Joseph Allen Skinner and the Culture of Collecting in America

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The Gilded Age ushered in a new era that saw continued recovery from the Civil War, economic depression, industrialization, and increased access to global markets and cultures. Collecting can be understood as a reaction to these changes, whether a nostalgic grip on the past or a possibility to represent and explore unknown futures. I will use Joseph Allen Skinner’s Museum as a case study for exploring the mindset of collecting in this period. Questions I explore include: what aspects of collecting cultures influenced collectors such as Joseph Allen Skinner? How did the stylistic and social mindset of American collectors evolve? My project will critique the culture of collecting in Gilded Age America through the localized perspective of the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum.

In order to deeply investigate the social and cultural mindset of American collectors, my project starts with a comparative study of The Joseph Allen Skinner Museum and similar collections during his time. His Museum articulated relationships with the cultural memories of industrial revolution, World War I, and the Great Depression. While the Skinner Museum has gained a reputation for its eccentricity, the Skinner Museum shares some collecting and display trends with other Gilded Age collections. A comparative study allows us to better understand some of the collecting models that Skinner both imitated and purposefully rejected.

The second part of my exploration will be a focused study of the objects in the Skinner Museum and the small histories of collecting they represent. Within the larger history of collecting, smaller trends emerged such as colonial revival, and objects related to American history, often documents bearing the signatures of the Founding Fathers. These trends within collections across New England reveal a shared mindset that resulted from a variety of anxieties arising around new social orders, industrialization, and the evolution of American identity. For example, Joseph Allen Skinner purchased the Rawson House (once belonging to Grindall Rawson, a minister who lived in South Hadley in the late 18th Century), and most likely took the colonial objects and furniture from the Rawson House to fill the basement of the Skinner Museum with a colonial revival exhibit. His impulse not only to acquire the Rawson House, but also to exhibit the previous owner’s furniture reveals an interest in both a local New England past and a more connected national past of gazing back at a simple and highly innovative time in which manual labor triumphed.

Lastly, I will discuss my current exhibition at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, which displays a portion of Skinner’s textile collection. This new installation highlights the collecting tensions between personal souvenir and local history and nostalgia for a pre-industrial past and embracing the technological progress. Situated within the American Art wing, the installation places Skinner’s collection within a larger dialogue about American art and collecting during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.