

VIKTOR WYND'S  

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CABINET OF WONDERS





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Illustrations by Theatre of Dolls

• PRESTEL •  
MUNICH . LONDON . NEW YORK





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INTRODUCTION  
• THE EDUCATION OF AN AESTHETE •

*'Par une belle matinée de mai, une svelte amazone, montée sur une superbe jument alezane, parcourait, au milieu des fleurs, les allées du Bois.'*

– Albert Camus

'Everything said from the angle of a real collector is whimsical.'

– Walter Benjamin

'Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me.'

– Michel Foucault

As a child I had few if any friends, and have since been mainly alone (even if often in a blaze of glorious, drunken and debased company). Most of my time has been spent in a world of make-believe, where I have lived through others who, though probably just as miserable, have had lives that seem to sparkle with a beauty and intellectual vigour that I can never hope to imitate. In private I have been Harold Acton, Heliogabalus, Edward James, Lord Berners, the third Marquess of Bute, the Trades-cants, Sir John Soane, Augustus Pitt Rivers, Sir Joseph Banks, Alfred Russel Wallace and whoever else has caught my fancy.

I have surrounded myself with things I find beautiful, an enormous web of multi-layered narratives. Each piece provides a distraction from the reality of a life I do not like. Collecting is a burden and a sickness. As a hypochondriac I enjoy it, and as an addict I find that as the pleasure of each addition wanes, the dose must increase. As a dealer, I don't buy just one picture and look at it and live with it and love it: I buy ten or twenty. That way I'll sell five and get five for free – except I won't. It never works that way. When I sell something, I regret it; when something doesn't sell, I know I've made a mistake and shouldn't have bought it. Other people's houses are filled with things I used to have and should still have, and could still have if I hadn't sold them. Of course, I now have new things that I wouldn't have had otherwise, but all the same, my life is filled with regrets. Any collector's is. We are never happy with what

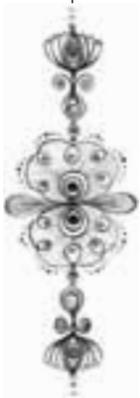


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Delilah is my favourite pet of all. She's a Colombian red-tailed boa constrictor and almost fully grown. I've had her since she was just a couple of weeks old and feeding on newborn mice. I keep her loose in my bedroom, with the electric blanket on so that she's always got somewhere warm to rest. People sometimes ask me how I think I can ever get lucky with a six-foot snake in my bed. Personally I think it's the least of my problems and if I can ever get someone up there they'll be only too delighted to find such a beautiful snake under the covers.

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In my library drinking tea in front of Matthew Killick's painting of a heart.



we've got; we always want more. We live our lives like the proverbial child with his nose pressed against a toyshop window, aware that the world is filled with things that will give us happiness and joy, but that we can only have one or two at a time. How much happier we would be if we could have everything! What lies we tell ourselves.

But I am sick and I know it, and I write this book as a warning to you not to waste your time and money accumulating countless objects, pictures, sculptures and whatnot, things that normal people call 'junk'. What is junk to you – a dull bit of brown, broken bone, say – is to me a piece of the dodo, that most iconic of extinct birds. There are perhaps five people in the world who own dodo bones. Two of them bought theirs from me. A dodo bone is one of the rarest, most unique and wonderful things that anyone could ever have. When clients ask if mine are real, I tell them that if they can't tell the difference themselves, they'd be far better off saving a five-figure sum and getting a chicken bone. The worst of it is, of course, that I have completely forgotten how many I own or where they all are. (One is in a cabinet in my dining room, a room so full of things that no one could possibly think of dining there. I only ever eat there when the maid is mopping the kitchen floor and I want my breakfast.)

I need beauty and the uncanny, the funny and the silly, the odd and the rare. Rare and beautiful things are the barrier between me and a bottomless pit of misery and despair, my only defence against the world outside.

Whilst reading history at London's School of Oriental and African Studies in the 1990s, I bumped into Edmund de Unger and had an enthusiastic conversation about Umayyad art. He very kindly invited me round and gave me his card, which grandly and simply just had the address – the Manor House, Richmond – written on it. I soon found out that he had amassed perhaps the world's finest collection of Islamic art. On my first visit to this grand London house, set in its own extensive parkland, it took all day just to wander around the ground floor, stopping only for lunch. We did not go upstairs or to his other house in Geneva. He smiled at me as I left and said that this should stop me ever becoming a collector, which seemed an absurd idea. I could never even imagine owning one of his many objects.

Almost two decades later, I am not so sure. On my fingers I wear two twelfth-century, 22-carat gold Seljuk rings from Persia that I flatter myself my old friend Edmund would covet. I have an overflowing house and museum that seem to be the source of constant media interest. I frequently lend works to museums. I have long considered



myself an accumulator, a magpie that surrounds himself with pretty things, but that, I think, is no longer accurate – I am a Collector.

I see my collection as an extension of myself. If something gets hurt, or is at risk of hurting, then I feel the pain. There is a significant financial cost to storing everything. Compounding that is the far greater financial cost of always needing a bigger house. In my last house I could hardly move – there was a path from the bedroom to the bathroom to the kitchen to a crowded desk – and it was not small. I will need to move again soon – but I'll never be able to afford to. What makes the situation even more ludicrous is that I cannot afford the insurance costs of keeping much of my collection at home, so it languishes in storage. Yet the pleasure I get from it is the same. Gentle reader, as I say, it is madness.

Collecting, it is widely acknowledged, is often symptomatic of psychological illness. The only workable definition I have ever come across is that to be a collector, one must accumulate objects with no thought as to what one will do with them once bought. It is not collecting to buy a picture for your dining-room wall (even if it is by Damien Hirst or Lucas Cranach the Elder), or to furnish your home(s) in exquisite good (or bad) taste; that is merely decorating, and thoroughly laudable and sensible at that. Collecting, on the other hand, is madness.

I remember the first time someone called me a 'collector': it was just after my curiosity shop, Viktor Wynd's Little Shop of Horrors, opened in Hackney, East London, in 2009. The museum (or shop, or gallery – whatever you like to call it – I call it a living, breathing sculpture, but you don't have to humour me: call it a mess if you like) was originally meant as a joke and I found the idea that I was a collector quite silly. I still pinch myself and feel like an imposter. Collectors, I then believed, were not mere mortals but godly figures such as Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, William Beckford, Calouste Gulbenkian, Robert Lehman, William Randolph Hearst and the Rothschilds.

The first love that grabbed me by the (prepubescent) balls, yelled 'Take me home!' and excited me was for an orchid. I have grown plants since I was a little boy. Adrian Slack, the carnivorous plant expert and nurseryman who has won more gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show than anyone can remember, is a cousin of my mother. Some of my happiest childhood memories are of going through the rubbish heap at his nursery and rescuing pygmy sundews and other delights. Cacti made a



brief appearance, but really it is tropical plants that I love: orchids, ferns, palms and bromeliads, lush, extravagant, excessive foliage. I return home laden from an orchid show, or late at night order an extensive collection online.

But passions come and passions go, and I fall in and out of love. This is all fine and dandy for something that can be put in a box, on a shelf, on a wall or in storage and forgotten about until my interest resurfaces, but I am too much of a dilettante to have a collection of plants. I can collect them, but they die eventually. One day, I tell myself, I will have a great garden. Confucius said that if you want to be happy for a day, you get married; if you want to be happy for a lifetime, you build a garden. I wonder if that will ever happen.

I never wanted to be a collector. I wanted to create, not to absorb other creations. I now tendentiously argue that collectors are artists at the very pinnacle of artistic endeavour. Our palette is everything ownable and our canvas is wherever we choose to put it. Truth be told, alas, I've always wanted to live alone in a cottage by the sea and write poetry.

Well, I may not be a John Tradescant or a John Soane, but I am a collector. This book is about what I collect, what I'd like to collect and, perhaps, about why.

*Viktor Wynd, London, 2014*



*Lists are meaningless and silly, but life is also meaningless and silly, so here is a list of writers who have changed or become a part of my life. It is by no means exhaustive – I've written it down from my defective memory.*

Harold Acton, Antonin Artaud, Machado de Assis, J. G. Ballard, Stephen Bayley, Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Beckett, William Beckford, William Blake, Jorge Luis Borges, Paul Bowles, Stephen Calloway, Italo Calvino, Leonora Carrington, Angela Carter, C. P. Cavafy, Miguel de Cervantes, Bruce Chatwin, Jean Cocteau, Richmal Crompton, Salvador Dalí, Daniel Defoe, Jacques Derrida, Philip K. Dick, John Donne, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gerald Durrell, Lawrence Durrell, Umberto Eco, Mircea Eliade, Henry Fielding, Michel Foucault, William Gaddis, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Günter Grass, Alasdair Gray, Graham Greene, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Knut Hamsun, G. A. Henty, Philip Hoare, Albert Hofmann, Bohumil Hrabal, J.-K. Huysmans, Robert Irwin, Christopher Isherwood, Alfred Jarry, B. S. Johnson, Ernst Jünger, Franz Kafka, Mario Vargas Llosa, Thomas Mann, Andrew Marvell, Somerset Maugham, Spike Milligan, John Milton, Nancy Mitford, Carl Muller, Robert Musil, Patrick O'Brian, Mervyn Peake, Sylvia Plath, John Cowper Powys, Rainer Maria Rilke, Frederick Rolfe, José Saramago, W. G. Sebald, Tobias Smollett, Philippe Soupault, Laurence Sterne, Leo Tolstoy, Laurens van der Post, Voltaire, Marina Warner, Evelyn Waugh, Jeanette Winterson, W. B. Yeats, Unica Zürn

*Artists whose work I would like to own, were I Hitler or Napoleon and able to take my pick:*

Bas Jan Ader, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Antonin Artaud, Balthus, Hernan Bas, Geoffrey Bawa, Peter Beard, Louise Bourgeois, Dieric Bouts, Marcel Broodthaers, Joan Brossa, Edward Burra, Petrus Christus, Joseph Cornell, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Salvador Dalí, Henry Darger, Paul Delvaux, Mark Dion, Otto Dix, Marlene Dumas, El Greco, Jacob Epstein, Lucio Fontana, Naomi Fisher, Tom Friedman, Caspar David Friedrich, Eric Gill, Alan Glass, Nan Goldin, Pierre Huyghe, Edward James, Ilya Kabakov, Mike Kelley, Paul Klee, Daniel Libeskind, Henri Michaux, Ana Mendieta, Hermann Nitsch, Martin Parr, Dieter Roth, Pieter Jansz. Saenradam, Christian Schad, Egon Schiele, Walter Sickert, Santiago Sierra, Stanley Spencer, Yves Tanguy, Dorothea Tanning, Luc Tuymans, Rogier van der Weyden, Jan van Eyck, Vincent van Gogh

Needless to say there are a lot more artists whose work I would like, but these would make a modest start for my town house.



*Artists whose work I own:*

Agostino Veneziano, Irene Ainsworth-Davies, Frida Alvinzi, Michael Ayrton, Cecil Beaton, Hans Bellmer, Zoe Beloff, Paul Benney, Peter Blake, Charles Bronson, Ian Bruce, John Buckland Wright, Reg Butler, Leonora Carrington, Mat Collishaw, Ithell Colquhoun, Tessa Farmer, Madge Gill, Maeve Gilmore, Hendrik Goltzius, Günter Grass, Alasdair Gray, Marcelle Hanselaar, Vanessa Hodgkinson, Axel Hoedt, William Hogarth, Jiae Hwang, Baptiste Ibar, Augustus John, Ilya Kabakov, Matthew Killick, Karl Lagerfeld, Molly Micklethwait, Polly Morgan, Willy Mucha, Martin Parr, Pablo Picasso, Mat Shinode Puie, Lina Scheynius, Austin Osman Spare, Graham Sutherland, Stephen Tennant, Keith Vaughan, Raisa Veikkola, John Waters, Hugo Wilson, Wols, Stephen Wright, Ossip Zadkine and others who I have forgotten, not to mention the world's largest (if not only) collection of work by Viktor Wynd.







CHAPTER I  
• FANTASY WYNDWORLD •



‘All my efforts are, for the moment, directed along one line: conquer boredom. I insist on seeing what lies on the other side of boredom.’

– André Breton writing to Jean Cocteau

‘The animals which you should not acquire can be divided into two groups: those that cannot live with you and those with which you cannot live.’

– *King Solomon’s Ring* by Konrad Lorenz

This is my house, where I live and breathe and snooze. I call it Fantasy Wyndworld because it took a long time to happen and I never imagined it would. It is more than a roof over my head that keeps me warm: it is an extension of me. As Nan Goldin says, ‘Objects are sublimations of relationships.’ For me it is all one, an enormous shell or a tail that I have grown. For years, few would come and visit. Hackney was the back of beyond. It’s all changed now, alas; I preferred it when it seemed to be another country.

Finding it embarrassing and awkward to be asked about my collection has made it difficult to answer the question of what I collect. Also, to think about it would be to question its very logic – and as there is no logic to it, that would depress me. But for your sake, dear reader, I will give it a try.

I have an ever-growing library of over 5,000 books, but that’s not really a collection. It’s far too small, for one thing. Instead it’s just a normal and modest amount for a person with an enquiring mind; a constant research resource; and a necessary way of staying alive. I do not need another painting (I will never need another painting), but I do need another book (probably about a painting), preferably at least one a day.

I do like dead people and bits of dead people, but I’ve got enough now. They are part of my box-ticking mentality: I get something I want, and I tick the box, and that’s enough for me. I need a human skeleton and a shrunken head, but I don’t need two. Strangely, I do need three dead babies in bottles. They are so beautiful, restful, serene and sublime. One of them lives on my kitchen dresser. Giant clamshells, on the other



Previous page:

The great dandy Sebastian Horsley’s sequined suit hangs on my bathroom door beside four of my drawings, a narwhal tusk and a Mervyn Peake sketch. Note also the rather extraordinary Austrian erotic picture, top left; I’ve never been able to work out what’s happening.



hand – enormous, fiendishly expensive things that weigh upwards of 30 kg and that I, with my slipped disc and bad back, can't move – I just can't get enough of. I must have at least twelve – mainly in storage because, even if I had anywhere to put them, I couldn't move them – and I want and need more.

The same applies to shells: I have hundreds from all over the world and long for a collection in the thousands. My desk is covered with them and, like a little boy with his toy cars, I constantly pick them up and marvel and rearrange them. Life without shells would not be a life worth living.

I don't need another two-headed lamb, but animal skulls and skeletons I love. I have hundreds and feel a deep-seated need to own thousands. They are so beautiful – sculptural – one stage removed from the living being. Taxidermy amuses me but I don't have it at home. Even if it didn't get eaten by moths, it is a little bit too real, not really my thing. It's nice to have a few pieces around, a stuffed dog, say, but a home or collection which has too much is morbid and bound to smell of the chemicals of death.

Living animals are vastly preferable. Whilst I have quite a few, including various reptiles and fish, a dog and a hedgehog, I am a long way from having a collection, and I don't intend to start one. When a plant is neglected and dies it is sad, but one can simply get another; neglecting an animal does such horrible things to my conscience that I won't do it. One day when I'm rich – which will be when I've stopped collecting – I will have an entire menagerie. One day ...

On the floor in my study, God knows where, is a bag containing the feathers of eight different extinct birds. How I longed for them, how I struggled to find and part with the money, and now that I have them they are lost on the floor and I don't really care. On my desk is a folder full of drawings by Alasdair Gray, the great, undersung Scottish artist and author of *Lanark*, amongst other books. For the past twenty years I have admired his work, never dreaming that I might one day own even one piece. But now they are here, a bundle of them, and since they've been bought they can stay in their folder. My happiness comes from owning them. One day I will get them out, look at them again and feel an intense pleasure; they'll be framed and hung in the Viktor Wynd Museum of my dreams. Behind me is a huge painting of his from the 1960s. I should turn and look, but I won't. My room is cold. I could pay for heating or I could put on one of my many fur coats and save my money for more important things.



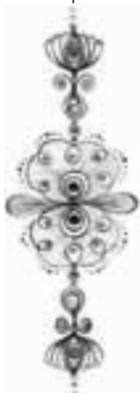
I only started thinking about myself as a collector of pictures when I moved house and discovered quite how many I had. Not having the wall space for them, and quite possibly never having any more wall space in the future either, makes me an art collector, albeit a modest one. And yet I know that of all the things one can collect, art is the most pointless. Compared to other attractive or interesting items it is obscenely overpriced and without doubt another bubble that is bound to pop, like tulips in seventeenth-century Holland. Even the most ludicrously plutocratically wealthy of the global elite can no longer hope to build up a meaningful collection. They can have two or three Francis Bacons and a Lucian Freud, probably not particularly good ones, and, most ludicrously of all, some Picassos – every museum in the world has them, every collector has them, even I, more fool me, have a Picasso (but mine was free). Surely the point of collecting is not to have something that everyone has that is easily replicated and in unlimited supply. You can go to IKEA for that. A collection should be filled with the rare, the beautiful and the inspiring, and blessed with a metanarrative. But who cares? I love art and I love my pictures and they give me pleasure, even when they are in storage. I want more of them and I will never be sated.

As for my plant collection, at the moment it is aquatic tropical mosses, liverworts and ferns that excite me the most. In my study I have an aquarium with over fifteen different species and I can spend hours every day looking at them. I am endlessly fascinated by the colony of Taiwanese red cherry shrimps, the school of cardinal tetras, the cobalt-blue blennies from New Guinea, the aquatic frogs from the Congo and the Laotian micro-crabs that can sit on my little fingernail and are very good at hiding. Even though I can spend hours every day staring, I doubt I see one of them more than once a month, but knowing they're there and I've got them makes me happy. I wonder how long this enthusiasm will last and hope I don't neglect it, causing them slowly to die, but alas, I can't guarantee it.

Even dead plants can be very beautiful and I am loath to throw them away. My studio is dominated by a (dead) eight-foot-tall tree fern, *Dicksonia squarrosa*, imported (living) from New Zealand. The trunk I planted with epiphytic orchids and bromeliads, all of which died years ago, and is none the worse for it.



The photo above the fire in my sitting room was taken by Igor Tolstoy at my crying party 'Loss; an Evening of Exquisite Misery', a 'pataphysical recreation of Günter Grass's fictional Onion Cellar from *The Tin Drum*.









UNVERKÄUFLICHE LESEPROBE



Viktor Wynd

**Viktor Wynd's Cabinet of Wonders**

Gebundenes Buch, Pappband, 200 Seiten, 24,0 x 28,0 cm  
160 farbige Abbildungen  
ISBN: 978-3-7913-4906-0

Prestel

Erscheinungstermin: September 2014

 [Der Titel im Katalog](#)