

Tom Sutcliffe: Why I'll never be one of the hoard

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I don't know if there is an antonym to the word "collector" but if so, I'm one of them. I'm not a completist but a depletist, driving not towards a comprehensively inclusive assembly of stuff, but a soothingly exclusive one. The ideal end-state – never likely to be achieved because of a combination of indolence and betraying weakness (some objects just are sentimentally "sticky") – would be a room that had just three or four objects in it, each one of them unimpeachably beautiful or useful. And because of that, one of the first things I thought when visiting the recently reopened Holburne Museum in Bath was "Thank goodness all this stuff is here and not in my house". Because the Holburne, among many other things, is a song of praise to knick-knackery and bric-a-brac. It summons words that are themselves a polysyllabic clutter.

This isn't, I should say, any criticism of its design or its interior. I'm not entirely convinced by the ceramic exterior of the new extension to the building – a kind of lizardy mottle which I think is going to look decidedly odd and dated in just a few years. But the interior is gracious in the old sections of the building (once a resort hotel for Bath's 19th-century visitors) and nicely designed in the new ones, which seem properly knowing about profusion. There's a central area, showing off some of the highlights of Holburne's own collection, which has been arranged in a deliberately crowded way to give some evocation of the housemaid's nightmare which Sir William Holburne's own home turned into towards the end of his life. And there are some very fine display cases which appear to privilege quality over quantity in some areas of the collection.

There are, also, some highly covetable things here, even if my own personal taste flinches away from the majolica and the silverware (What, to be honest, would be the point in owning only one majolica plate? The collection is its only alibi). There are some good paintings – including a lovely Stubbs portrait and two fine Allan Ramsays – and a collection of stunning enamel miniatures. But even so, I'm not sure that there's any individual object here that would make you travel a long way unless you had a scholarly or specialist interest in the subject. What makes it worth the journey (and you really shouldn't miss it if you go to Bath) is the way that the entire museum enshrines the collector's instinct.

It's a nice touch that the very first show in the temporary exhibition space should be devoted to Peter Blake, a highly creative example of the acquisitive and magpie instincts of the collector. In one respect, his approach couldn't be more different to that of William Holburne. Where the latter gathered up precious objects, hampered only by the relative modesty of his budget, the former picks up items which have been cast aside and abandoned (often, I guess, by people like me). He then restores value to them, either by allowing them to form a kind of inanimate support group or by applying a criteria that makes them appear as if they're part of an elite (as in his very appealing collages of exclusively black-and-white objects). But you also suspect that the two men would have understood each other's fascination with stuff, and the desire to acquire more of it. You can imagine Holburne showing Blake one of his more fascinating treasures – a "micro-carving" in ivory which was produced, one suspects, as a "collectable" – and Blake pointing out the more curious details of his own assemblies. And oddly the overall effect is almost enough to convert even a staunch depletist to the charms of collection.