

FROM MEMORY KEEPERS TO LIBRARIANS OF THE FUTURE, COLLECTORS SHARE WHAT DRIVES THEM

IN HIGH SCHOOL, EMMA TRELEAVEN signed up for a fashion class to learn how to make vintage-inspired clothing. Her teacher gave her a sewing manual from the 1950s. “It changed my entire approach,” Treleven said. The gift showed her the value of original sources—and turned her into a collector. “My Own Two Hands,” her collection of pre-1975 books and ephemera focused on making fashion and textiles, won University College London’s 2023 Anthony Davis Student Collecting Prize.

Some collectors get started because of a particular hobby or passion. Others want to capture a cultural moment or movement. Many have been bibliophiles since childhood. Whatever their backgrounds, budgets, or enthusiasms, they’re driven by love—of the objects themselves and of the conversations and histories their collections document. Deep pockets aren’t a prerequisite. Some of the most intrigu-

ing collections belong to students and early-career professionals who don’t fit the image of a collector as a well-heeled, older bibliophile with time and money to burn.

“Book collecting is not just about trophy-hunting the most expensive and famous books,” said Heather O’Donnell, the founder and owner of Honey & Wax Booksellers in Brooklyn, New York. “It’s also about finding things that really speak to you and then turning your attention to what you learn from that connection and how you can build on it.”

Treleven, for instance, is now a PhD candidate at the London College of Fashion. Her collection informs her work as a fashion historian and curator—and it doesn’t break the bank. “The great thing about what I collect is mostly it’s very cheap,” she said. “It’s not seen as highbrow. It’s not something most people collect. . . . The things that are used and written in and stained are not really seen as high-class literature.” But annotations like notes about sizing offer a direct line to the makers of past eras and add real value for a fashion historian and curator. “They’re just so magical,” Treleven said.

Kind of like a seed library, “My Own Two Hands” also helps keep alive hands-on knowledge for the future. “Instead of an interesting assortment of ‘lost’ techniques used to inspire and inform my hobby,” Treleven wrote in her Davis Prize essay, “I now see my collection as part of a whole that tells a wider story, one which deserves to be preserved and shared.”

Why We Collect

BY JENNIFER HOWARD



The Interspecies Library includes artists' books examining invasive species, speculative futures of extinct animals being revived, genetically modified organisms, and more.

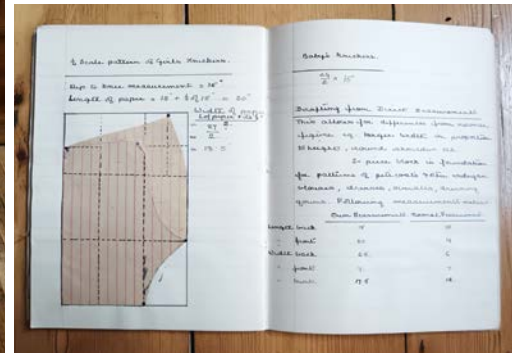


COURTESY EMMA TRELEVEN (3)



LEFT: Emma Treleven's use of her collection to teach herself to make clothing includes making her wedding dress with information from a leaflet on practical point lace.

BELOW: Treleven's collection of books and ephemera about making dress and textiles before 1975 includes a school girl's notebook full of samples from a 1927 sewing class.



MEMORY KEEPERS OF HISTORY

A sense of mission animates Lisbet Tellefsen's decades-long work as a collector and archivist. She grew up in Berkeley, California, in the 1960s, which she calls "the golden era of collecting," when every box of cereal or trip to the gas station produced something collectible. "Every kid in our neighborhood had a baseball card collection, a comic book collection," she recalled.

But collecting quickly became more than a hobby for Tellefsen, who early on "began using objects as external memory," she said. "I've used objects to chronicle my life for as long as I can remember." The child of a Norwegian immigrant mother who traveled in Bay Area activist circles, she grew up among people who'd led big, engaged lives—people like Matt Crawford, a Black activist and a grandfather figure for her. Che Guevara, the Black Panthers, Angela Davis, 1960s and '70s pop and political posters, Cuban music and culture—all were part of the mix.

Having grown up around activists, Tellefsen realized that political movements need memory keepers. "There is a role for someone like me who archives the movement, who ensures that this history is not only preserved for the next generation, but it's delivered in usable form to those who need that now," she said. "That's activism in my book."

Over the years, Tellefsen has been, among other things, an ethnomusicologist and a publisher (she co-founded a Black lesbian cultural arts journal, *Aché*, in 1989), as well as a curator and collector. She's the force behind several significant archives, including a major collection of posters



COURTESY LISBET TELLEFSEN

Lisbet Tellefsen's collection of activism history includes extensive material on Angela Davis.

and other material related to Angela Davis, which formed the basis of the recent exhibition *Angela Davis—Seize the Time* at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA).

She's focused now on finding permanent homes for some of her most significant archives. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) now has some political posters from her collection, while the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University holds many of her papers related to *Aché*. "Right now, I'm putting together what is probably the finest collection of Black queer history of the 20th century," she said—some fifty-to-one-hundred items, curated to secure a permanent institutional home.

ACCESS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Rebecca Romney, the co-founder of the rare book firm Type Punch Matrix in Silver Spring, Maryland, understands both sides of the collector–bookseller relationship. Currently, she collects gothic romances published by ACE in the 1960s and '70s. “They are such an exercise in packaging and marketing as a way to define genre,” she said. Paratextual details like cover illustrations and blurbs reveal how the genre evolved over the decades. An internet dive into the publishing history of a genre might produce useful tidbits, she said, but it can’t compare to “getting all of these books in front of you and suddenly having an epiph-



Rebecca Romney, a rare book dealer with Type Punch Matrix, has an expansive personal collection of books from the 1960s to '70s ACE gothic romance series.

any because they start talking to each other as objects.”

Romney doesn’t spend more than \$15 on the gothics. It can be tricky to find one in great condition at that price point, but the search is part of the thrill. “You might be hunting for a single book, and then all of these other books come up that you’ve never heard of before,” she said. “You discover things that you weren’t even looking for”—an ability that also helps a bookseller respond to customers’ unique interests. Book collecting, she said, “is a kind of autobiography in the form of a treasure hunt.”

In 2017, Romney and O'Donnell established the Honey & Wax Book Collecting Prize to encourage women collectors under thirty. This year’s winner, Auroura Morgan, owns Black Lantern Tattoo Company in Nashville, Tennessee. Morgan’s prize-winning entry, “Hybrid Botanicals: A Modern Tattoo Artist’s Reference Collection,” showcases the collection of illustrated books that the artist mines for inspiration when creating custom designs for clients.

O'Donnell wants to encourage people from all walks of life to embrace collecting. “What I care about is broadening the involvement, the representation, in the world of rare books and archives, empowering more people to feel like they have a stake in it,” she said. “The boundaries that have been placed on book collecting are the same boundaries that are placed on cultural capital across the board,” she added. In addition to money and education, “you needed access to the material and people willing to deal with you.”



Auroura Morgan, the 2023 winner of the Honey & Wax Book Collecting Prize, owns Black Lantern Tattoo Company in Nashville, Tennessee, and is inspired by this botanical illustration collection.



PHOTO BY DENNIS BARRETT

Ariana Valderrama, the winner of the 2022 David Ruggles Prize, collects books related to Toni Morrison's time as an editor.

MATCHMAKERS FOR THE ARCAINE

As those boundaries become easier to cross, booksellers need to meet today's increasingly diverse collectors wherever they are. Ian Kahn of Lux Mentis, Booksellers in Portland, Maine, said that might be online rather than at an antiquarian book show. "If all you do is go to the big book fairs and complain that the only people you're seeing in your booth are old white guys," he said, "I suggest that a fair bit of the blame rests with you for not figuring out where the people you find interesting are and coming to them."

Part of the art of bookselling involves a kind of matchmaking, taking care that unusual or unique items wind up in the right hands. Kahn looks for a balance between institutional and private sales. "If everything goes into institutions, there's no future for collecting," he said. Large dealers still make money from moving a lot of product, but he prefers a different model. He'd rather spend three weeks researching a unique book that will command a high price "than spend those three weeks cataloging huge piles of things I don't personally find fascinating."

He noted that collectors with more eclectic or niche interests often seek out like-minded communities and objects of interest online. They turn to platforms like Instagram, as its visual-heavy interface makes it an excellent place to showcase the kind of book art and esoterica ("from occultism to fetishism") that Kahn specializes in. "The internet has been fascinating in terms of what it's done to the trade," he said. "It's one of the reasons why a lot of people have shifted into idiosyncratic specialties, revolving around material that is inherently scarce, rare, unusual."



COURTESY LUX MENTIS, BOOKSELLERS

A 1936 first edition of *Prelude to Chemistry* by John Read with a new binding by Nate McCall features a Scottish wheel design that gives the book an alchemical feel. It is one of the esoteric and unusual titles offered by Lux Mentis, Booksellers in Portland, Maine.

LITERARY DETECTIVES

Social media opened a gateway to collecting for Ariana Valderrama. Stuck at home during the pandemic, the young communications professional stumbled across the Instagram feed of BLK MKT Vintage in New York. She spotted the first edition of a book that Toni Morrison, one of her literary heroes, had edited at Random House. It became Valderrama's first purchase as a collector. "I kind of got hooked from there," she said. Absent a definitive bibliography of books edited by Morrison, she set about tracking them down. "It was fun to do some literary detection," she said. "I loved getting to look at and read books that she edited, seeing what her tastes were."

In 2022, Valderrama's Morrison collection won the Grand Prize in the David Ruggles Prize competition. Named after an abolitionist and printer who, in 1828, opened what became the first Black-owned bookstore in the United States, the prize recognizes young collectors of color. Valderrama also credits a chance to attend the Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar (CABS), now CABS Minnesota, with bringing her up to speed in the terminology and economics of the rare-book trade. She's thought about opening a bookstore herself, in part out of a sense that Black bookstore owners are too few and far between. CABS, she said, reassured her that those booksellers do exist, even if "the visibility is not where it should be."

THE ART OF BOOKS

A long-ago stint at CABS also helped Fran Durako step into the rare-book trade after a successful career as the chief information officer for a Washington, DC, law firm. A longtime lover of Victorian literature, she "wandered into the world of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers," she said. "That led me to William Morris, who founded the famed Kelmscott Press, which I started collecting." When she had an opportunity in 2003 to buy the Kelmscott Bookshop in Savage, Maryland, she jumped at it. "Obviously it was fated," she said.

Much of Kelmscott's business now comes from institutional clients like universities. But drawing new and diverse collectors into the rare-book world "is vitally important

to the trade and to conserving and continuing book history," Durako said.

Under her leadership, the shop has shifted from general used bookstore stock to more specialized material, with a focus on artists' books. Such work grapples with "everything from Black Lives Matter to animal extinction to climate change to women's issues, across the spectrum, in creative and unexpected ways," Durako said.

A LIBRARY FOR THE FUTURE

Book artists, broadly defined, also power Oscar Salguero's evolving collection, "The Interspecies Library," which won the 2023 Ruggles Prize. A Brooklyn-based independent curator and archivist, Salguero falls into the lifelong bibliophile category of collector. When his family emigrated from Peru, his mother told him he could bring one suitcase. He filled it with books. "I always understood them as being special documents, full of mystery, full of ideas and thoughts that are important to keep around," he said.

Salguero hoped to study creative writing but wound up pursuing a degree in industrial design at Virginia Tech. He became aware of other design students around the world who drew inspiration from new fields such as biotechnology and artificial intelligence (AI) to create book-like artifacts that imagined possible futures and new relationships among species. For instance, one artist dreamed up a cookbook "for how we were going to incorporate viruses in our diet in the future," Salguero said. "To produce it as a book, to manifest that alternative reality was, to me, incredible."

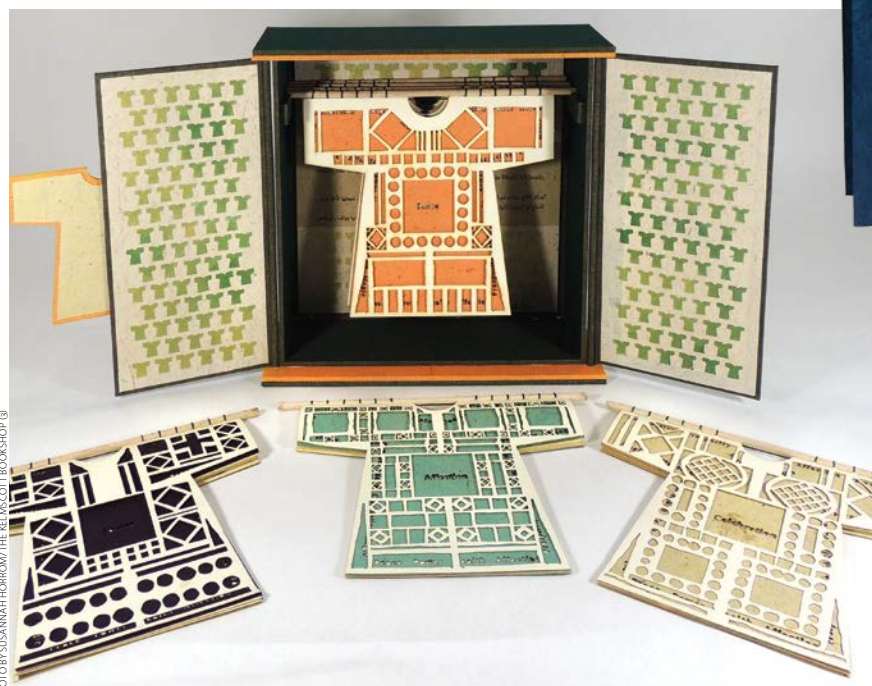
He described it as a goosebumps moment. "I decided to trust the vision of these artists and seek out these works they were producing," he said. For him, collecting means making connections and building a community. His expanding network includes artists in Chile, Ecuador, Indonesia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Sweden, and elsewhere whose work

takes various book-inspired forms—cookbook, catalogue, diary, encyclopedia. Some "are utopian in nature, and some are almost like cautionary tales," he said. One artist created an advertising binder from an imaginary start-up selling customized dodo birds—two years before a real-life start-up announced it could recreate the woolly mammoth, *Jurassic Park*-style.

"Collection" doesn't quite capture the way Salguero thinks of the Interspecies Library. "It's a way to pose new, almost theoretical ideas about what a library and an archive can be, or what the purpose of books in culture can be," he said. The Library represents a community of makers, an investigation of interspecies relationships, a gallery of possible futures, and a series of documents that poke at humans' shifting assumptions about everything non-human, from pigs to fungi to rocks.

For all their differences in background, budget, and taste in books, these collectors and booksellers share one thing: a dedication to pursuing what intrigues them and revealing the value in it, whatever their means and circumstances. "Collecting is not as inaccessible, not as daunting as it seems," said Ariana Valderrama. "You don't have to collect firsts. You can collect whatever you want, whatever you're passionate about." 📖

Jennifer Howard is the author of *Clutter: An Untidy History*.



LEFT: *Transpose* (2021) by Cairo-based book artist Islam Aly is another book offered by the Kelmscott Bookshop. The bilingual book in English and Arabic explores talismanic shirts that are found throughout the Islamic world. RIGHT: *Spider and the Stars* (Philadelphia: Luminice Press, 2023) by artists Thomas Parker Williams and Mary Agnes Williams, offered by the Kelmscott Bookshop, mixes an original illustrated story with factual information about how spiders travel long distances.



The Kelmscott Bookshop in Savage, Maryland, focuses on works from private presses and book arts, such as cut-paper stories by artist Béatrice Coron. *Wings Valleys* (2002-23) was inspired by a twelfth-century Sufi poem and depicts the journey of life through the seven valleys.

