CHAPTER 1

Towards the Museum: Perceiving the Art of “Others” in the Ancient Near East

Massimiliano Franci

Introduction

When contemporary societies imagine the development of the act of collecting and the idea of the museum, they usually go back to the period of the Roman Empire, while finding the first modern examples of collecting only within the spirit of the Renaissance. Nevertheless before reaching a clear idea of the museum and about collecting, cultures must go through a number of transformations or passages that unexpectedly find their cradle in the ancient Near East. This hypothesis could surprise because in ancient Near Eastern cultures it is not easy to find clear evidence of a particular taste to collect artefacts.

The main reasons for this neglect are two. First of all, it is normal to link the idea of collecting with the Western world. Secondly, in the ancient Near East the meaning of “Other” is usually related to the idea of the “enemy”, the bearer of chaos. In ancient societies this negative figure is acceptable, from both social and cultural point of view, only if it can be put into the stereotyped category of those subdued. The “Other” doesn’t produce anything that is worthy of interest. This is a common mechanism of defence inside any cultural community.

The concept of cultural identity is an important one. Only through establishing our own identities and learning about the identities of other individuals and groups do we come to know what makes us similar to some people and different from others, and therefore to be able to establish social connections with them. Identifying ourselves as the bearers of a set of common values that the members of a social group perceived as something unique – lifestyle, law, custom, art, religion – also communicates the decision of the group to exclude everything which belongs to a different tradition. In fact, cultural memory preserves the bulk of knowledge from which a social group derives its awareness of unity and peculiarity; through a kind of indemnificatory determination in a positive (“we are this”) or in a negative (“they are this”) sense. Identity, back then, like language, was not just a description of cultural belonging, it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities. Moreover, identity was discovered to be something fragile that needed protecting and preserving, since it could be lost. For these reasons it seemed impossible to consider important the culture of others.

The conditions to evaluate in a positive way the artefacts and the cultures of others were developed in the ancient Near East. This important mental process took place over 5000 years of history and through different phases. At the beginning the artefacts of Others were believed to be elements of chaos. Later, they were considered of economic value as war’s booty, a “prestigious” gift in diplomacy, an exotic object, and finally a cultural element of a different culture that could be appreciated.

A good and peculiar example is the request of the Pharaoh Pepi II to Harkhuf (2278–2184 BCE), governor of Elephantine, for a particular gift: a Pygmy. The pharaoh wrote a letter that Harkhuf later incorporated into his funerary autobiography:

You have said… that you have brought a Pygmy of the god’s dances from the land of the horizon-dwellers… Come north to the Royal Palace at once! Hurry and bring with you this Pygmy whom you brought from the land of the horizon-dwellers live, hail and healthy, for the dances of the god, to gladden the heart, to delight the heart of King Neferkare who lives forever! When he goes down with you into the ship, get worthy men to be around him on deck, least he fall into the water! When he lies down at night, get worthy men to lie around him in his tent. Inspect him ten times at night! My majesty desires to see this Pygmy more than the gifts of the mine-land and of Punt! When you arrive at the residence and this Pygmy is with you, live hale and healthy, my majesty will do great things for you (Lichtheim, 1975: 23–27).

A very prestigious gift!

Thus in the Near East was born the idea of “collecting and museum archetypes”: ex oriente lux: the seeds of this wonderful intuition were widely disseminated in the world. In this chapter I will be addressing two questions: (a) is it possible to describe an evolution of the significance and taste in collecting what is produced in the ancient Near East? And, (b) what is the contribution of
the ancient Near East in the development of the culture of collecting?

Towards the Collecting Idea: The Contribution of Ancient Near Eastern Culture

In ancient Near Eastern documents we can find the first indication about collecting, specifically in the Old Testament: Adam and Noah can be considered the first collectors. Adam gave a name to all the creatures of God, classifying them according to their nature; defining collecting as classification. It is an important point of view because it is clear that the classification preludes any type of collection. Noah saves his family and the animals, saving in this way all Creation (Genesis vi.19–20), translating the idea of collecting into preservation. Noah makes further classifications in the so-called Table of Nations (Genesis x–xi). Starting from its descent, he geographically describes and catalogues languages and peoples in such a peculiar way that this type of genealogy is still used as a basis in modern Afro-Asiatic linguistics. Both Adam and Noah represent the extreme boundaries of the collecting idea and the Collectors image: classifying to gain knowledge of the world and build our own culture; preserving to save our own culture (Elsner & Cardinal, 1994: 1; Thomason, 2005: 8).

Before the Old Testament documentation, something similar had happened in a different but not so distant civilization. In ancient Egypt in the second half of the second millennium BCE the scribe Amenope wrote the first encyclopedia of history, the so called onomastikon. He made an account of the ‘Everything’ in the same way that Adam did, giving names to the things belonging to the sky, water, earth, gods, spirits, kings, officials, people and groups of people including foreigners and foreign lands, age groups, list of towns of Upper and Lower Egypt, buildings and their parts, and types of land, agricultural land, grain, parts of animals and kinds of meat. A long word list but also a linguistic and pictorial representation of the whole Egyptian universe, made for a precise purpose: “instructing the ignorant, to know all that exists”, defining the act of collecting as education.

This kind of list was previously used in Egypt at the end of the third millennium BCE when the scribes wrote long geographical lists with the place names of all of the known world (Franci, 2002: 409–410): Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Nubia, Libya, Mediterranean islands. The first examples of this list were the so called Execration texts. They were written on statuettes, bowls, or blocks of stone, and then broken. In this way, using sympathetic magic, the Pharaoh exerted the same magical power on the kingdom or the princes named in the text, a rudimentary way of collecting (or grouping) to exercise his own control over the outer world. In these examples the act of collecting was used to organize and control (Baudrillard, 1994: 9). Moreover when a culture enters into a period of decadence and deculturation because the country is under the control of a foreign society, it attempts to maintain its identity and cultural memory with a kind of institutional antiquarianism: the active rebuilding and restoration of religious landmarks, the recovery of earlier art pieces and religious documents, and saving all this information inside the perimeter of the temple and covering all the surfaces of the walls with any useful data (myths, calendars, instructions, and so on) under an obsessive impulse to recreate the whole universe. Nevertheless in this way ancient knowledge was left in the hand of a restricted social class: the priests who cut the rest of the population out of its own culture, essentially decreeing the death of the Egyptian civilization (Franci, forthcoming 2014). Therefore the Egyptian priests – in a particular moment of great menace like Noah – decided to save their culture within the temples. They used it as a book, with innumerable lists of elements and information about their culture. This kind of collection is the unique stronghold against the loss of their civilization, as collecting writing is a storage system where everything can endure and be preserved (Assman, 2006: 99).

The Art of “Others”: From a Symbol of Chaos to a Collector’s Item

Regarding the art of the others as something of value was the most important mental passage made in the past because every ancient civilization considered the culture of the Others as a chaotic element in the process of constructing its own identity – distinguishing between “us” and “them” (Assman, 1998: 3). The production of the Others is well accepted in inner economical trade and war booty is the first and common way to learn about foreign products. The direct knowledge of foreign production brings particular attention to the quality and peculiarities of some of these products: i.e. Syrian or Cretan silver vessels, or myrrh, ivory, ebony, and exotic animal skins from Africa. Paradigmatic are some Near Eastern examples: (a) the Statue of Puzur-Ishtar viceroy of Mari (end of the 111 millennium BCE) discovered at Babylon where it had been brought as war booty by the King Hammurabi (1750 BCE) after the destruction of Mari; (b) the Code of Hammurabi, a well-preserved Babylonian law code, dating