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Adam G. Houghtaling

Southern Adventist University, ahoughtaling@southern.edu

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Anna Safley Houston and Early Twentieth Century Collectors

Adam Houghtaling

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Anna Safley Houston was an eccentric woman who was famous for many things. She was married at least nine different times all to different men. She was a successful business woman in a time where women rarely went into business. What Houston is most famous for is her collection of antique glass which is considered one of if not the finest collections of glass in the world. However, Houston collected many other items that included furniture, prints, baskets, pianos, guns, swords, and much more. While Houston died in 1951, many of the items that she collected can be seen at the Houston Museum in Chattanooga. Anna was able to achieve a large degree of success because “she had a compulsive and magnificent singleness of purpose in her life.”¹ While antique collecting started out as a hobby, it eventually became an obsession that had significant effects on Houston’s life. Houston was successful in engaging in the necessary parts of collecting while overcoming significant barriers that other early twentieth century collectors did not face.

One of the most important parts of collecting in the early twentieth century was traveling. Houston’s drive to obtain the greatest collection possible led her to visit all forty eight states in the United States, before Alaska and Hawaii were granted statehood, plus Canada, and Cuba. Houston did not let potential dangers stop her from traveling to places where she could expand her collection. In 1916, she went to a town called Juarez that was on the border between Texas and Mexico. At the time, there was a revolution going on in Mexico involving the bandit and political leader Pancho Villa. Anna felt like she could get some great deals on antiques from Mexicans who did not know the value of the items they were selling. While Anna was in Juarez, Villa and his men raided the border town and the United States Cavalry rode in to chase the

¹ Tom Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe: The Life, Legend and Legacy of Anna Safley Houston* (Tennessee, Adams Lithographing Company, 1994), 3.

raiders off. Anna was near the fighting and could hear guns firing and horses galloping. In the same way as Houston, famous collector Bella King traveled large distances to expand her collection. Isabella Cockburn Millar traveled to many parts of China and Japan searching for plants, seeds, prints, and art with her husband Frederick Truby King. Like Houston, King developed “fine organizational skills, time management, and efficiency.”²

King was different from Houston in that her travels were intended to be a recreational journey for her husband Frederick, who was suffering from poor health and exhaustion. There were many other famous collectors from the early twentieth century who did an impressive amount of traveling. David Theomins did a large amount of traveling and had an extensive collection of “Japanese arms, middle-Eastern textiles, and a fine rare Chinese Jade piece.”³ Another collector who went to Japan was the New Zealand doctor, Thomas Hocken. Hocken is believed to have collected Japanese *Shunga* woodblock prints and he did accumulate diverse documents that include shipping almanacs and other material.⁴ New Zealander Esmond De Beer also traveled to Japan to collect items. American collectors Armand Hammer and William Randolph Hearst not only traveled to collect, but began collecting due to traveling. Hammer developed his passion for collecting art when he was in the Soviet Union practicing medicine. “Initially Hammer became interested in art when he set out to decorate his home in Moscow.”⁵ Similarly, Hearst discovered his love for collecting while traveling overseas with his wealthy family. “Hearst’s passion for art acquisition was lifelong. He had demonstrated his ‘mania for antiquities’ as his mother described it, from his first trip abroad at age ten.”⁶ While their motives

² David Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China: Traveling and Collecting in the Early Twentieth Century,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 14 (2012): 67.

³ Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China,” 72.

⁴ Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China,” 72.

⁵ (“Hammer Museum: The Armand Hammer Collection”)

⁶ Victoria Kastner, *Hearst Castle: the Biography of a Country House* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 53.

and methods for collecting may have greatly differed, it was important for early twentieth century collectors to be able to travel.

Another key part of collecting was creating a social network of friends, family, or other professionals who could assist in the process by providing the expenses needed for traveling, means for transporting collected goods, or a place to store collected items. Throughout her life, Houston was able to obtain all of these. Through her marriage to Harold Creekmore, Houston was able to accomplish a significant amount of traveling. While Creekmore was not a wealthy man, his job as a railroad brakeman provided him with free transportation. Houston did not spend much time with Creekmore during the four years they were married, but she did manage to visit every state and a couple of other countries in her pursuit of antiques. James W. Houston, who was married to Anna for sixteen years, had a pickup truck that Anna greatly appreciated because it allowed her to move antiques over long distances. When Anna moved from her home, many friends and family members allowed her to store valuable antiques in their homes until she had a place to store them again.

Similarly, Bella King also was able to build a strong social network of family and friends in New Zealand, that assisted her greatly in collecting. According to David Bell, historian from University of Otago, "Bella's diary entries demonstrate the ways the professional and social networks of their Dunedin circles provided valuable support during their journey to Japan."⁷ Bella King moved around a lot and "her collections were dispersed into other domestic settings through friends and family."⁸ One person who was an important part of King's support network was Captain Horace Carew. Carew was a mariner in China and Japan who happened to be the

⁷ Bell, "Bella King in Japan and China," 73.

⁸ Bell, "Bella King in Japan and China," 72.

brother of Edgar Hall Carew, stipendiary magistrate and coroner in Dunedin. Carew helped the Kings by providing a way to travel. King recorded in her diary “Captain Carew taking them shopping and sightseeing in the Motomachi and Nanko bazaar shopping areas in Kobe.”⁹ During their travels, Frederic and Bella appear to have made very little effort to learn the languages with the exception of the skills necessary to trading. The Kings also received valuable assistance in dealing with certain language barriers from many different individuals in their professional network. Captain Carew was one of the individuals who helped the Kings communicate with the locals. Another person who assisted the Kings was Captain Deverush, a pilot on one of the Bella’s return trips.

Most of the great collectors from the early twentieth century achieved an impressive level of education. Esmond Samuel De Beer studied at New College, Oxford before enlisting to serve in the First World War. After the war, “De Beer completed a degree from Oxford, and an M.A. at the University of London in 1923.”¹⁰ Thomas Hocken attended Woodhouse Grove School and a school in Newcastle before going on to study medicine at both Durham University and Dublin University. Hocken was able to become a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1859. Armand Hammer attended Columbia University where he graduated medical school in 1921. William Randolph Hearst went to established private schools before he attended Harvard College. Hearst was eventually expelled from Harvard for misconduct, but not before becoming an editor for the Harvard Lampoon. When describing Bella King along with Marie Stopes, another woman who traveled to Japan, Bell finds that both of these women displayed “observational acuity, analytical tendency, and economic concision to scientific minds to their

⁹ Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China,”73.

¹⁰ (“Esmond Samuel De Beer - Sir Walter Scott Collection - Dunedin Public Libraries” 2017)

records.” Bell attributes these qualities to both women having similar educations where he mentions that “Bella had been Dux of the Edinburgh Educational Institution for Young Ladies and a prize-winner in the Edinburgh association for the University of Women Examinations.”¹¹ Houston stands out from other great collectors from the early twentieth century in how little education she received. Following the death of her mother and newborn brother, “Houston was forced to leave school in the sixth grade in order to care for her nine younger siblings.”¹² Despite her lack of a formal education, Houston was able to become an authority on antiques. “By the time of her death, she was being consulted by dealers and collectors all over the country, as well as editors of publications in the antique field.”¹³ Houston’s spectacular knowledge of antiques came from her having an excellent memory and her studying of *Antiques Magazine*. Before having to drop out of the sixth grade due to family reasons, Houston had performed well in school due to her excellent memory. A lady who knew and worked with Anna claimed that Anna never forgot anything. In 1922, Anna began reading *Antiques Magazine*, and it is no surprise that she kept every issue until her death in 1951.

Another area where Houston differed greatly from other great collectors of the time period is wealth. Money seemed to be a very important part of collecting, necessary to obtain an enormous amount of artwork, antiques, prints, etc. Hammer and Hearst were immensely successful men. According to Arthur Brisbane, Hearst owned “Nine newspapers and a number of periodicals published in five different cities from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.”¹⁴ As for Hammer, Joseph Finder writes “After a number of business ventures, Hammer bought the

¹¹ Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China,”73.

¹² Jennifer Crutchfield, *Chattanooga Landmarks: Exploring The History Of The Scenic City* (South Carolina, The History Press, 2010), 30.

¹³ Williams, *Always paddle your own Canoe*, 53.

¹⁴ Arthur Brisbane, “William Randolph Hearst,” *The North American Review* 183 (1906): 521.

struggling Occidental Oil Company in 1957 and managed to build it into the multibillion-dollar multinational firm it is today, the twelfth largest industrial corporation in America.”¹⁵ Esmond de Beer kept Japanese collections in his house to demonstrate “wealth, status, and intellectual stock.”¹⁶ While Houston was able to experience some financial successes through her shops and rentals, she was never wealthy. How Houston was able to afford thousands antiques, some of which were quite expensive is a mystery. One of the possible explanations offered by Tom Williams is that Anna used the money from her millinery business to buy houses. “The purchases were always secured by mortgages, and there are numerous papers indicating that she refinanced properties, getting new and bigger loans, paying off the old ones and coming out of it with tidy little sums of cash.”¹⁷ It can also be speculated that Houston got her money through her marriages. While Anna did take whatever money she could get from her husbands, most of her husbands did not have anything to begin with and none of them were wealthy men. Some of Anna’s husbands married her to gain financial support. In 1917, Anna and Richard C. Vallmore were married in Chattanooga. This marriage was over less than six months after it began. Anna claimed that Vallmore married her because “she could support him and prevent his having to do work.”¹⁸ Houston was also willing to pile up debt in order to expand her collections. During difficult times of the 1930s, Houston stopped paying any attention to her bills. When creditors came by to collect, Houston would grab her most valuable antiques and hide under her house. Anna also benefited from people being unaware of how valuable antiques were. The niece of one

¹⁵ Joseph Finder, “Hammer,” HighBeam Research (1987): 1.

¹⁶ Bell, “Bella King in Japan and China,” 72.

¹⁷ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 54.

¹⁸ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 46.

of Anna's husbands claimed that Anna bought many items for "Practically nothing because she started buying before people really knew the value of antiques."¹⁹

While being an early twentieth century collector would require sacrificing a great deal of time, space, and money, Houston went far beyond what most collectors did in what she gave up in order to gather and maintain her collection. Houston's desire to collect hurt her public perception, family life, and living conditions. Many people who lived in Chattanooga during Houston's time saw Anna as a dirty, crazy old woman who disliked children. Behind her back, people in the community would call Houston "Crazy Annie" or "Antique Annie." Bob Evans describes seeing Houston on McCallie Avenue when he was a boy walking home from school in Brainerd. Evans says that Houston was often seen carrying at least one package to her place. If she had two heavy packages, she would put one down, walk for a while, put the second package down and go back to grab the first package. According to Evans "She always looked like a tramp or a hobo, and I suspect that she rode the rails. She probably disembarked at the Southern Railway switchyard at Warner Park. This was back in the days of coal-fired engines, and was an extremely dirty way to travel."²⁰ A closer look at Houston's lifestyle suggest that she had a hoarding disorder.

Those who hoard items can extremely difficult to live with. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America finds that "Hoarding causes anger, resentment, and depression among family members, and it can affect the social development of children."²¹ Houston's hoarding made life difficult for her husbands. In the case of James Houston, Anna's obsession brought about the termination of their marriage after sixteen years. James said that he divorced Anna

¹⁹ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 56.

²⁰ Williams, "Always Paddle Your Own Canoe," 94.

²¹ ("Hoarding: The Basics | Anxiety And Depression Association Of America, ADAA" 2017)

“because he could never find a place to sleep at night. There was always a piece of antique furniture Mrs. Houston had just acquired in the way.”²² The final nail in the coffin for James is when Anna purchased expensive antiques using a check with James’s name on it. It did not take long for James to file for divorce. Anna quickly responded by filing a cross-bill for the case to be tried on in court. Eventually, a divorce was granted on grounds of abandonment and James was awarded his plumbing tools and equipment and Anna was awarded the property and her antiques. While the divorce was granted, conflict between James and Anna continued as James sought an injunction against Anna a month later. James accused Anna of going to his place of business and “demanding money, answering the telephone, interfering with customers, fussing and arguing to his embarrassment before his customers, and had constantly annoyed and harassed the stenographer or clerk that he has engaged.”²³ James also accused Anna of threatening to kill or hurt him and his niece that worked for him. The injunction was granted, but surprisingly, James and Anna stayed in touch for many more years.

Besides being hard to live with, further evidence of Houston having a hoarding disorder can be seen in her actions following the great depression. Houston was severely affected by the Great Depression. Houston would lose all of her rental houses before eventually selling her house in order to keep her antique collection. Anna knew that her creditors posed a major threat to her collection and she devised a plan to prevent creditors from taking her collection. First she found friends who would be willing to store items for her until she could set up shop in a new location. Second, she began constructing a barn on the property she and her former husband James had purchased which was located on Wentworth Avenue, off Spring Creek Road. While

²² Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 60.

²³ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 61.

there are now photographs of the event, there are numerous reports from onlookers that “Anna built the whole thing with her own two hands.”²⁴ There were a couple tasks that Anna needed assistance with, such as lifting heavy beams into place that supported the roof. Houston received help from a neighbor’s boy for a couple things she could not do herself, but she was spotted on top of the barn’s roof working on placing the tarpaper roofing. When her building was finished, Anna went about retrieving her antiques from the friends she had left them with and began moving them into her new building. Even though the barn was filled with valuable items, the building itself was often viewed as ugly and messy by the town’s people. Newspaperwoman Louise Fort described Anna’s magnificent collection as being stored “in probably one of the ugliest buildings in the world.”²⁵ Mary Jean Giles Rogers, whose mother was a friend of Houston’s, remembers the yard outside the barn being littered with things like an old sleigh, wagon wheels, rusty metal implements, junk. She also recalls old building materials and windows leaned up against the walls. The inside was yet to be completed with the studs open to view and the wooden floor. Houston’s collection was all over the house with stacks of furniture along the walls and an abundance of glassware, China, and other items being displayed on all surfaces. Mrs. Rogers found Houston’s new residence to be very cold inside due to the building not being heated. Giving up a nice house in order to preserve a collection of antiques shows that Houston was extremely dedicated to her craft. Houston’s actions and living conditions can easily be diagnosed as a hoarding disorder. Houston could have sold part of her collection for a lot of money that would have allowed her to pay off creditors and keep her home. Instead Houston chose to live in a barn packed with her multitude of possessions where the living conditions were unhealthy and dangerous. Kenneth J Weiss and Aneela Khan found the following conditions to

²⁴ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 64

²⁵ Williams, *Always Paddle Your Own Canoe*, 64

be criteria included in the affirmative diagnostic criteria for a hoarding disorder. “Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value. The accumulation of possessions that congest and clutter active living areas and substantially compromise their intended use.”²⁶

A common theme of early twentieth century collectors is an aspiration to have their work observed and appreciated by others. Houston was no exception to this theme. Anna was very selective of who she let into her barn. She only let those she felt had an appreciation for antiques into her building. However, she was quite generous to those she felt had a genuine interest in her precious items. There are reports that Anna did not make very much money because she would not sell her antiques for a fair profit. She would often let customers who were friends buy certain items through installment payments, letting them make the purchase over an extended period of time with no interest. She even gave away items to those who could not afford to pay her. Houston dreamed of having her antiques displayed in a museum in Chattanooga well before she legally handed her collections over to the people of Chattanooga in her final years. There are accounts of her refusing to sell certain pieces because she was saving them for a museum that go back to the 1930s. Fellow American collector William Randolph Hearst was similar to Houston in how he wanted his collection to be appreciated by others. Hearst built a magnificent castle in San Simeon, California, where his art collection was displayed. Jana Seely, the curator of the Hearst Collection Castle writes “In a Newsweek interview on May 6, 1946, when asked if his pleasure in the art treasures he had acquired equaled the amount of money he spent on them, Hearst replied that the enjoyment he had received was only second in importance to the

²⁶ Kenneth J Weiss and Aneela Khan, “Hoarding, Housing, and DSM-5,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law* 43 (December, 2015): 493.

enjoyment others obtained from them.”²⁷ Hearst also wanted his collection to become a museum after he died. In 1957, the Hearst Corporation gave the Hearst Castle to the state of California so the castle could become a historical museum. In 1927, Hearst made the following statement about his estate: "I see no reason why the ranch should not be a museum of the best things that I can secure."²⁸ Along with Houston and Hearst, Hammer wanted his collections available for the public to experience. After returning to the United States, Armand Hammer along with his brother Victor, created Hammer galleries in New York, which consisted of art work Armand collected in Moscow. In 1965, the University of Southern California received a collection of works by European masters from Hammer. From 1965 to his death in 1990, Hammer continued to collect art. Today there is a museum of Hammer’s collections that bears his name in Los Angeles, California. Esmond Samuel De Beer and Thomas Hocken demonstrated this desire to have their work appreciated in the contributions they made to public institutions in New Zealand. According to Dunedin Public Libraries, “The Dunedin Public Libraries benefited from De Beer’s philanthropy by receiving an almost complete set of first and early editions of the works of Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott in 1948. The collection now numbers over 100 items.”²⁹ Hocken gave his private collections of books, drawings, journals, maps, music and film, newspapers, paintings, photographs and posters to the Otago Museum shortly before his death in 1910. According to the University of Otago, “Doctor Hocken's gift forms the foundation. Since its opening in 1910, the collections have continued to grow with ongoing acquisition of heritage and contemporary material.”³⁰ Whether it was having museums dedicated to their collections or

²⁷Jana Seely, “The Hearst Castle, San Simeon; The Diverse Collection of William Randolph Hearst,” http://www.gostar.com/antiquing/hearst_collection.htm (March, 2017).

²⁸Jana Seely, “The Hearst Castle, San Simeon” 2017.

²⁹ (“Esmond Samuel De Beer - Sir Walter Scott Collection - Dunedin Public Libraries” 2017)

³⁰ (“About Hocken Collections, Hocken Collections, University Of Otago Library, University Of Otago, New Zealand”)

simply leaving their collections to a library or museum, early twentieth century collectors wanted their collections to be observed after their deaths.

Anna Safley Houston certainly had a lot in common with other collectors from her time period. Houston was similar in how she did a great deal of traveling, established a social network of family and friends for support, and worked to have a museum where others could experience her collections after she died. What separated Houston from other great collectors of her time period was her lack of an impressive formal education, her lack of wealth, and how she valued her antiques more than her own wellbeing. The fact that Houston put together possibly the finest collection of antique glass in the world despite not being rich or formally educated makes her achievements truly remarkable.

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