

**“I did it my way”:
One man and his Art collection**

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Art not your thing? Never been able to really grasp what all those pashmina wearing men with hats at funny angles, discussing form, shape and harmony, are really getting at? Do you tremble at the thought of visiting a London Art Gallery and, to add insult to injury, having to pay for the torment? Yeah, me too.

Well, that is until a few years ago. What made the difference for me was realising that, though plenty of eminent pashmina wearing men and women have spouted words of eloquence about a piece of art, what really matters is what I think. My opinion, as a viewer of the image, is just as relevant as that of anyone else. With this simple power-to-the-people attitude, my fears at being laughed at for saying what I think have melted away. The great thing about an image is its uncontrollability of meaning. A scholar may say it's about one thing; but really an image is never about only one thing; it's about whatever emerges from the dialogue between it and you, the viewer.

That is not to say that centuries of scholarship should have no bearing on how you see a picture. Indeed you are going to be affected by these previous readings whether you like it or not – as they flit in and out of your subconscious. Despite this, you as a viewer, have a great deal of power over how you understand an image. That power in viewing an image – that individuality of meaning – is often reflected in the choices people make in collecting art. Sometimes even, these collections by an individual can have a greater impact on the public than all the scholarship put together.

One such individual was Carl Jacobsen and later, his son, Helge, from Denmark, both in the brewery business which is now Carlsberg. Currently on display at the Royal Academy in London, on loan from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, is Jacobsen's collection. It is a show perhaps unlike any other: there is no theme, or theory, or artistic terminology motivating the collection. Instead, Jacobsen brought together pieces from a range of periods, styles, materials and nations. It is art that he (or his son) liked, from Ancient Egypt through to Post-Impressionist. His collection was, for sure, motivated by what he considered to be good art - a consideration that was formed through discussion with scholars of the period. Yet, although he listened to the supremos on the subject, he did not follow them slavishly. He did not care for collecting French painting of the 19th century – especially the younger avant-garde generations like Manet, Monet and Gauguin. On the other hand, Carl ordered works by Rodin directly after Rodin's one man show in 1900 at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, when he was still not universally accepted.

Perhaps the spirit of this exhibition is summed up by one painting done of the man himself. In his own exhibition room, Carl is shown to be hosting a party. Surrounding him are not only art scholars, but artists and politicians, his wife and children. All are named on the frame: each person's name in full directly under their image in the picture. One name however is not in full. It's Carl's. Standing centre stage, he is

inscribed simply as CJ. Even in art of himself, his individuality, that expresses itself so well in his collection, shines forth.

This collection is a tour de force of one man's interaction with the world of art, and a fascinating insight into the politics of the re-discovery, in the 19th century, of art lost since the ancient civilisations of Etruria, Greece and Rome. Yet the sheer span of the collection means that it is also a great place to start learning about that dreaded term: 'Art' with a capital A – its themes and its development. In less than 15 rooms, you can walk past masterpieces of more than two and a half thousand years. You can see before you the lines of influence from one period to the next stretching out from room to room. You can pitch the sculptors of Ancient Greece against Rodin and Degas. You can see what towering artistic genius later sculptors and painters worked in the shadow of, aligning themselves with and reacting against. Most importantly, you can see just how diverse art is. There really is something for everyone.

The Royal Academy is a towering and impressive building with sweeping staircases and marble throughout. Traditionally such august buildings are considered worthy to be art galleries because they match the grandeur of the art they frame. As such, they are institutions that have traditionally reinforced the boundaries between those who 'know' about art and those who don't. However, with this collection, the building's grandeur not only emphasises the art, but also pays tribute to the individual who put it together so that the public could go see it and make their own choices. That's you and me.

So when you next drink a Carlsberg, think about CJ and his collection. Better still, go and see it for yourself.