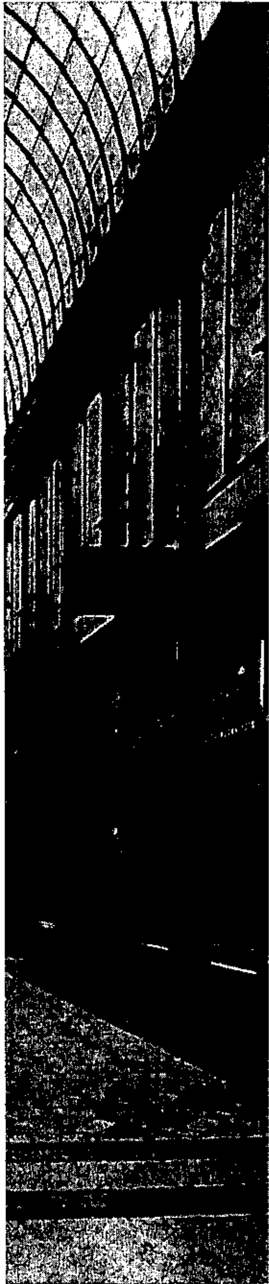

THE ARCADES PROJECT

WALTER BENJAMIN

Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin

PREPARED ON THE BASIS OF THE GERMAN VOLUME EDITED BY ROLF TIEDEMANN

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[The Collector]

All these old things have a moral value.

—Charles Baudelaire[1]

I believe . . . in my soul: the Thing.

—Léon Deubel, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1929), p. 193

Here was the last refuge of those infant prodigies that saw the light of day at the time of the world exhibitions: the briefcase with interior lighting, the meter-long pocket knife, or the patented umbrella handle with built-in watch and revolver. And near the degenerate giant creatures, aborted and broken-down matter. We followed the narrow dark corridor to where—between a discount bookstore, in which dusty tied-up bundles tell of all sorts of failure, and a shop selling only buttons (mother-of-pearl and the kind that in Paris are called *de fantaisie*)—there stood a sort of salon. On the pale-colored wallpaper full of figures and busts shone a gas lamp. By its light, an old woman sat reading. They say she has been there alone for years, and collects sets of teeth "in gold, in wax, and broken." Since that day, moreover, we know where Doctor Miracle got the wax out of which he fashioned Olympia.[2] □ Dolls □ [H1,1]

"The crowd throngs to the Passage Vivienne, where people never feel conspicuous, and deserts the Passage Colbert, where they feel perhaps too conspicuous. At a certain point, an attempt was made to entice the crowd back by filling the rotunda each evening with harmonious music, which emanated invisibly from the windows of a mezzanine. But the crowd came to put its nose in at the door and did not enter, suspecting in this novelty a conspiracy against its customs and routine pleasures." *Le Livre des cent-et-un,* vol. 10 (Paris, 1833), p. 58. Fifteen years ago, a similar attempt was made—likewise in vain—to boost the ‹Berlin› department store W. Wertheim. Concerts were given in the great arcade that ran through it. [H1,2]

Never trust what writers say about their own writings. When Zola undertook to defend his *Thérèse Raquin* against hostile critics, he explained that his book was a scientific study of the temperaments. His task had been to show, in an example,

exactly how the sanguine and the nervous temperaments act on one another—to the detriment of each. But this explanation could satisfy no one. Nor does it explain the admixture of colportage, the bloodthirstiness, the cinematic goriness of the action. Which—by no accident—takes place in an arcade.[3] If this book really expounds something scientifically, then it's the death of the Paris arcades, the decay of a type of architecture. The book's atmosphere is saturated with the poisons of this process: its people drop like flies. [H1,3]

In 1893, the cocottes were driven from the arcades. [H1,4]

Music seems to have settled into these spaces only with their decline, only as the orchestras themselves began to seem old-fashioned in comparison to the new mechanical music. So that, in fact, these orchestras would just as soon have taken refuge there. (The "theatrophone" in the arcades was, in certain respects, the forerunner of the gramophone.) Nevertheless, there was music that conformed to the spirit of the arcades—a panoramic music, such as can be heard today only in old-fashioned genteel concerts like those of the casino orchestra in Monte Carlo: the panoramic compositions of ‹Félicien› David, for example—*Le Désert, Christoph Colomb, Herculanum*. When, in the 1860s (?), an Arab political delegation came to Paris, the city was very proud to be able to mount a performance of *Le Désert* for them in the great Théâtre de l'Opéra (?). [H1,5]

"Cineoramas. The Grand Globe Céleste: a gigantic sphere forty-six meters in diameter, where you can hear the music of Saint-Saëns." Jules Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1900* (Paris, 1901), p. 61. ▢ Diorama ▢ [H1,6]

Often these inner spaces harbor antiquated trades, and even those that are thoroughly up to date will acquire in them something obsolete. They are the site of information bureaus and detective agencies, which there, in the gloomy light of the upper galleries, follow the trail of the past. In hairdressers' windows, you can see the last women with long hair. They have richly undulating masses of hair, which are "permanent waves," petrified coiffures. They ought to dedicate small votive plaques to those who made a special world of these buildings—to Baudelaire and Odilon Redon, whose very name sounds like an all too well-turned ringlet. Instead, they have been betrayed and sold, and the head of Salome made into an ornament—if that which dreams of the console there below is not the embalmed head of Anna Czyllak.[4] And while these things are petrified, the masonry of the walls above has become brittle. Brittle, too, are ▢ Mirrors ▢ ‹See R1,3.›
[H1a,1]

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this "completeness"? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence

at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes socle, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession. It must not be assumed that the collector, in particular, would find anything strange in the *topos hyperouranios*—that place beyond the heavens which, for Plato,[5] shelters the unchangeable archetypes of things. He loses himself, assuredly. But he has the strength to pull himself up again by nothing more than a straw; and from out of the sea of fog that envelops his senses rises the newly acquired piece, like an island.—Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of "nearness" it is the most binding. Thus, in a certain sense, the smallest act of political reflection makes for an epoch in the antiques business. We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to "assembly." [H1a,2]

Extinct nature: the shell shop in the arcades. In "The Pilot's Trials," Strindberg tells of "an arcade with brightly lit shops." "Then he went on into the arcade. . . . There was every possible kind of shop, but not a soul to be seen, either behind or before the counters. After a while he stopped in front of a big window in which there was a whole display of shells. As the door was open, he went in. From floor to ceiling there were rows of shells of every kind, collected from all the seas of the world. No one was in, but there was a ring of tobacco smoke in the air. . . . So he began his walk again, following the blue and white carpet. The passage wasn't straight but winding, so that you could never see the end of it; and there were always fresh shops there, but no people; and the shopkeepers were not to be seen." The unfathomability of the moribund arcades is a characteristic motif. Strindberg, *Märchen* (Munich and Berlin, 1917), pp. 52–53, 59.[6] [H1a,3]

One must make one's way through *Les Fleurs du mal* with a sense for how things are raised to allegory. The use of uppercase lettering should be followed carefully. [H1a,4]

At the conclusion of *Matière et mémoire,* Bergson develops the idea that perception is a function of time. If, let us say, we were to live vis-à-vis some things more calmly and vis-à-vis others more rapidly, according to a different rhythm, there would be nothing "subsistent" for us, but instead everything would happen right before our eyes; everything would strike us. But this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him. How he himself pursues and encounters them, what changes in the ensemble of items are effected by a newly supervening item—all this shows him his affairs in constant flux. Here, the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of a collector. (At bottom, we may say, the collector lives a piece of dream life. For in the dream, too, the

rhythm of perception and experience is altered in such a way that everything—even the seemingly most neutral—comes to strike us; everything concerns us. In order to understand the arcades from the ground up, we sink them into the deepest stratum of the dream; we speak of them as though they had struck us.) [H1a,5]

"Your understanding of allegory assumes proportions hitherto unknown to you; I will note, in passing, that allegory—long an object of our scorn because of maladroit painters, but in reality a most *spiritual* art form, one of the earliest and most natural forms of poetry—resumes its legitimate dominion in a mind illuminated by intoxication." Charles Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels* (Paris, 1917), p. 73.[7] (On the basis of what follows, it cannot be doubted that Baudelaire indeed had allegory and not symbol in mind. The passage is taken from the chapter on hashish.) The collector as allegorist. □ Hashish □ [H2,1]

"The publication ‹in 1864› of *L'Histoire de la société française pendant la Révolution et sous le Directoire* opens the era of the curio—and the word 'curio' should not be taken as pejorative. In those days, the historical curio was called a 'relic.'" Remy de Gourmont, *Le Deuxième Livre des masques* (Paris, 1924), p. 259. This passage concerns a work by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. [H2,2]

The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). (The collector does just this, and so does the anecdote.) Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of "large contexts." The same method applies, in essence, to the consideration of great things from the past—the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum—when, that is, a favorable prospect presents itself: the method of receiving the things into our space. We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life. [H2,3]

Fundamentally a very odd fact—that collector's items as such were produced industrially. Since when? It would be necessary to investigate the various fashions that governed collecting in the nineteenth century. Characteristic of the Biedermeier period (is this also the case in France?) is the mania for cups and saucers. "Parents, children, friends, relatives, superiors, and subordinates make their feelings known through cups and saucers. The cup is the preferred gift, the most popular kind of knickknack for a room. Just as Friedrich Wilhelm III filled his study with pyramids of porcelain cups, the ordinary citizen collected, in the cups and saucers of his sideboard, the memory of the most important events, the most precious hours, of his life." Max von Boehn, *Die Mode im XIX. Jahrhundert,* vol. 2 (Munich, 1907), p. 136. [H2,4]

Possession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts. Moreover, with the recent turn away from naturalism, the primacy of the optical that was determi-

nate for the previous century has come to an end. □ Flâneur □ The flâneur optical, the collector tactile.[8] [H2,5]

Broken-down matter: the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory. Allegory and the fetish character of the commodity. [H2,6]

One may start from the fact that the true collector detaches the object from its functional relations. But that is hardly an exhaustive description of this remarkable mode of behavior. For isn't this the foundation (to speak with Kant and Schopenhauer) of that "disinterested" contemplation by virtue of which the collector attains to an unequaled view of the object—a view which takes in more, and other, than that of the profane owner and which we would do best to compare to the gaze of the great physiognomist? But how his eye comes to rest on the object is a matter elucidated much more sharply through another consideration. It must be kept in mind that, for the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection. This connection stands to the customary ordering and schematization of things something as their arrangement in the dictionary stands to a natural arrangement. We need only recall what importance a particular collector attaches not only to his object but also to its entire past, whether this concerns the origin and objective characteristics of the thing or the details of its ostensibly external history: previous owners, price of purchase, current value, and so on. All of these—the "objective" data together with the other—come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magic encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object. Here, therefore, within this circumscribed field, we can understand how great physiognomists (and collectors are physiognomists of the world of things) become interpreters of fate. It suffices to observe just one collector as he handles the items in his showcase. No sooner does he hold them in his hand than he appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into their distance, like an augur. (It would be interesting to study the bibliophile as the only type of collector who has not completely withdrawn his treasures from their functional context.) [H2,7; H2a,1]

The great collector Pachinger, Wolfskehl's friend, has put together a collection that, in its array of proscribed and damaged objects, rivals the Figdor collection in Vienna. He hardly knows any more how things stand in the world; explains to his visitors—alongside the most antique implements—the use of pocket handkerchiefs, hand mirrors, and the like. It is related of him that, one day, as he was crossing the Stachus, he stooped to pick something up. Before him lay an object he had been pursuing for weeks: a misprinted streetcar ticket that had been in circulation for only a few hours. [H2a,2]

An apology for the collector ought not to overlook this invective: "Avarice and old age, remarks Gui Patin, are always in collusion. With individuals as with

societies, the need to accumulate is one of the signs of approaching death. This is confirmed in the acute stages of preparalysis. There is also the mania for collection, known in neurology as 'collectionism.' / From the collection of hairpins to the cardboard box bearing the inscription: 'Small bits of string are useless.'" *Les Sept Péchés capitaux* (Paris, 1929), pp. 26–27 (Paul Morand, "L'Avarice"). But compare collecting done by children! [H2a,3]

"I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer's warehouse. These, crowding on my mind, in connection with the child, and gathering round her, as it were, brought her condition palpably before me. I had her image, without any effort of imagination, surrounded and beset by everything that was foreign to its nature, and farthest removed from the sympathies of her sex and age. If these helps to my fancy had all been wanting, and I had been forced to imagine her in a common chamber, with nothing unusual or uncouth in its appearance, it is very probable that I should have been less impressed with her strange and solitary state. As it was, she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory." Charles Dickens, *Der Raritätenladen* (Leipzig, ed. Insel), pp. 18–19.[9] [H2a,4]

Wiesengrund, in an unpublished essay on *The Old Curiosity Shop*, by Dickens: "Nell's death is decided in the sentence that reads: 'There were some trifles there—poor useless things—that she would have liked to take away; but that was impossible.'. . . Yet Dickens recognized that the possibility of transition and dialectical rescue was inherent in this world of things, this lost, rejected world; and he expressed it, better than Romantic nature-worship was ever able to do, in the powerful allegory of money with which the depiction of the industrial city ends: '. . . two old, battered, smoke-encrusted penny pieces. Who knows but they shone as brightly in the eyes of angels, as golden gifts that have been chronicled on tombs?'"[10]
[H2a,5]

"Most enthusiasts let themselves be guided by chance in forming their collection, like bibliophiles in their browsing. . . . M. Thiers has proceeded otherwise: before assembling his collection, he formed it as a whole in his head; he laid out his plan in advance, and he has spent thirty years executing it. . . . M. Thiers possesses what he wanted to possess. . . . And what was the point? To arrange around himself a miniature of the universe—that is, to gather, within an environment of eighty square meters, Rome and Florence, Pompeii and Venice, Dresden and the Hague, the Vatican and the Escorial, the British Museum and the Hermitage, the Alhambra and the Summer Palace. . . . And M. Thiers has been able to realize this vast project with only modest expenditures made each year over a thirty-year period. . . . Seeking, in particular, to adorn the walls of his residence with the most precious souvenirs of his voyages, M. Thiers had reduced copies made of the most famous paintings. . . . And so, on entering his home, you find yourself immediately surrounded by masterpieces created in Italy during the age of Leo X. The wall facing the windows is occupied by *The Last Judgment*, hung between *The Dispute*

of the *Holy Sacrament* and *The School of Athens*. Titian's *Assumption* adorns the mantelpiece, between *The Communion of Saint Jerome* and *The Transfiguration*. The *Madonna of Saint Sixtus* makes a pair with *Saint Cécila*, and on the pilaster are framed the Sibyls of Raphael, between the *Sposalizio* and the picture representing Gregory IX delivering the decretals to a delegate of the Consistory. . . . These copies all being reduced in accordance with the same scale, or nearly so, . . . the eye discovers in them, with pleasure, the relative proportions of the originals. They are painted in watercolor." Charles Blanc, *Le Cabinet de M. Thiers* (Paris, 1871), pp. 16–18. [H3,1]

"Casimir Périer said one day, while viewing the art collection of an illustrious enthusiast . . . : 'All these paintings are very pretty—but they're dormant capital.' . . . Today, . . . one could say to Casimir Périer . . . that . . . paintings . . ., when they are indeed authentic, that drawings, when recognizably by the hand of a master, . . . sleep a sleep that is restorative and profitable. . . . The . . . sale of the curiosities and paintings of Monsieur R. . . . has proven in round figures that works of genius possess a value just as solid as the Orléans <Railroad Co.> and a little more secure than bonded warehouses." Charles Blanc, *Le Trésor de la curiosité*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1858), p. 578. [H3,2]

The *positive* countertype to the collector—which also, insofar as it entails the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful, represents the consummation of the collector—can be deduced from these words of Marx: "Private property has made us so stupid and inert that an object is *ours* only when we have it, when it exists as capital for us, or when . . . we *use* it." Karl Marx, *Der historische Materialismus*, in *Die Frühschriften*, ed. Landshut and Mayer (Leipzig ‹1932›), vol. 1, p. 299 ("Nationalökonomie und Philosophie").[11] [H3a,1]

"*All* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*. . . . (On the category of *having*, see Hess in *Twenty-One Sheets*)." Karl Marx, *Der historische Materialismus* (Leipzig), vol. 1, p. 300 ("Nationalökonomie und Philosophie").[12] [H3a,2]

"I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man." Karl Marx, *Der historische Materialismus* (Leipzig), vol. 1, p. 300 ("Nationalökonomie und Philosophie").[13] [H3a,3]

The collections of Alexandre du Sommerard in the holdings of the Musée Cluny. [H3a,4]

The quodlibet has something of the genius of both collector and flâneur. [H3a,5]

The collector actualizes latent archaic representations of property. These representations may in fact be connected with taboo, as the following remark indi-

cates: "It . . . is . . . certain that taboo is the primitive form of property. At first emotively and 'sincerely,' then as a routine legal process, declaring something taboo would have constituted a title. To appropriate to oneself an object is to render it sacred and redoubtable to others; it is to make it 'participate' in oneself." N. Guterman and H. Lefebvre, *La Conscience mystifiée* (Paris, 1936), p. 228.
[H3a,6]

Passages by Marx from "Nationalökonomie und Philosophie": "Private property has made us so stupid and inert that an object is ours only when we *have* it." "All the physical and intellectual senses . . . have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses, the sense of having."[14] Cited in Hugo Fischer, *Karl Marx und sein Verhältnis zu Staat und Wirtschaft* (Jena, 1932), p. 64. [H3a,7]

The ancestors of Balthazar Claës were collectors. [H3a,8]

Models for Cousin Pons: Sommerard, Sauvageot, Jacaze. [H3a,9]

The physiological side of collecting is important. In the analysis of this behavior, it should not be overlooked that, with the nest-building of birds, collecting acquires a clear biological function. There is apparently an indication to this effect in Vasari's treatise on architecture. Pavlov, too, is supposed to have occupied himself with collecting. [H4,1]

Vasari is supposed to have maintained (in his treatise on architecture?) that the term "grotesque" comes from the grottoes in which collectors hoard their treasures. [H4,2]

Collecting is a primal phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge.
[H4,3]

In elucidating the relation of medieval man to his affairs, Huizinga occasionally adduces the literary genre of the "testament": "This literary form can be . . . appreciated only by someone who remembers that the people of the Middle Ages were, in fact, accustomed to dispose of even the meanest [!] of their possessions through a separate and detailed testament. A poor woman bequeathed her Sunday dress and cap to her parish, her bed to her godchild, a fur to her nurse, her everyday dress to a beggar woman, and four pounds *tournois* (a sum which constituted her entire fortune), together with an additional dress and cap, to the Franciscan friars (Champion, *Villon,* vol. 2, p. 182). Shouldn't we recognize here, too, a quite trivial manifestation of the same cast of mind that sets up every case of virtue as an eternal example and sees in every customary practice a divinely willed ordinance?" J. Huizinga, *Herbst des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1928), p. 346.[15] What strikes one most about this noteworthy passage is that such a relation to movables would perhaps no longer be possible in an age of standardized mass production. It would follow quite naturally from this to ask whether or not the

forms of argumentation to which the author alludes, and indeed certain forms of Scholastic thought in general (appeal to hereditary authoritary), belong together with the forms of production. The collector develops a similar relationship with his objects, which are enriched through his knowledge of their origin and their duration in history—a relationship that now seems archaic. [H4,4]

Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found. It is the same spectacle that so preoccupied the men of the Baroque; in particular, the world image of the allegorist cannot be explained apart from the passionate, distraught concern with this spectacle. The allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector. He has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. Nevertheless—and this is more important than all the differences that may exist between them—in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector. As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he's collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist—for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated—precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them.[16] [H4a,1]

Animals (birds, ants), children, and old men as collectors. [H4a,2]

A sort of productive disorder is the canon of the *mémoire involontaire,* as it is the canon of the collector. "And I had already lived long enough so that, for more than one of the human beings with whom I had come in contact, I found in antipodal regions of my past memories another being to complete the picture.... In much the same way, when an art lover is shown a panel of an altar screen, he remembers in what church, museum, and private collection the other panels are dispersed (likewise, he finally succeeds, by following the catalogues of art sales or frequenting antique shops, in finding the mate to the object he possesses and thereby completing the pair, and so can reconstruct in his mind the predella and the entire altar)." Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris), vol. 2, p. 158.[17] The *mémoire volontaire,* on the other hand, is a registry providing the object with a classificatory number behind which it disappears. "So now we've been there." ("I've had an experience.") How the scatter of allegorical properties (the patchwork) relates to this creative disorder is a question calling for further study. [H5,1]