



Jane's Little Matchbox Book of Stuff




Christmas 2019

Here are some extracts from *The Book of Stuff* which logs my possessions in watercolours and tells the story of what each one means to me.

At this time of year we give each other things that we do not need, yet there is excitement and affection in the giving and the unwrapping.

My book-in-progress is an attempt to unwrap the memories that are held within objects acquired over a lifetime of collecting – to understand my fondness for them and in so doing construct a diary of my life.

Why do people like me collect? Is it to show the world what sort of a person we are? Is it to amass varieties of a particular class of object? Or just the simple pleasure of looking at something you enjoy?

In 2001 the artist Michael Landy destroyed everything he owned. The

'exhibition' was called Break Down and Landy gathered together all his 'stuff': stamps, clothes, passport, love letters, Saab; painstakingly catalogued all 7,227 objects, and then destroyed them. The process was done by a dozen workers relegating each item to its basic materials and then shredding, pulping or reducing them to grains.

I didn't go to watch, but 45,000 people did, fascinated by the thought that someone could annihilate not just their hard-earned possessions to nothing, but their memories as well!

I am doing the opposite in celebrating my stuff – a kind of a 'break down' in its way, separating different facets of the self through the choices of what one surrounds oneself with. To write their biographies and in the process a little bit more about my own.



Let's start, appropriately, with matchboxes which have become collectors' items through rarity. You used to get them at restaurants and hotels everywhere and many were typographically

decorative. Those days have gone with the smoking ban.

Recently, I contributed to a 'Matchbox Museum' of tiny and esoteric collections. Mine was a trayful of different-sized matchboxes containing small things that were in some way self-defining: a mini self-portrait, you might say. So that's my theme for this festive season. Let's see how much can fit into so small a space. Magnifier provided.



It all started when I decided to paint objects around me in a book of the finest watercolour paper. After 165 portraits, I did a few sessions in botanical watercolour painting from which I learned a great deal about technique. My style has always been to try and capture the essence of a thing rather than photographic accuracy, but the next 100 paintings (and it is that many) are more carefully observed and better informed. I can't record everything; just a representative sample.



The first gift Stephen gave me was this little cricket made of basket grass. I had been a collector before I met him, but we egged each other

on, fuelled by our mutual love of fine craftsmanship. The truth is I have difficulties walking past shops with baskets on display without stopping. It doesn't matter how many picnic hampers, waste-paper baskets, garden willows, reed bowls, bicycle baskets, mats, fruit or log baskets I have, if there's something that catches my eye I have to go in and buy.

The South African baskets are some of a dozen lining an attic wall. I love the inventiveness of their design; you'd think it would be challenging to come up with a new idea for a round



form yet every one is different, celebrating the fact that the permutations of lights and darks, and line and angles are almost limitless within the exacting constraints of the construction method. The designs traditionally mean something: triangles tell you that the weaver was a man while diamonds were for women. Small squares or dots celebrate fruitfulness, whether rain, good crops or a new-born child. Marriage patterns show how many cattle were in the bride price, or whether the groom was married before.

Ceramics probably comprise my largest collection. Is it the earthiness of them that appeals; that such beauty can be magicked out of mud?

What shall I choose? Perhaps this Delft charger (1760-80). While painting it I came to appreciate the appeal of the three herons and the conversation they are having on the plate. Or the Iznik tile which reminds me of places we travelled together and where we planned to go to. Both are dashed off with such verve and life rarely found in modern pottery.



Drinking glasses are my particular passion and these five balusters dating from 1710-30 are the best in my collection. I love to put them out for a lavish dinner party – often I've had £12000-worth of glass on the table, with 18th-century opaque twists for dessert wine and Victorian cranberries for water. People get nervous if you tell them, but the heavy lead crystal is very robust. What's the point of having beautiful things if you don't use them?



This walking stick is a collector's item. It's a 'frigger', or in the US a 'whimsy'. These were fanciful objects made by the gaffer at the end of the working day to use up any spare glass still in the pot (c.1890s). Many were highly skilled pieces. To blow a hollow tube of this length requires fine judgement and skill and an assistant to pull the end of the stick while the gaffer blew to keep the tube in tact so it could be filled with hundreds and thousands when the piece was cool.

I treasure it because my collector friend Francis left it to me; only five people of his vast circle of illustrious friends were nominated to receive one of his things. I am honoured and touched to be one of them.



I've got a whole drawer of sets of playing cards. At one time I would buy them in the gift shop of museums I visited, but it got out of hand. Back in the day, there would be one pack in a small shop, but now there are just too many. I am not the sort of collector who has to acquire one of a particular item everywhere I go. The queens of hearts are my favourites.

Old toys feature a bit in the book. These tiddlywinks have been in my family for as long as I can remember. Steven and I sometimes had races – but all we did was flip the winks along with the bigger ones, which I now know to be called ‘squidgers’. I learn, too, that to stop your opponent getting to the finishing pot before you, the artful move is to ‘squop’ them which means you flip your wink on top of theirs to stop them playing it. That’s at professional level. Appeals to the croquet player in me.



It's 20 years since I started pasting wine labels in the loo as a post-modernist statement about where even the finest wines end up – and some very fine labels are in that collection, not all of them drunk by us. Because collecting ‘les etiquettes’ is a ‘thing’. I still can't resist trying to soak off a pretty wine label, as a memento of an occasion. The Angele rosé is this year's summer tippie.





I have drawers full of textiles that are a major part of my collection of stuff. Not just things I have made myself at various periods of spinning, vegetable dyeing, weaving, knitting, and embroidering, but folk art collected at home and abroad: embroideries from Mexico, India, Palestine, Syria; woven and knotted carpets from Swat, Persia, Morocco; kelims that fade in the sun and suffer from moth in spring; beaded bags and tassels; intricately embellished clothing; knitwear galore.



The trilobite has been hidden away in a cupboard unregarded for some time, which seems uncaring for a fossil that is at least 250 million years old and therefore the oldest bit of 'stuff' that I have. It was Stephen's, as was the nautilus shell. He loved its Fibonacci replication and would wax lyrical about the golden section and design for hours. Apparently, placing sea shells on a windowsill attracts energy and keeping them in a basket brings good luck — both of which I do. Is that the source of my good fortune?



I suppose I've got to end with time, because it's running out. Well, it is, isn't it! 'For at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near.' Here are some of my most treasured timepieces and, typical of my relationship with time, none of them work. All have a story to tell. And if you want to know what they are, my Christmas friends, you must wait for my book which I will publish some time in 2020 in a very limited edition.
with love from Jane



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