In her excellent introductory remarks, Dianne Macleod posits that women collectors were the primary consumers in the domestic sphere. They “were empowered by the act of consumption,” and in their role as consumers, were able to engage in the male discourse of possessive individualism, which was and is the backbone of America’s financial system. Macleod focuses on the relationships between collectors and the objects they collected. Following a chronological survey of the building of collections, the author, in successive chapters, highlights individual collectors, to illustrate changes in collecting habits. These collecting habits reflect changes in American taste and the evolving ability of women to share their collections outside the home in an increasingly public way, thereby influencing other collectors and the tastes of a larger audience. In most cases, the specific artists or manufacturers of the objects collected are not enumerated. It is the overall collection, the relationship with the objects formed, and the display of these objects that is Macleod’s focus. The women who are included in this book are a mixture of well-known collectors such as Isabella Steward Gardner, Etta and Claribel Cone, and Louisine Elder Havemeyer and relatively unknown women such as Catharine Lorillard Wolfe and Eliza Bowen Jumel. A total of thirty-six women are featured.

This is also a study of how upper-class women became increasingly involved in the public display of objects, which, in turn, gave them “an entrée into the public sphere and a venue for the shaping of culture” that continues today. The “alliance between art and activism” is a continuing thread throughout the book.

An interesting parallel in this study is the shifting of the decorative arts from existing outside the “serious” art collecting milieu to becoming part of major collections and museums and how this shift had a gendered component. Once males such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller Jr. began collecting in the field of decorative arts, these art forms came to be associated with the “fine arts”. These men looked upon themselves and their collections as “guardians of elite culture”. This ran counter to women collectors of the same period, such as Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt who used their collection of decorative art at Cooper Union, for the purpose of educating women in art and design in order to help them become self-supporting in the artistic community.

The book ends in 1940 and this reviewer wonders why Macleod did not extend its scope to 1945. In doing so, she could have included Peggy Guggenheim, an important woman collector whose New York City gallery Art of this Century was a vital part of the city’s art scene in the war years.

The book has a good index, but lacks a bibliography, which is disappointing. However an extensive Notes section does point the reader to a wide variety of other available material. The text is supplemented with a number of excellent archival photographs and a small selection of color plates. This book will be used by those interested in art history, women’s studies, and American material culture and consumerism in the nineteenth and twentieth.

Susan Nurse, Visual Resources Coordinator/Art Historian, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York snurse@mag.rochester.edu

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