produced ended up. A few glass workers participate in exhibitions of art glass together with the glass designers and said that they really enjoy it. At these exhibitions they sometimes meet collectors. The joy of meeting consumers, collectors as well as non-collectors, visiting glass factories and being able to show how glass is produced was also emphasized during the interviews.

Marketers and retailers

The marketers discussed the significance of stories in marketing of glass objects. A marketer emphasized that all the successful products had originated from the designers, not from the marketers. The importance of educating shop assistants was mentioned by a marketer.

One glass shop arranged regularly exhibitions of exclusive art glass, which were attended by collectors. The importance of having knowledge of glass to share with collectors and potential collectors was confirmed. The development of relationships with collectors was also discussed. Another shop selling second hand glass indicated that collectors are interested in the origins of the glass. The shop owners’ knowledge is important in order to give information about the glass designer and the glass factory producing the glass. The shop owners emphasized the difficulty of finding quality glass objects to sell. A possible reason could be that people’s knowledge of antiques has increased over the last decades. Different trends were also discussed. For example, pressed glass was not in demand ten years ago, but is popular today. Both interviews with the glass shop owners pointed to the importance of lighting, placement and dusting of the glass objects for sale.

Auctioneer

An auctioneer emphasized that the demand for expensive glass among collectors has decreased in Sweden during the last years. The international market is becoming more important. Different trends are noticeable, for example classical engraved bowls are more difficult to sell today. The interview confirmed that buyers, collectors and potential collectors, have become more demanding over time, they only want to buy perfect glass and tolerate no flaw. The interview indicated that the auctioneer has high knowledge of glass and that he/she over the years has developed relationships with the collectors.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate different motives for collecting glass. The visible experience of glass was important for all the collectors. The lighting, placement and dusting of the glass objects were emphasized by the collectors as well as the glass shop owners. Collecting involves different rituals (e.g., McCracken 1988) and grooming in particular is noticeable in this study. In general, the collectors were interested in learning more about glass. It was also stressed that a glass collector should have knowledge about the production process. Provenance, to know the glass object’s origin, where it was made and by whom, also increases the value for the collectors. The enjoyment of seeing glass produced and the importance of having good relationship with the glass designers whose object they collect were also mentioned. The collectors expressed pride over the history of Swedish glass and over their collections. Nostalgia was noticeable. The collections symbolized links to a bygone era. Several of the collectors originate from Småland where a majority of Swedish glass has been and still is produced.

The glass designers emphasized that they did not think of collectors when designing glass, but instead it was a creative process where the ideas originated from the designer him/herself. Collectors are, however, significant for selling unique art glass. Also, collectors are important for selling limited editions of glass as well as miniatures. It was in particular the designers selling unique art glass that met the serious collectors in the galleries and sometimes formed a relationship with them. Different categories of consumers purchasing glass were mentioned. Consumers purchasing mass-produced glass were also important for the glass industry’s future. These consumers might one day become collectors and purchase more expensive unique glass. Some designers were aware of the importance of stories for selling glass. If studying how glass objects are marketed, it is noticeable that they all have names and sometimes a story. Also, the designers are emphasized when marketing the objects.

The interviews with the marketers indicated that they are well aware of the importance of stories in marketing. The importance of knowledgeable staff in glass shops was also mentioned. The glass shops interviewed confirmed the importance of having knowledge of glass to be able to establish a relationship with the customers, collectors and potential collectors. The interview with the auctioneer also showed that he/she has high knowledge of glass and that he/she has developed relationship with collectors over the years.

The workers blowing, painting and engraving glass did not think of collectors when producing glass, but focused on making perfect objects. They enjoy meeting consumers in the glass factories and to show how they make the glass objects. A few glass workers had met collectors at galleries during exhibitions. Even though provenance is of great importance to collectors, the individual glass workers are in general not mentioned in marketing of contemporary glass objects. However, antique glass objects are often marketed with information about both designers and glass workers, thereby emphasizing the teamwork performed.

CONCLUSION

Collectors expressed their passion for glass and are important for the future of Swedish glass industry. It is something glass designers, glass workers, marketers, retailers and auctioneers agree on. Collecting is dependent on a flourishing glass industry. In order to sell glass as collectibles, provenance and stories related to its origin are important. Swedish glass is part of the Swedish soul, people have great pride in the glass history which exists in Sweden; a history which collectors help to preserve and perform. The article has presented some preliminary findings from a multi-sited ethnographic approach to collecting. Continued analysis of the data material gathered is believed to contribute to our understanding of glass collections and collecting, how meanings differ, how meanings are created and how meanings are transformed among different categories of people.

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