Avon Collectors: Middlebrow Aesthetic Expression of the Twentieth-Century Self

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PREFACE

In the United States there is a fairly large group of people who collect Avon bottles and other Avon memorabilia as a hobby. For some of these people this hobby is much more than a means of recreation; their collections are deeply entangled with their identities and affect their perceptions of the world. The act of collecting and the resultant, ever growing collection, or physical manifestation of the collecting process, allows Avon collectors to express themselves aesthetically. This creative outlet in turn permeates all areas of the devoted collectors’ lives. The way they display their collection, the degree to which they alter their living spaces to accommodate their collection, the types of Avon collectibles they specialize in, the lengths they go to build their collections, the time they spend researching and learning about their collections, and the friends they have made through collecting all profoundly influence the way Avon collectors live their lives. Conversely, Avon collectors share many beliefs and attitudes that presuppose the collecting of these objects. Their avenue of expression, or aesthetic "taste," is filtered by many variables including social class, level of education, career choice, age, and geographic place of residence.

This thesis will discuss Avon bottles as having "kitsch" properties, will place Avon bottles in a cultural framework of
class and "art," and will define their existence as a result of mid- to late-twentieth century's mass consumer culture. Moving beyond a description and analysis of the Avon objects themselves, the phenomenon of collecting and those who collect will be examined. Finally, pushing beyond theory and popular literature about collecting, stories about actual lives of those who collect will be told. Fleming's artifact analysis was used to first describe Avon bottle collecting and collectors and then to culturally evaluate the process and product, or collection. Fieldwork played a major role in this paper, and Michael Owen Jones' methods used in Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition & Creativity (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989) served as an interpretational framework to tell stories, sometimes sad stories, about the day-to-day activities of those who have chosen to devote much of their lives and energy to collecting Avon bottles and to expressing themselves via their hobby.

Defining the objects of Avon collectors' desires is a difficult task because Avon collectibles can't be lumped into any single category. Labeling collectibles is also tricky because collectors exist who collect absolutely anything associated with the Avon Company, its history, or its sales representatives. Therefore, there is no complete, definitive body of items or objects to collect. Collectors accumulate everything from product containers to sales brochures to company giveaways awarded to productive representatives. A
small list of common categories of Avon collectibles includes paper products such as magazine advertising; Avon literature - - order pads, sales catalogs, letterheads, corporate correspondence and product packaging; children's toys; fragrance lines; soaps; candles; figural bottles; cars; dolls; gift sets; and representatives samples. For simplicity, Avon collectibles will often be referred to as "Avon bottles."

The Avon Company is the largest producer and distributor of cosmetics in the world. The multinational corporation is over 100 years old, and over time has produced massive quantities of product, increasingly so in the last thirty years. The company marketing strategy is based on consecutive two-week sales "campaigns" which bombard the customer with new products and new packaging twenty-six times each year. Since 1965 Avon has been a conscious participant in the collectibles market, manufacturing figural bottles and series of steins, dolls, and limited editions of whatever else would sell. Most of their products are mass-produced, cheaply made with materials like plastic, glass, and paper, and designed to appeal to masses of Americans.

Avon has even created a collectibles division that employs a marketing specialist and a collectibles manager who work full-time to promote Avon Collecting. Since 1986 the company has made a concerted effort to appeal to collectors by introducing a special "Collectibles" line. Every figurine and collectible is now marked with a special "Avon Collectibles"
logo, and most no longer contain any Avon products -- they are solely collector's "items" and have no function as a beauty product. Through its new "Collectibles Line" Avon has devised an exceptional strategy with which to lure those susceptible to the "collecting bug" -- a great variety of items offered; mass produced, large quantities of product; and a large network of sales representatives.

Nevertheless, the Avon corporation has a very tenuous relationship with its collectors. This is apparent from interviews with collectors who are disgruntled with Avon’s lack of interest in the NAAC (The National Association of Avon Collectors), and also from Avon’s greedy desire for profit marked by the production of unlimited "limited edition" series, and basically non-recognition of the collecting association’s existence and passion for the objects and hobby.

While apparently angry with the Avon Corporation’s lack of enthusiasm for the NAAC’s devotion to the company, Avon collectors - in their next breath - regale the Company and speak highly and nostalgically of its merits. They collect not only for the beauty they see in the objects, but also out of respect for the product, and the sense of belonging invoked by the "Avon Lady" corporate image. Most collectors I spoke with, in fact, provided me with the same quick and romantic thumbnail sketch of the Company’s history, indicating a true devotion to Avon and its products.

I first became aware of Avon collecting from an auction
I attended in Rantoul, Illinois (a small town about 30 miles north of Champaign/Urbana) in the summer of 1989. One of the estates up for auction included a collection of 5,000 Avon bottles and five accompanying display hutches. My immediate reaction was "you've got to be kidding;" but as I thought more about the collection I became curious and started asking myself questions. I wanted to know what had possessed this man to accumulate and display Avon bottles, and if there were others who had a similar passion for these seemingly "meaningless" bottles. The auction incident then sat on a back burner in my mind for several months, until, by a stroke of luck, I discovered a copy of The Avon Bottle Collector's Encyclopedia (Bud Hastin) at a Barnes & Noble Book Warehouse in New York City. An initial cornerstone in my research, this gem of a resource linked me to O.R. Nicholas, an Avon collector with the world's largest collection and a house museum; the National Association of Avon Collectors, the club and governing body of Avon collecting; and members of the Avon Corporation's Collectibles Division. The more I read about collecting and the people I talked to who collected Avon made me realize that I was onto what may constitute a trend and, if not a trend, certainly an important activity in many peoples' lives that needed to be studied.
CHAPTER ONE

To those not devoted to Avon memorabilia the zeal of those who collect could be puzzling. Indeed, the uninitiated might even ask "what is this Avon stuff?". The label "kitsch" has been selected to describe Avon bottles and other "collectibles" which are "twentieth century junk" -- produced en masse, and not intrinsically valuable, either historically or monetarily.¹ The term "kitsch" is not used to suggest the cultural inferiority of these middlebrow objects as compared to elite culture's "fine art" objects. No value judgments about the role Avon bottles play in the collectors' lives is made in this study. As sociologist Herbert Gans states:

a comparative analysis of high and popular culture must begin not with personal judgments about their quality but with a perspective that sees each of them as existing because they satisfy the needs and wishes of some people, even if they dissatisfy the needs of other people.²

Gans maintains that

all human beings have aesthetic urges; a receptivity to symbolic expressions of their wishes and fears; a demand for both knowledge and wish fulfillment about their society; and a desire to spend free time in ways that diverge from their

¹. Jose Wilson refers to the collecting of objects that were originally mass-produced and of no intrinsic value, as part of a current collecting boom of "twentieth century junk," in The Collector's Catalogue (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 5.

work routine.³

It can be argued, however, and many scholars do, that mass-produced collectibles are of inferior quality, even though they may satisfy the "aesthetic urges" of some collectors. These objects are cheaply produced by machines, and often imitate the designs and properties of "fine art." Many scholars discuss kitsch as "bad art," characteristic of people with "bad taste." As Howard Becker points out in his book Art Worlds, however, even kitsch can be elevated to fine art status if the players who determine what is and is not fine art deem it so.

In Art Worlds, Becker describes how the art market is created by those who have the money and power to control what becomes the latest craze in the "fine art" world. Art objects are selected very subjectively, and the process is often manipulated by the various players participating in the elevation of objects to "art." A perfect example of how arbitrary this elevation of object to art can be seen in a recent Washington Post article about "magnet art" collected by, no less, a former Avon bottle collector.⁴ Marlou Freeman turned to collecting $.59 to $.99 magnets because her trailer home was too small to properly hold and display her Avon collectibles -- plates, cups and saucers, figurines, and

³. Ibid., 67.
jewelry. It is assumed that the magnet collection, by nature, took up less space and was easier to display on the many metallic surfaces of the trailer than was her Avon collection. Due to the limitations of Freeman's living space, she had to seek out another form of "art" to decorate her surroundings and to express herself.

Freeman, the suddenly famous collector, is a 47-year-old waitress and bartender at O'Toole's Roadhouse in Laurel, Maryland. Over the past ten years she has collected decorative refrigerator magnets. Her collection was "discovered" by a New York Gallery owner when Freeman placed a classified ad in the Post to sell her collection for $9000.00 in order to upgrade her trailer. Alesh Loren, a SoHo gallery owner, perfectly illustrates the process whereby different "art worlds" work together. Loren, a "funky, spunky fellow with light brown dreadlocks," declared the magnets "an incredibly marvelous retrospective of American popular culture -- a masterpiece of kitsch!" In fact, Loren decided that Freeman was an "accidental Andy Warhol" and purchased her collection for his ritzy Loren & Pere Gallery on LaFayette Street in SoHo, New York.

Transformed into an exhibit entitled "Marlou's Magnets," kitsch art suddenly becomes valuable gallery art! This is part of an amazing process, discussed by Becker, in which members of the fine art community are now involved. Loren mounted "Marlou's Magnets" for display on 64 old refrigerator
doors and has commissioned 36 artists to create "magnet art" of their own for a collective showing. Loren, by nature of his status in the fine art world, was able to gain media coverage from television, newspapers, and radio stations in New York and across the country for the exhibition. The New York Post's "Eye on Art" column proclaimed Freeman a "Queen from the Sticks [who] hits SoHo." Freeman's celebrity status has been recognized, not surprisingly, by People Magazine, "Good Morning America," and Glamour, but also by PBS's "McNeil/Lehrer Newshour" and the New York Times. Even Maryland Governor Schaefer was made aware of Freeman's "success" in the art world. In a letter to Freeman, he lauded her "vision and hard work," and thanked her for "inspiring us all." It is comical, and doubtful, to think that Freeman calculated this artistic "vision," or that she inspires many with her magnet collecting. Freeman simply collected Avon bottles first, and then magnets, to satisfy an aesthetic need according to practicality. Ultimately, a desire to improve her quality of life led to the sale of her collection, not a desire to "hit the art world."

Loren, a Yugoslav, seems fascinated by the unrefined tastes of Americans. "It [American's taste] is kitsch, but I find an expression of freedom in it... Besides, who is to tell you what is good and what is not good? Kitsch is an art form... it is the best kind of impressionism."5 Impling that

5. Ibid.
kitsch imitates art, the question becomes who defines what qualifies as good art? The answer is: the ruling Art World — they determine what is seen in fine art galleries, they control the media, they have contact with established "Art World" artists and patrons, and they have the access to financial support and funding. At face value, then, mass-produced items like Avon bottles or refrigerator magnets are relatively valueless. They are not rare and are made of cheap, expendable materials, but when sponsored by those with money and power, kitsch becomes art.

Most often, however, kitsch remains kitsch, and is rarely considered acceptable "art" by the cultured class. Dwight MacDonald calls people who consume mass-produced objects like Avon bottles members of the mass culture, or masscult. He claims their cultural products are "anti-art" and not really culture at all. He assumes masscult’s art to be a parody of high culture’s art, and recognizes no worth in their art. More importantly, MacDonald allows no personal relationship between masscult and their art to develop, nor does he recognize that instead of parodying high culture, masscult’s appreciation of art is the same process merely using a different medium through which to experience what masscult defines as "art." MacDonald sees the art of the masscult as a grave and unrelenting threat to high culture and feels it goes

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"Against the American Grain" (the title of his 1952 book). It is imposed from above, and limits the expressive freedoms of Americans. However, my research negates the claims made by critics of mass culture that "masscult offers its customers neither an emotional catharsis nor an aesthetic experience" by illustrating the aesthetic role that Avon collectibles play in collectors' lives. Like owners of Monet and Cezanne, Avon collectors define their collectibles in aesthetic terms and treat their objects as art.

This thesis can be placed within the context of a long debate between conservative, traditional students of culture and liberal, "new," scholars who emphasize popular culture. The points of contention between the two camps revolve around the issue of the merits of popular culture. One side studies the view that popular culture is an evil, leveling force in society, and the other that popular culture is a reflective and affective aspect of twentieth-century life, worthy of study. The debate is not only between these two opposite conceptions about the worth of popular culture, but involves other issues that reside in the middle, "grey areas," of popular culture studies. Some of these issues relevant to this study are the many different ideas about definition, classification, value, consequences, and roles of popular

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8. Ibid., 5.
culture in society.

The negative aspect of scholarship is represented in the work above of MacDonald, and also by Gillo Dorfles, Andrew Ross, and Curtis Brown. Gillo Dorfles, a scholar who has written about kitsch from an elitist perspective, calls kitsch "junk art, knocked off cheaply; the daily art of our time."\(^9\) He does qualify, however, in his book, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, that this "junk art" may cause an aesthetic reaction in some people, for "each mind perceives a different beauty."\(^10\) Dorfles implies that those whose minds perceive a "different beauty" are middlebrow, and that their definition of beauty is less beautiful than elite culture's definition of beauty. This is evidenced also by his statement that "one person may even perceive deformity where another senses beauty."\(^11\)

Andrew Ross has a less pessimistic view of kitsch "art" than Dorfles and MacDonald, but is also quite elitist in his treatment of the "ignorant class" who collect objects like Avon bottles. Ross maintains that "the consumer of kitsch is likely to be unaware of the extent to which his or her intentions or pretensions [of art] are reified and alienated

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\(^10\). Ibid., 10.

\(^11\). Ibid., 11.
in the kitsch object."\textsuperscript{12} Kitsch is designed not only to fill a space in peoples' lives and environments, but also imitates the artistic taste of high culture. Its "legitimate" (high) culture references are used to flatter the owner-consumer. Kitsch is serious about imitating art, but is owned by those with insufficient cultural capital to gain access to legitimate culture. Therefore Ross associates kitsch with the middlebrow audience that has class aspirations and desires upward mobility.

Curtis Brown also picks up on the serious nature of "kitsch art." "Its purchaser believes it endows him with an air of richness, elegance, and sophistication."\textsuperscript{13} Brown feels that kitsch rarely intends to be frivolous and is "unaware of being anything but appealing and desirable."\textsuperscript{14} Kitsch's audience is hungry for approval and for things that "at least sound elegant."\textsuperscript{15}

The above definitions of kitsch assume, then, that collecting Avon bottles is an expression of the middlebrow's desire to imitate, or "purchase into," the aesthetic ideals of those they perceive as being members of the "high culture." Alan Gowans calls the imitative nature of mass-produced art


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 16.
objects "mimetic substitute imagery."\textsuperscript{16} He argues that forms are revered and symbolic because of the associations attached to them, and that the reproduction of these forms satisfies a human urge to mimic what is highest in form and culture. Objects like Avon bottles serve as substitutes for revered forms, and thus acquire symbolic, sentimental and associative social values that are present in high culture. More simply stated, Gowans' mimetic imagery concept helps the owners of "mobile homes" to think more of their being in a home than of their being "mobile."\textsuperscript{17} Fakes, or imitative objects, also remind the consumer of the higher class status they aspire to and the objects they one day hope to have.

A partial methodological solution is found in scholars' work that takes a more liberal approach to interpretation of material culture. Scholars like sociologist Herbert Gans, and popular culturalists Alan Gowans, Russel Nye, and Ray Browne find merit in the study of popular culture, accept it as a consequence of a highly technological, wealthy, democratized nation, and feel it both reflects and affects what happens in our country. They do often qualify its merits through the use of value statements, and concern themselves with quality rather than the process. For example, many popular culturalists still think Shakespeare is "better reading" than


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 418.
romance novels, PBS a "higher" television form than NBC sitcoms or the Home Shopper's Network, and Picasso's art "finer" than black velvet Elvis paintings bought on the roadside.

The fact that consumerism plays a huge role in deeming what becomes popular, and therefore what becomes "popular art," cannot be denied. A definite profit motive in popular arts can be detected, and "what sells" is imitated, repeated, and formulized in new forms. The works of popular culture scholars Ray Browne and Russel Nye recognize this fact, but also maintain that a great deal about the past and present can be learned from popular culture.\(^8\) They feel popular arts are democratic, reflect the values of the bulk of the population, and are a "gauge by which we can learn what Americans are thinking; their fears, fantasies, dreams, and dominant mythologies."\(^9\) This seems to suggest that popular arts not only provide people a creative outlet, but that they help to find expression for ideas, beliefs, and values that often seem inexpressible. In his essay "Notes on a Rationale for Popular Culture," Nye develops a list of characteristics of the popular arts and makes a case for the validity of their

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\(^8\) Ray Browne was instrumental in founding the Journal of Popular Culture which is published at his institution, Bowling Green State University. Russel Nye is author of one of the tomes of popular culture, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: The Dial Press, 1970).

study. He argues against the elitist condescension toward popular culture discussed above, and states that the popular arts aren't necessarily "aesthetically bad." Nye contradicts himself, however, when he writes that "the popular audience expects entertainment, instruction, or both, [when purchasing popular arts] rather than an aesthetic experience."\(^{20}\) While both Browne and Nye endorse the study and analysis of popular culture and recognize that it can be used to discover and understand cultural codes, they are still unable to acknowledge that the aesthetic experience is the same, whether the afficionado is a member of the high or middlebrow class.

Regardless of the debatable aesthetic properties of these "kitsch" objects, Avon bottles do fill aesthetic and human needs for their collectors. Utilizing the work of Herbert Gans, again, it becomes clear that while it is helpful to recognize that different taste cultures co-exist, value judgments about those various tastes do not have to be made. Gans feels that different "taste cultures," or "taste publics," exist because of the diversity of, and disagreement about, aesthetic standards and values among various social classes. His theory is that in the United States aesthetic pluralism exists, and that each taste culture has distinctive standards -- no strict high/low dichotomy exists, and an interchange of ideas and "art objects" flows among the taste

cultures.

Gans distinguishes five different taste cultures in our society, and identifies factors that predetermine an individual’s membership in a particular taste public. Determining factors are class, age, religion, ethnic and racial background, regional origin, and place of residence, as well as personality factors. The major source of differentiation among taste publics is socioeconomic level or class, which is based on income, occupation, and education. Inherently different, these five taste cultures find a wide variety of objects either aesthetically pleasing or displeasing. The following quote provides an example of these differences in taste:

Different classes of people collect different things. The very wealthy have their art and racehorses, the middle echelons their books and stamps and the bottom levels their knick-knacks and matchbooks. But it is really all the same, a way of giving us a sense of value, a sense of place, a sense of what is lacking in our lives.

The taste culture that most aptly fits with Avon bottle collectors’ class status and aesthetic preferences is labeled by Gans the "lower-middle culture." This category is America’s dominant taste culture, and is made up of middle- and lower-middle-class people in the lower-status professions.

23. Gans, 84.
The aesthetics most appreciated by this taste public emphasize substance and form. Their arts express and reinforce the taste cultures’ ideas and feelings about beauty, their belief in traditional morals and values, and their faith in traditional institutions. Much of this classes’ art consists of popular adaptations of non-representational high culture art; altered, more representational and simplistic imitations of fine art. Most importantly, lower-middle culture’s literal and representational art must be "solid, looking and colorful."24

Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton are also careful to point out in their book *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) that the choice of proper art is relative to a collector’s social class. That visual art placed second in a survey the two sociologists did to determine the "top ten special objects" found in the home is valuable data and will be discussed later, but what is important here is their definition of "visual art." "Visual art" is a broad category defined along class lines:

The type of art object itself tends to be strongly influenced by social class, so that lower-middle class respondents tend to have a higher percentage of mass-produced art, whereas original art objects tend to be owned more frequently by the upper-

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middle classes.\textsuperscript{25}

They, too, recognize that important qualities of lower middle-class art include style, past memories (or nostalgia), associations, and characteristics of self, and that "art objects" are seen as "high status."\textsuperscript{26}

From the scholarship on popular arts, then, we see an intense desire to either disdain or to defend the study of popular arts. Efforts to define popular arts qualitatively and as symptoms of class are also evident. Much of the early, conservative scholarship on mass culture seems to reduce popular arts to an evil characteristic of consumerism, and ignores the role of aesthetics in the process of decision-making in purchases. The more liberal scholars discuss popular arts as reflective of culture and indicative of underlying cultural messages, but still "judge" the work on a scale of low to high, and by doing so, maintain that a difference exists in the aesthetic processes between highbrow and middlebrow consumers and collectors of art. It is almost as if a need to define "art" has become more important than the fundamental purposes of "art" in peoples' lives.

It is apparent from the review of literature that differences in taste and class exist, but it is pointless to squabble over a definition of "art" because art is such an


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 65.
abstract, subjective, and relative term. Descriptively, Avon collectibles have been labeled "kitsch" because they have properties associated with what is commonly understood to belong to a category of popular arts. This is not to say that these properties of Avon collectibles limit the degree to which these objects can be aesthetically enjoyed by their owners.

The questions these scholars have addressed were appropriate to their time and to the development of early popular culture and material culture studies, but it is now time to address more important underlying issues such as the role objects play in peoples' lives, and how "art" objects, however defined, function across class lines, to help people enjoy and understand their lives and worlds. After all, "the object is not the message, but the medium."27 The model used in this study to reveal "the message" combines the work of sociologist Gans, and the work of cultural critic Fred E. Schroeder. The work of Gans is relatively value-free and allows differences in taste to co-exist with an overall human need for beauty in lives. Using Gans, Avon bottles can be considered "art," and they can embody aesthetic qualities. Schroeder's book Outlaw Aesthetics has been of paramount importance because he articulates many of the underlying roles that popular arts fill in our lives. He is also fairly

careful not to make value or quality judgments about "art." Schroeder confirms that "art forms [all art forms] are for sustenance -- we need them to sustain our unexpressed and often unconscious needs and beliefs." While popular art forms are seemingly simple, clear, and understandable, all are still and expression of

"human longings, fears, despairs, and dreams -- simpler, cruder and briefer than the works of Sophocles, Aquinas, Rembrandt, and Strindberg, but no less expressive of the tragic state of the human condition."28

Schroeder also believes that "reading" objects and audiences, or in this case Avon collections and collectors, can be beneficial to gaining a greater understanding of purpose and meaning. The popular arts are "social documents" that are "receptive to reading humanistic meanings in. Reading them tells us about their audiences, and within them we discover abstractions for which the arts are emblematic."29 While the forms may be simple, the ideas, concepts, and philosophies underlying popular arts may be profound.

The Avon Company provides aesthetic reassurance and "art" for the members of the lower-middle taste public that Gans describes. Beatrice Rosenblum, a newspaper columnist, calls Avon bottle design "a victory of form over function." Rosenblum describes Avon bottles in esoteric and aesthetic terms when discussing their intriguing form and artistic

28. Schroeder, 10.
29. Schroeder, 40.
design. Although initially manufactured for utilitarian purposes to attractively contain Avon products, "they were so original in design, so superbly fashioned, that owners were unable to part with them when the contents were used." Rosenblum suggests that Avon bottles' "superior and elegant" form and design, although a "modern production," are a desirable alternative to the unaffordable antiques collected by the wealthy. Rosenblum's comments would indicate that the Avon collector elevates his or her collection of mass-produced glass and plastic figurines and bottles to the realm of aesthetic objects.

Descriptive phrases taken from the Western Handbook and Price Guide to Avon Bottles also indicate that Avon collectors find the values and standards of "high art" embodied in their collectibles. To Avon collectors, Avon is "Art," and collectors are quick to draw comparisons between their art and high art. For example, "the new clear snail with its gold antennas is a masterpiece," while the "Tiffany-type tulip lampshade" is said to be "a colorful addition to any fine collection." White plastic busts containing cologne are listed as "Eighteenth Century Classic figurines." A reproduction Renoir painting sits in a cologne-filled "picture


frame" bottle. The *Avon Bottle Collector's Encyclopedia* goes as far as calling Avon packaging "art": "Take a look at current boxes; they are a work of art in themselves."32 Names of products themselves also make "artistic," and therefore "valuable," references: Jennifer "Hummel" Figurine; Grecian Pitcher; American Heirloom Porcelain Bowl; Florentine Lady Pomander; and the Cameo Ring Perfume Glace. Collectors also take pride in the Avon Company's reference to the "real Avon." This name, of course, suggests "the Shakespearean countryside through which the fresh and wholesome river Avon flows."33

In addition to direct artistic references Avon bottles make to "high art," collectors also use the materials of fine art to describe their pieces. The contradiction here, obviously, is that all Avon materials are cheap imitations of the "real thing." Remember, "kitsch is expendable, replaceable, and lacks any unique 'value' or intrinsic 'truth' which might qualify it within artistic canons."34 This fact does not discourage collectors, collecting books, and even the Avon bi-weekly catalogs from describing objects in "authentic" terms. To collectors, the "attractive, coveted, handsome collecting possibilities of these excellently designed

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33. Holmberg and Munsey, 9.

34. MacDonald, 99.
bottles" is due largely to the quality and materials that go into the object's "creation." Many collectors, in fact, do view the production of Avon bottles as a creative process. They choose to ignore that these bottles are mass produced, and instead focus on the "craftsmanship" of Avon products. Avon collectors' handbooks also lead the collector to believe that Avon bottles are carefully and exquisitely crafted through "age-old" processes:

The containers themselves are designed by Avon's own packaging group. After the initial design is completed, consultation is undertaken with engineers at the various glass houses which produce the figurals. As one producer confided, in some cases Avon's initial designs are so intricate that they have to be modified, and even then they are a real challenge to any glass maker.  

Popular phrases used to describe the materials of Avon bottles include: brown leather-look box; plastic case, wood-carved finish; wood grained plastic; gold tone with simulated diamonds; silver tone; gold colored; crystal (plastic); and silver (plate).  

In addition to fulfilling aesthetic needs, a connection is made to the past in order to meet Avon collectors' needs for tradition, history, and nostalgia. As Dwight MacDonald said, "kitsch is the simplest and most direct way to soothe the need for nostalgia -- an escape from reality, it always

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35. Holmberg and Munsey, 8.


37. Hastin, 47-51.
and only represents a search for a world with set conventions, the world of our fathers in which everything was good and fair."\textsuperscript{38} Connections with "the world of their fathers" are made continuously by the names and descriptions Avon gives its bottles. Feelings of comfort, of "a time when life was simpler," and of patriotism and pride in the United States' history are evoked by many Avon objects. After all, "in saving items, people want things that are symbols of the past, either through their design, quality of workmanship, or composition. Some people want a thing that brings on feelings of nostalgia, transporting them back in time, and the more a group of items captures the 'soul' of a past era or period, the more likely it is that it will become a collectible."\textsuperscript{39}

Examples of products with names and descriptions that make historical and nostalgic references include: the Model T; the Town Pump; a Gas Lantern; an Inkwell fashioned after the Coventry Ink bottle; ornaments similar to the pre-World War II German Christmas decorations; the Covered Wagon; the Cannonball Express; an American Schooner; the Viking Discoverer; an Uncle Sam Pipe; the Philadelphia Derringer; a replica decanter of a Thomas Jefferson Handgun; Presidential Busts; the Liberty Bell; the Spirit of Saint Louis Airplane; a Pot Belly Stove; Betsy Ross and her Flag; Elizabethan and

\textsuperscript{38} MacDonald, 73.

Victorian Fashion Figurines; a Sweet Shoppe Pin Cushion and Cream Sachet; a Country Store Coffee Mill and Country Charm Butter Churn Decanter; a Parlor Lamp; the Cape Cod 1876 Dish Collection; and a "Remembering When" School Desk Decanter.\(^{40}\)

The result of historical and nostalgic cultural and aesthetic references that Avon bottles make is an inherently contradictory message about the nature of mid- to late-twentieth century technology and society. Placed in an appropriate framework of twentieth century mass production and consumerism, Avon bottles do have some historical and cultural value. They are representatives of industrial and technological advancements, as well as symbols of the democratization of "art." Avon bottles and other collectibles are considered "democratic" because they are widely available and affordable to almost any American who so desires them.\(^{41}\)

"As strange and fantastic as some of them are, the articles being collected today with such stark intensity (like Avon bottles) are a part of America's cultural and business history. They may not yet be scarce and few of the items are unique, but they are interesting and can boast an association with our fathers and grandfathers."\(^{42}\)

This association with fathers and grandfathers is based

\(^{40}\) Hastin, 40-70.

\(^{41}\) Holmberg and Munsey, 206.

largely on nostalgia for what was, and is used to counter the fact that industry controls our fate today. The Avon Corporation participates in this past/progress contradiction by using a powerful image to build on and evoke a "time-honored image of cordial Avon ladies lavishing personal attention on the customer."43 In reality, Avon is a huge multinational conglomerate that controls the world's beauty products market and rapes the land for raw materials. The Company uses the latest technology, spends millions on product research and development, owns an entire Manhattan building, employs thousands, and even takes orders via fax machines. Folklorist Susan Stewart recognizes this irony also:

Within contemporary consumer society, the collection takes the place of crafts as the prevailing form of domestic pastime. Ironically, such collecting of the "ready made" combines a preindustrial aesthetic of the handmade and the singular object with a postindustrial mode of acquisition and production.44

The contradictions continue beyond "art and nostalgia" and the Avon's corporate image. They can be traced to fears resulting from the rapid post-World War II technological changes and the societal upheaval of the 1960s. Post-war fear and distrust of space-age technology, the Cold War, and technological advancement sparked a reaction against modernism


44. Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 166.
which resulted in a wave of nostalgia for the past in the middle 1960s.\textsuperscript{45} Jerry Neapolitan, in "Contemporary Craft Object and American Culture," speaks more directly about the macrame, pottery and shadowbox craft movement of the 1960s, but his ideas can be applied to Avon collectibles as well, for they have similar, and perhaps even more contradictory, properties as crafts. Neapolitan also discusses the profound impact of the turbulent 1960s on Hippies, but also on older Americans. Both groups harbored strong anti-modernist feelings, and although the younger group rebelled and the older group reacted, they shared a desire for a simpler, more authentic life of the past (even though the society they imagined probably never existed).\textsuperscript{46}

The type of craft, or "art," these people were attracted to provided a sense of stability and permanence in their unsettled lives. Avon bottles, although mass produced and different from the type of craft Neapolitan describes, embody a special quality and nostalgic appeal that allow them to substitute as "craft/art objects." This "art" is literal and practical, "utilitarian in form but also beautiful and

\textsuperscript{45} The collecting of mass produced "collectibles" began in the middle 1960s and grew during the 1970s. The late sixties are identified in much of the popular literature as the beginning of the "Collecting Boom" in the United States. See for example, William Ketchum's \textit{The Catalogue of American Collectibles} (New York: Rutledge Books, 1977).

unique." Avon bottles and the Avon corporation symbolized, and continue to do so, integrity and authenticity to consumers. Collectors sense, even though falsely, a careful, individualized creative process. They do not perceive the Avon Company as a faceless giant: contact with local Avon Sales Representatives prevents this. It is almost as if customers identify so closely with their Avon Lady (or Man) that they assume she or he has meticulously crafted and packaged the items before delivering it to their door. Perhaps much of Avon's success stems from its ability to bridge the gap between modern materials and mass production and the nostalgic days of the past. Using forms and descriptions that fulfill aesthetic needs and evoke warm feelings about the past help relieve the dissonance and confusion that many collectors feel in their modern world.

47. Ibid., 28.
CHAPTER TWO

Several theories about the motives for collecting exist, many from the ranks of popular literature on collecting and collectibles. Only in recent years has the subject attracted enough attention to prompt scholarly research on "collectibles." The Journal of the History of Collections, a four-year-old publication, is one outgrowth of scholars' growing interest in the topic. Collecting and collectibles are valid areas of research because of the enormous role that material culture plays in peoples' lives, and also because an entire industry and culture surrounds the collectibles market. Many Americans devote time and energy to identifying, gathering, enhancing, and displaying their collections. The subject is vast, and needs to be studied in order to first describe, and then understand and evaluate, the cultural and social importance of collecting contemporary commercial objects.

There are many subtopics relevant to the collection of objects like Avon bottles: collecting as a process of "preying," "hunting," "competing and challenging," finally resulting in "killing," or obtaining, an object; the rescuing and restoration of objects -- turning rags into riches and finding treasures in trash; the "meaning" of objects -- their value symbolically, emotionally, and monetarily; the historical documentation of the collection -- the collector's knowledge about the object and its "maker;" the display of the
collection -- the alteration of home space and organization of the collection; the motivation of the collector -- aesthetic appreciation, inheritance, tradition, investment, imitation of high culture; and the corporation behind the production of these objects -- its motivation, reflection of company values, marketing strategies, and the historical integrity of its products. Although these subtopics are all valid and interesting, and most surface during interviews with collectors, this chapter and the remainder of this study focuses primarily on the motivation of the collector, the process of collecting, the display of the collection, and the values and meaning reflected by the artifacts in the context of the collector's collection. These topics were selected because they are the most revealing about Americans' need to possess and collect material objects, an important aspect of our culture.

There are a number of theories to explain why people collect, and perhaps determining who collects is an appropriate place to begin. According to American Demographics, the collecting trend peaks among those who have household incomes of $30,000 to $49,999.¹ Collecting experienced huge growth from 1977 to 1982, partially evidenced by a 20% growth in used-merchandise retail establishments

¹. Diane Crispell, "Collecting Memories," American Demographics 10 (November 1988): 38-41. According to statistics on collectors, those within the 30,000 to 49,999 range collect "collectibles," while those who make over $50,000 tend to collect stamps, coins, and art.
(including antique stores and second-hand shops), and the publishing of hundreds of books on collecting during each of these years. To highlight the ubiquitous presence of collectibles in the home, in 1987 one-third of adult women in households with incomes of $25,000 or more owned at least one collectible figurine, and the average "collector" owned at least 15 figurines.

According to Stephen Hughes, people collect for a variety of reasons. He lists, in his "philosophy of collecting," eight reasons why people collect. Collectors' ultimate goal, Hughes believes, is to engage their aesthetic, spiritual, educational and cultural impulses through the process of collecting. The steps toward goal achievement are: to search for an identity; to become an active participant; to become good at something; to meet people; to strengthen a marriage; to relieve stress; to make money; and to build investments.² In addition to the personal and social reasons for collecting, then, it appears that the financial potential in collecting intrigues some collectors. In order to "make" a profit, collectors need to play the game of selecting potentially valuable objects, paying the minimum price for the objects, and then selling them at a gain. This is a difficult challenge, for the collectibles market fluctuates according only to the principles of supply and demand within a self-

referential collector's market.³ This uncertain market is especially important with Avon bottles, since they have no intrinsic value, and an investment in no way guarantees any kind of a return.

It may seem strange that collectors invest so much of themselves, and rely so heavily on inexpensive objects to help them understand and shape their worlds. Through collecting, however, a number of processes occur that are irrelevant to the "value" of the "means to the end." Collectibles are simply the tools that allow collectors to redefine their world; exhibit dominance and affection and feel power; create a sense of order and closure; and restore and conserve matter to a form pleasing to them.⁴ Redefining, or recontextualizing, means to make an object one's own by creating a new space and meaning for the object by juxtaposing it to other objects of the owner's choice. In a sense, it is a way collectors gain power over their collection, and thus their lives. The second principle, exhibiting dominance and affection and thereby feeling powerful, is important because of the tension between these two poles in all of our lives. Since collectibles are inanimate objects, they are easy to dominate and control; but because collectibles are also objects of affection, they provide a sensuous outlet for

³. Stewart, 167.

touching, handling, playing with, and caring for the objects. A sense of closure is also created through the collecting process. It allows collectors to order and complete a series or a set, or to fill some pre-determined "collection" space in their homes. Finally, restoring and conserving objects allows collectors to maintain and preserve their collectibles to their own personal standards by dusting, cleaning, and caring for them, and by attempting to "fight the clock" and slow the aging process. Collecting, then, provides answers to issues that people deal with in everyday life, and collectibles are the vehicles through which the process can occur.

Jerry Neapolitan adds other reasons why people collect. He says collectors have a need to be creative and to express themselves. "Art" can only exist when there is an audience, or perceived audience, viewing an object or collection of objects.\(^5\) Since the artist in popular art is anonymous, the collectors themselves are able to vicariously become the artist through ownership and manipulation of the "art" objects. As the "creator" of the collection, the objects a collector chooses to buy and include in the "art work" are completely at his or her discretion. The collection reflects the owner's aesthetic preferences and artistic desires. Objects also fulfill a need for interaction with inert matter.\(^6\) Objects invite people to pick them up and handle

\(^5\) Schroeder, 42.

\(^6\) Neapolitan, 29.
them, and experience pleasure from their forms.

Another appeal of collecting is the dual nature of the activity. Collecting is highly individualistic and can be a solitary pleasure, or it can be a group and social activity. Thus collecting embodies one of the classic American relationships -- the tension between individualism and community. Individualism is achieved through the collector's preoccupation with the self: self-expression, self-indulgence, self-fulfillment. Collecting meets an individual's need for material consumption, status superiority, and social advancement. While "duty to self" is met through collecting, human beings also have other needs that revolve around contact with others. Collecting clubs provide a forum for common experience, shared enthusiasm, and mutual admiration. Buyers and sellers of collectibles often tend to be members of the same class, thus their tastes and interests mesh, and the feeling of community is present in the collecting activity. "Collectibles provide an area of shared interests, tastes, and lifestyle and allow both individual expression and shared pleasures."7

One of the individual pleasures of owning a collection is the ability and freedom to control the objects included in the collection. "Collections are small rituals in which we observe the channeling of obsession, an exercise in how to make the world one's own; to gather things around oneself

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7. Ibid., 30.
tastefully, appropriately." Viewed as a microcosm of the individual's world, control of the pieces in the collection provides the collector with the power of ownership and direction. In addition, power is achieved through the collector establishing his or her own rules of order and organization. It is the collector who dictates inclusion in the collection, the arrangement of the collection, the hierarchy of values expressed in the collection, and the aesthetic standard governing the collection. To bring order to one's life is to feel power, control, and stability. Owning a collection alone does not guarantee these benefits, however. As anthropologist James Clifford states, a collection must be rule-governed:

An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to have is transformed into rule-governed, meaningful desire. Thus the self that must possess but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies -- to make "good" collections.  

A "good collector," is expected to establish a taxonomic and aesthetic structure to order his possessions. The collector thus "professionalizes" his hobby, and his viewing public realizes it by the collector's ability to label objects, know the objects' place in history, tell "interesting" things about the objects, and distinguish quality and conditions of objects. To be a socially

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9. Ibid., 218.
appropriate activity, collectors must create and follow procedures for cultivating the collection -- acquisition, care and display of collection, and the place of collecting in lives.\textsuperscript{10}

Collecting can also be an important element in the aging process. Most Avon collectors are retired, and have taken up the collecting hobby in order to keep themselves active. Collecting fulfills many needs of retired members of society. According to gerontologists, there are five basic needs that must be met in order for retired people to feel "whole." These include the need for activities that afford status, recognition, and achievement; activities which provide a social group; activities which provide meaningful expression of self to others, or are creative in terms of traditional and contemporary social values; activities which contain certain aspects of work, including hobbies which are useful or can be sold; and activities which are recurrent, organized, visible to a social audience, permit a range of participation, and foster the formation of new roles.\textsuperscript{11}

Hobbies, because of their many benefits, are also recommended to the aging in the popular literature. A hobby is perceived as necessary to "experience retirement with a

\textsuperscript{10} Danet and Katriel, 260.

purpose -- rich in possibilities and opportunities."\textsuperscript{12} It is best, it seems, to "arrive at retirement with a hobby already established, for the exponent is then in his stride and the capacity for enjoyment is increased" upon retirement. Susan Stewart looks upon collecting and the collection as a reward of aging and patience: "'Earning' the collection simply involves waiting."\textsuperscript{13} In addition to filling time, hobbies provide many important elements of a quality life to their participants. Recreation rejuvenates the spirit, and the activity keeps the aging physically fit. Friendships are made, and there is often a great community spirit surrounding hobby clubs. Collecting is an especially good hobby, for it involves more than accumulating objects. The collector meets others with similar interests, and experiences a challenge through his "quest" for collectibles. Other important advantages of collecting include the need to display the objects -- and if a collector is handy with woodworking or other crafts, he or she can even build the mechanisms of display, making the hobby a multifaceted activity. Another valuable aspect of collecting is the memories that can be relived through objects. The collector can tell the story of his or her life through the items chosen to collect and display. The joy of collecting is not only in the activity,

\textsuperscript{12} Eleanor Brockett, How to Retire and Start Living, (London: New English Library, 1963), 11.

\textsuperscript{13} Stewart, 166.
but in the triggered memories of the past. Most important perhaps, is that "hobby enthusiasts are no respecters of age. In the company of others who share the same enthusiasm there is no need even to remind oneself, much less anyone else of one's age -- the hobby is the thing, and new friendships, so important to the over-sixty, flower and flourish in this climate." ¹⁴

In The Grand Generation, Marjorie Hunt recognizes that as people age, they experience a number of personal crises, including the loss of physical vitality, the threat of isolation and loneliness, the loss of stimulating and meaningful engagements, and the awareness of a shortened future.¹⁵ To combat these feelings, it is necessary for the aging to discover a personal solution to affirm their creative potential along with a community of others. Collecting provides this personal solution for many. The process of collecting is habitual and familiar; collectors follow routines, and frequent familiar antique shops, garage sales, and second-hand stores. A clear path, or process, is established to make their remaining time useful. Collecting allows the collector and the viewer of the collection an opportunity to infinitely "see and remember experiences, and to touch something that was physically part of a past

¹⁴. Ibid, 144.

environment or event." 16 Since it is meant to be shared with others, the collection is considered "social currency," a means to generate an audience, and therefore the company of others is received. Creatively, the collection is an outlet for the reconstruction of the self through time, resulting in a subjective "life review." 17 The collection spreads life out simultaneously for all to see. The collectibles included in the collection are powerful social tools -- they are lures for memories and for drawing the world in. 18

Regardless of the age of the collector, the display of the collection is an extremely important part of the collecting process. The display of objects is a uniquely individual means of personal and aesthetic expression. The collector asserts control over the collection by defining and containing it intellectually, aesthetically, and spatially. As a reflection of self, the collection is a very personal entity; its display, too, is crucial to maintaining the collector's identity. The collector brings meaning to the objects in his or her collection; exhibited within the context of other objects, collectibles are reclassified according to the rules and organizational framework established and selected by the collector/owner. Once incorporated into the collector's collection, the objects are laden with new

16. Ibid., 60.
17. Ibid., 42.
18. Ibid., 63.
meaning, and reaffirm individual and group values.\textsuperscript{19}

The opportunity to display the collection according to his or her rules provides the collector with another outlet for creativity: "no longer simply a consumer of objects that fill the decor, the self generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer of those objects, a producer by arrangement and manipulation."\textsuperscript{20} The collection can also be reorganized time and time again, allowing for experimentation. Never static, "playing" with the objects and displaying them in new and different ways can result in new meaning, and new relationships between the collector and individual members of the collection can be established.

The display of the collection includes how objects are physically arranged within the home and also how collectors talk about and describe their collections when "presenting" them to others. It is important to evaluate the role a collection plays within the context of the home, for the display of objects expresses it owner's value system and beliefs. Home is the most personal space in which a human being exists; the home is not only arranged and ordered according to deep cultural patterns and values, but it is also quite indicative of an individual's beliefs, perceptions, and

\textsuperscript{19} Interpreted from Eugene W. Metcalf's Smithsonian Resident Associate Program (Washington, DC) lecture on 10 December 1990, titled "Collecting Folk Art: A Barometer of the Modern American Identity."

\textsuperscript{20} Stewart, 158.
identity. Susan Stewart believes that the display of the collection and the establishment of boundaries in the inner sanctum of the home is an attempt to bring meaning to our essentially empty lives:

The collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space. For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it.

By filling "empty lives" the collection merely meets another human need. Importantly, the display of the collection establishes boundaries within the private space of the home. These boundaries and the collection's addition to the home's ornamentation and decor project the self into the defined private space of the home. The interior of the room -- in itself an empty essence -- becomes significant because it reflects the "interior of the self."

It can be argued that the ultimate achievement in collecting is to transform the space of the home into a museum. After all, "the pinnacle for all collectors is to have one's collection displayed by a museum," and if the

21. Henry Glassie discusses the ordering of space and its reflection of cultural values in his books Folkl House in Middle Virginia (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), and Passing the Time in Ballymenone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).


23. Stewart uses the phrase the "interior of the self" when discussing the texts of "possession" in On Longing, 158.
museum hasn't come to the collector, the obvious alternative is for the collector to build a museum in the his or her home.\textsuperscript{24} "A museum of one's own, for the impassioned collector, this is the crowning coup, the ultimate status, the surest collaboration with immortality."\textsuperscript{25} In creating a "museum," Susan Stewart recognizes that some interesting things happen in the process. Museums, by attempting to be representative and authentic, serve as models for our world, "even though it is fiction that they somehow represent a coherent representational universe."\textsuperscript{26} The individual collector also invents a classification scheme that defines space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the objects in the collection.\textsuperscript{27} It is the "museum" display, then, that many collectors attempt to emulate with the arrangement and presentation of their collections in order to understand their world. The popular press provides many instructions and guidelines to the collector so he or she can best, and most attractively, display the collection. It is necessary for collections to be "properly displayed" in order to be fully appreciated.\textsuperscript{28} Proper display can be achieved in

\textsuperscript{24} Danet and Katriel, 256.


\textsuperscript{26} Stewart, 161.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 162.

a number of ways. It may include building display shelves in rows or series along the walls of the home, or even the use of free-standing shelves as room dividers "to really incorporate the collection into living space of the home."\textsuperscript{29} The collection can be organized for display in a variety of ways - - by theme, color, shape, size, historical period, or type.\textsuperscript{30} Artificial lighting highlights certain objects or accentuates the beauty of the objects' materials. Glass doors and special cabinets protect and "showcase" prize pieces of the collection. Finally, to really champion the collection, the collector must carefully label and document the objects in his collection.

A collection that grows "larger than life," however, may cause the collector the dilemma of how to "house" the collection that has outgrown its display area. In some cases collectors add rooms to their homes:

\begin{quote}
Sometimes it seems that collectors are more interested in housing The Collection than the family. People will move to find the right space for The Collection; they will enlarge the house by three feet if necessary for The Collection; and they will sacrifice a closet to make room for The Collection.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The passion for collecting and living with the collection burns very strong in many collectors. Walter Benjamin defines

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 253.

\textsuperscript{30} William Ketchum, \textit{A Treasury of American Bottles} (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 19.

\textsuperscript{31} Kron, 208.
collecting as "an art of living intimately with objects," and believes the objects themselves don’t "come alive in him [the collector]; it is he who lives in them." 32

Sociologists Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton discuss this power that objects hold over human beings and the role objects play in our lives in their book The Meaning of Things. These two scholars argue that the objects surrounding us, in our homes, are ascribed affective power, and are "charged" with the energy of ourselves. This energy is utilized during the entire process of collecting to the exclusion of other activities, and therefore is valued as a high-priority activity, carrying a great deal of meaning in the collector’s life.

Part of the person’s life (conservation of energy) has been transferred to the focal object [the collection] – part of his or her ability to experience the world, to process information, and to pursue goals has been channeled into the task to the exclusion of other possibilities. However, this lost invested energy can turn into gain if as a result of the investment the agent achieves a goal he or she has set for his or herself [thereby providing positive feedback which strengthens self and allows it to grow]. 33

The objects chosen to place in the home are carefully selected by individuals to attend to regularly and to have close at hand. These special objects create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and therefore are heavily involved


in making up the person's identity. If the objects in the home are considered "art," or "art-like," they reinforce an individual's feelings of excellence, superiority and belief in his own good taste. Feelings of personal achievement grow as does the perceived status of the self when surrounded by powerful objects that command respect and the envy of others.

Interplay with other collectors is seen as important by Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton. To possess objects in one's home is to want others to know they are possessed. The sociologists use Durkheim's concept of "collective effervescence" to discuss the importance of sharing common activities with other people. They call collectivity ritualistic and exhilarating. Belonging to a group, or a whole greater than the self, is a necessary experience. A reference group with shared rituals is required to maintain boundaries between "us" and "them," and also to make status comparisons with other owners of objects.

Rituals performed by individuals and groups are repetitive patterns of behavior and thought that serve a number of purposes. Rituals are "social events which help us to shape our relationship to other people and to our culture as a whole." They allow for social companionship, commemorate a link with the past, and affirm a sense of group

34. Ibid., 17.
35. Ibid., 18.
36. Geist and Nachbar, The Popular Culture Reader, 263.
solidarity. The enactment of ritual is a communal celebration of valued group ideas and myths. Rituals professionalize the groups’ activities and the transmission of knowledge, and foster group cohesiveness and development. The familiarity of rituals provides structure, control, and comfort to the chaotic pace of twentieth-century life. Individual Avon collectors, and especially Avon collecting clubs have extensive rituals that accompany their entire "process" of collecting.

Another characteristic then, of the late twentieth century persona, is illustrated by people’s relationships with their collectibles and the rituals surrounding the process of collecting. A collector can attach such great meaning to things and invest so much of the self in the inanimate, that he or she can begin to believe the objects possessed substitute for who they are. This is a classic example of a materialistic superficial society, so often the "monster" collectors are trying to battle through the activity of collecting. Ironies are seen over and over again in the study of mass produced collectibles; the feelings of nostalgia they evoke, the modern materials they are made of, and the processes necessary to produce and distribute them.
CHAPTER THREE

In these last two chapters, the reader will become acquainted with various Avon collectors whose lives illustrate the important role collectibles can play in filling aesthetic and human needs. The examples in the following chapters exemplify how popular culture can be elevated to "art," and how the lives of middlebrow collectors are made whole and satisfying through its collection. This chapter tells the story of a single collector and his collection, and chapter four introduces individual collectors within a group context, the collecting club.

Avon collector O.R. Nicholas was discovered through the July 1990 Outlook newsletter published by the Avon Corporation (figure 1). Nicholas was pictured, along with other collectors, in an article devoted to Avon collectibles. The article said the following about Nicholas:

'People call me 'Mr. Avon' and say that I'm the oldest collector, with the largest and the most beautifully displayed collection.' The 82 year old Nicholas was perched on a stool showing photos of his Clifton Forge, Virginia, home to anyone who happened by at the 19th annual convention of the National Association of Avon Collectors, held June 18-24 [1990] in Canton, Ohio. The photos chronicle every nook and cranny of a home bursting with more than 14,000 Avon products, sales awards, promotional items and mementos -- a collection "Nick" says is far from complete, although he's been at it since 1972 and has invested $100,000.'

Needless to say, these bits of information about Nicholas' collection were intriguing, because of Clifton Forge's

proximity to Washington and Nicholas' obvious love of Avon bottles and pride in their display. A letter was immediately written and sent to Mr. Nicholas in January of 1991 expressing interest in his collection, and asking him if a visit to Clifton Forge and viewing of his collection would be possible. His response to the correspondence was enthusiastic, and said a visit to his collection was a must. Unfortunately the tour would have to be conducted under the guidance of his son Norman, who takes care of his home while he and his wife Cynthia spend the winter at a trailer park in Winterpark, Florida. The two of them wouldn't be back in Virginia until mid-April. A second letter was sent to O.R. thanking him, and a telephone call made to Norman Nicholas to set up a date and time for a visit to Clifton Forge and "the collection."

Norman was very friendly, but seemed surprised by a graduate student's interest in his father's collection. Apparently few people take his father's Avon collecting seriously, or visit the Nicholas' Avon Museum. Norman agreed to meet at his father's home located at 941 Ingles Street in Clifton Forge, on Thursday, March 14, 1991. An automobile was rented, as it was possible a 1974 VW Bus would not survive the trip to the mountainous southwest corner of the state. Camera and tape recorder in hand, the route taken from Washington was southwest to highways 66 West, 81 South and then 64 West; in total it was only a 4 1/2 hour trip from D.C. to Clifton Forge, but light years away.
The first two-day fieldwork experience consisted of a general viewing of the collection; an interview with Norman about his father's relationship with Avon; an interview with Norman's son-in-law Dave VanAsperen about "Granddaddy" and "Dad" and his generational and emotional ties with the Avon collection; and a trip to Happy's Flea Market in Roanoke, 45-minutes from Clifton Forge, where Norman and Dave rent an "Avon Booth." A second trip to Clifton Forge involved extensively describing into a tape recorder the contents, size, and organization of O.R. Nicholas' collection, and also photographing the collection. From interviews with Norman and his son-in-law/partner Dave, a great deal was learned about O.R.'s interest in Avon, and why he has devoted so much of his life to his collection. From the collection itself, much of O.R.'s life was able to be decoded and the values and ideas about the world that are important to him were able to be "read."

The interview with Norman focused on his father, O.R. Nicholas. Questions were asked about O.R.'s personality, why Norman thought Avon was important to his father and why he collected it, and what he thinks the collection reveals to others about his father. Norman sat back and began to tell a long story about his father -- his work ethic, his personality, and his relationship with Avon bottles were among the topics discussed.

Norman feels it takes a unique personality type to become
a collector. He (Norman) does not have this personality, nor can he always understand it. His father, he says, is an introvert who has few friends; in a sense, his collectibles are his best friends. O.R.'s collection allows him to express himself, and since there are thousands of ways to differently display the collection, he discovers something new about his objects and how they fit together every day. In addition, caring for the collection takes up a great deal of O.R.'s time; now that he is retired he needs something to fill his hours. Norman estimates that three-fourths of his father's life is spent in personal involvement with the collection: organizing, pricing, documenting, and displaying the objects. The relationship O.R. has with his objects, then, allows him to feel more comfortable with himself, takes up time in a lonely life, and provides an opportunity for him to learn. The large body of knowledge and information O.R. has amassed about his hobby and his collection allow him an expertise which he can share with others, and a way to work around his shyness. This seems to confirm the needs cited by gerontologist Joan May Moran that the elderly have to be creative and to gain status and power through self-expression and expertise at a hobby.²

The question of "why Avon?" elicited specific responses from Norman about his father's attraction to objects, and to Avon bottles in particular. Collecting allows a closeness to

². Moran, 62.
objects which is very satisfying to his father. Living in an imperfect world as we do, objects allow O.R. to experience perfection. A flawless object feels complete and beautiful. In addition, these "perfect" objects are very detailed, and "must have cost the Company a lot of money to produce." Aside from the goal of acquiring perfect objects, O.R. also has the goal of introducing others to Avon bottles and teaching them to appreciate them. O.R. thrives on the appreciation by others of his collection; in part, his display is arranged for them -- the visitors to his museum and the guests in his home. He wants his love of Avon bottles to ignite and spread in others.

Another major reason for O.R.'s attachment to his Avon collection is the gradual, yet debilitating, Alzheimer's illness that afflicts his wife Cynthia. As she loses her capabilities, O.R. needs his collection more and more and devotes increasing time to it. Her illness, in fact, is the reason the couple spend their winters in Florida. Since the bulk of the collection is housed in Clifton Forge, this requires O.R. to spend nearly five months out of the year away from his beloved collection. What he has done, naturally, is to move part of his collection to Florida, so he can enjoy it and "play" with it. He has even bought two china cabinets in Florida so he is able to display a small portion of his collection and give others in his retirement community an idea of what he has spent his retired years doing. Displaying the
collection is O.R.'s way of letting those around him know how important the objects are to him, and they are also a great means of conversation. While leaving his collection in Clifton Forge behind during the winter months is difficult, upon his return in April, O.R. is rejuvenated and thrilled to begin to care for his adored Avon bottles once again. The process of cleaning, reorganizing, re-shelving, and relabeling the collection takes months, and completely fills O.R.'s time -- a physical reality while in Virginia, and a mental preoccupation while in Florida.

Unfortunately, in addition to the emotional ties to his collection, O.R. also has a lot of money tied up in the collection. A victim of a false "market" pricing system established by Bud Hastin in The Avon Bottle Collector's Encyclopedia, O.R. has spent over $100,000 on bottles that today aren't "worth" what he paid for them. He is a victim of what Stephen Hughes called "an uncertain and self-referential collector's market," cited in chapter two. The financial loss makes him very sad, but does not disappoint him as much as people not appreciating and visiting his museum. For O.R.'s collection to have been worth the investment and the energy, he feels it must be seen, and be left in someone's care who will sustain it and treat it as he has done. The poor investment and lost money do not concern O.R.; he only desires to pass the collection on to a family member or other collector who will care for it deeply.
O.R. was raised in a poor home, however, so he does know the value of money and would not knowingly "throw" it away. His family was very conservative, and they found a use for everything they could get their hands on. O.R. didn't have many toys, so he learned to be creative and to keep himself entertained. He did this by using objects he had access to, learning to tell stories about them, and using his imagination to display them and think about what they represented. O.R. has always animated "things" and brought them to life.

O.R. was also a very hard worker, and his work ethic has impacted upon his collecting habits. While working, his job was the most important thing to him; he had a great deal of ambition and took pride in what he accomplished. Now O.R.'s collection is a new manifestation of his work ethic. The collection is something tangible that people can see and enjoy; a physical representation of his years of hard work as a collector. O.R. wants others to be able to enjoy what he's so proud of. He gets very disappointed that more people haven't visited his museum -- even if it's only out of curiosity. O.R. feels that the lack of interest in his museum is just another symptom of our poor educational system, and of a limited commitment to hard work. He feels his collection is worthwhile, important, and valuable, and that it should be seen. Unfortunately, he feels, the schools no longer teach or reward students for curiosity, creativity, or imagination.

Norman Nicholas' son-in-law, Dave VanAsperen, seems to
have inherited his "granddaddy's" love for, and "obsession" with, Avon bottle collecting. Interviews with VanAsperen took place on two separate occasions, and were a bit more detailed than Norman's in respect to the Avon bottles and O.R.'s collection. Visits with Dave took place at Happy's Flea Market in Roanoke on March 15, 1991, and at O.R.'s home in Clifton Forge on April 23, 1991. Dave loves to talk about "Granddaddy's" collection, and is quite proud of O.R.'s achievements as a collector. Dave, too, describes himself as an introvert who is extremely uncomfortable around other people. It is only through Avon collecting and selling that he manages to communicate with others and "get by": "I've wrapped my world up into it." He lives through the collection in much the same manner that O.R. does, but has added a dimension to collecting through his selling of Avon products as an "Avon Man."

Dave and his father-in-law Norman Nicholas rent a booth at Happy's Flea Market (figure 2). They began their business at Happy's in the summer of 1989, and it has grown by "leaps and bounds" since. As Norm puts it, he's retired, and is "really more interested in the business side of Avon, and could give two-hoots about the collection." Dave, on the other hand, combines an interest in business and a passion for collecting in his involvement with Avon. A part of their business consists of "running down" bottles for collectors who have been unable to find certain items; the other side of the
business is operating an Avon "store." Dave orders Avon products in bulk from the Company, and then is able to sell them at lower prices than other Avon Representatives in the Roanoke area. These "Reps" do not receive reduced prices because they order in much smaller quantities than Dave, and he has actually put several representatives out of business with his competitive prices.

Dave's booth at Happy's Flea Market is stylishly arranged with half of the area devoted to the display of Avon collectibles and the other half reserved for products. Dave has carefully placed signs throughout the huge Flea Market complex to lure potential buyers to his booth, #21B. Dave has also printed business cards, of which he has distributed approximately 3,000. His truck is a moving advertisement as well, with a reproduction of his business card painted on both sides and a "2 Buy or Sell" message on the back end. Dave actually repainted his truck after the first visit (figure 3). Some photographs of his truck (and his Avon license plate holder) were taken in March, and on the return trip in April, he said "to rip up those old photos and take some new ones -- I painted my truck over!" Dave was a very pleasant man to spend time with, and it was clear that his main goal in both business and life is to please his customers and help others enjoy Avon products and collectibles as he does.

The questions Dave answered at Happy's focused on the establishment of O.R.'s collection and museum, and the meaning
of the collection and museum to himself and to O.R. Dave is quite knowledgeable about Avon bottles and products, and has also devoted his life, although at a much younger age, to Avon. Dave, too, worked for the railroad as an electrician for a few years, but was injured during his military service in Vietnam in the 1970s and has been on disability ever since. He feels lucky to have free time to spend with O.R.'s collection, and also to sell Avon. He fills what would otherwise be lonely days with an activity that he greatly enjoys.

Dave serves as O.R.'s "right-hand man," and has taken the responsibility of caring for the collection in O.R.'s winter absence. Dave is as meticulous in his treatment of the Avon objects as his "graddad" (Dave refers to Norman as "Dad" and O.R. as "Graddad"). He and O.R. have obviously shared many stories about Avon; much of their lore about the early Avon Company, certain Avon objects, and incidents that have occurred in Avon "collecting history" is similar and equally mythical. Similar, too, is their passion for the collection. If Dave's memory is accurate, the following excerpt from the transcripts of interviews will give a brief history of the collection and museum, and O.R.'s and Dave's feelings about the museum.

When was the Avon collection started and why?

Well, about 1972, O.R. saw a few pieces he liked, so he picked them up...but a few pieces to him could be 500. He liked the Company and their products, and the pieces sort of just caught his
eye. He started collecting more or less as a hobby; he really got to picking up more pieces as time went by, and the next thing you knew, the house was packed. Avon just got into his blood and it stayed there -- he's been collecting it for close to 20 years.

**How did O.R. decide to turn his home into a museum?**

After the house was full, he moved his collection to a small shed next to the trailer park. Well it wasn't but about a year before that building was completely full when he decided in 1978 to build a cinder block museum. Since he was a pipe fitter for the railroad, he could do it all, so he built the museum himself. While he's been retired, he's gotten more into wood, and he made a lot of the display cases himself. His chess board is one of his proudest pieces; in fact I think it's one of the prettiest pieces in the collection. Anyway, he sold the trailer park in 1985, and found a house big enough to hold the collection. But it wasn't quite big enough once the collection really began to grow. Originally he used only half the basement for Avon...but then the upstairs kept getting fuller and fuller and fuller, 'til he decided to turn the whole thing into a museum. He decided he would make different areas for different things...made the dining room basically into the plate collection; the front porch is made into an awards section; the living room is the steins, collectibles, Albees, and small animals; and then downstairs the front half is the product line and the back half plates; and the very back are the soaps and dishes. He had to build on to the house because the collection got so big -- a porch out front, the room in back, and a finished garage.

**How many people know about the collection?**

A lot of people know about it, but they don't know where he lives. Less than 5% of the 4,500 people in Clifton Forge have been through the collection, if that many. He hasn't done any advertising, per say, but that's the way he wants it. It takes advertising to attract visitors, but he didn't want that and I respect that. The Chamber of Commerce has never backed it or advertised it either. You know they got the C & O Historical Society now and the Allegheny Arts and Crafts Center downtown, but they never say anything about what's up here, a 1/2-mile from the center of town. The old mayor
tried to, she did, support the museum; she’d let people know about it at meetings out of town. Nobody has anything against the museum, but what it boils down to is that it’s kind of like Natural Bridge [a natural formation/park/historical site] -- you live in Natural Bridge, you’ve probably never been to see Natural Bridge. The same is true with a place like Niagara Falls...you might have something great in your back yard and you’ve never been there. I’ve never been to the Historical Society. I know where it is, and the same thing with the Arts Center down there -- I haven’t had any desire to go down there, and I guess it’s the same way with the collection for other folks.

Do people from out of town visit the museum?

There’s been a lot of major people who have been here and seen the collection [243 have signed including all the NAAC officers and board members who have seen the collection during the years 1978-1990]. Many have taken pictures of individual pieces for themselves, and Bud Hastin, the editor of Avon Bottle Collector’s Encyclopedia, has photos of the collection in his 1983 book. He’s got, and he’s been told by Hastin and Bill Armstrong, the NAAC President, that supposedly he has the largest collection of Avon in the world, which, you know, is a lot of Avon. Out of over 17 or 18,000 pieces ever produced, his collection being over 14,000 pieces puts him right up there. Anyway, when we answer requests from our advertisements in Avon Times or Western World, we write our customers back and say by the way we have a collection here in Clifton Forge and we put one of our cards in to let people know we have a collection. A lot of times customers would just call us up on the phone and say ‘Well we’re here in town, where’s the collection?’ It’s just one of those out of the blue kind of things, and they’ve come from all over the country, in fact, from all over the world -- we’ve even had ’em from England and Canada.

So does O.R. feel like enough people visit his museum?

No, actually it makes him really sad that more people don’t come. Yeah, yeah, yeah, he enjoys talking to folks, and he enjoys showing the collection. Most of the people who come are collectors themselves or are interested in becoming collectors, and so they’re in the same field that
he is in. He can show them some of the things, alot of things, that have never been seen by anyone
else, because he's got things in his collection
that nobody else has. He gets representatives that
will send him things from other states and other
countries. The prices are so much different and
higher, and the products are different too. It
doubles the things to collect, and makes Avon all
the more interesting. He's even set up a section in
the museum for his foreign Avon. Anyway, when
you've got such interesting pieces and products,
it's sad that others can't see them too.

From the above discussions with Norman Nicholas and Dave
VanAsperen, a great deal can be interpreted about O.R.'s life
and the role his collection plays in it. Contributing factors
to O.R.'s decision to collect Avon bottles were revealed
through the interviews. These factors include a love of
Avon's beautiful bottles and products, appreciation of the
work ethic and "rags to riches" story of the Company's
founder, and most importantly O.R.'s need to fill his lonely
days with meaning and activity and to feel a sense of self-
esteem. These two sources disclosed that O.R. feels a sense
of comfort and aesthetic appreciation from the mass-produced
Avon bottles he has collected for over twenty years. O.R.'s
collection is his best friend -- the material objects serve as
a creative world of possibilities. In his collection things
fit together according to his rules and understanding of the
world. Nicholas feels powerful when selecting and obtaining
objects that he deems "worthy" of inclusion into his
collection, and also when he determines how they will be
displayed. Nearly every aesthetic and human need mentioned in
chapter two is met for O.R. through his collecting of Avon bottles.
Interviews with Norman and Dave that recount the partial history of the collection and O.R.'s feelings toward Avon objects are important, but equally important is the analysis of the actual objects that make up the collection. In order to discuss the degree to which O.R. Nicholas has ordered his life around his Avon collection, it is necessary to describe his collection, room by room, to understand the sheer quantities of objects he has collected, as well as to understand his method of organizing and prioritizing his collection.

The significance of the detailed documentation of Nicholas' collection that follows is its power to reveal the personal and cultural codes that order O.R.'s life. O.R.'s sense of order, space, organization, flow, and ideas about what constitutes a museum are understood from the following description, as is the process of his painstaking designation of every square inch of his home to best house the collection. It is unlikely that the reader will have an opportunity to visit the soon-to-be defunct "Avon Museum." This description serves as the reader's senses, and the exact measurements and dimensions of the rooms, cabinets, and shelves allow the reader to gain a visual understanding of the museum without actually having viewed it.

It is important to remember that O.R.'s life revolves around his collection. The ample free time he has is spent economizing and maximizing his space to most beautifully and
efficiently display his objects. O.R. places so much emphasis on the space needed to properly arrange his collection, in fact, that he has moved himself out of his home so all the objects fit. In a sense, O.R. values his objects more than he does himself. He has created secondary living space for himself through architectural adaptations to his home. These include two new areas -- a narrow room off the back of the kitchen (figure 7), and a finished garage in which O.R. sleeps, watches television, and reads about Avon when not interacting with the collection itself.

"Proper" spatial configuration and exact measurements represent O.R.'s conceptions of a well ordered life. He has cleverly selected plywood as the material with which to best divide the space in his home. Plywood is inexpensive and sold in 4' by 8' sheets which can be easily divided into display cabinets and shelves. Plywood can be seen, in fact, as the most appropriate material on which to display Avon collectibles: mass-produced material, mass-produced into cabinets and shelving, made to display mass-produced art. The ability to mass-produce simple display forms from sheets of plywood is also beneficial because of the nature of O.R.'s collection. He buys entire collections at a single time, and thus his own collection often grows by hundreds or thousands of pieces at a time. Nicholas needs to be able to quickly build the machinery to house these precious new items, and he can do that with plywood.
Although there is no simple way to portray one man's home to another person, a slow walk through O.R.'s museum with a tape recorder in hand may allow some insight and comprehension. O.R. Nicholas moved into his current ranch house in 1985, after a tornado and flood destroyed the trailer home and park he owned in Clifton Forge. Nicholas purchased the trailer park that sits on the edge of town after he retired from the C & O Railroad in 1972. During his tenure as owner, O.R. began collecting Avon bottles and other memorabilia at garage sales and flea markets. As his collection grew, O.R.'s desire to share his collection with others led to his building an Avon Museum on the trailer park property. The building was built with cinder blocks and was covered with red wooden outdoor paneling. The left side of the building's front announced O.R.'s "AVON MUSEUM" (figure 4). O.R. spent hours and hours of his retirement time building display cases and shelves for his museum. He had a group of four women who helped him ready his museum for the public, and also to serve as docents for visitors. The Avon Museum opened in the fall of 1978. Unfortunately it was destroyed only 7 years after its opening. This discouraged O.R., but his vision of maintaining an Avon museum only encouraged him to shop for a house that would be suitable to display his collection.

O.R. and his wife Cynthia found and purchased a ranch house located at 941 Ingles Street in Clifton Forge, and with
it realized their concept of home as museum and museum as home. The house has a single story with a full basement, but has been altered by O.R., with the help of his son Norman and grandson-in-law Dave, to better suit his Avon collection. Architectural adaptations include the addition of a fairly large front porch to house the "better" pieces of O.R.'s collection and the addition of a "living room" built onto the back of the kitchen.

A tour of O.R.'s home, and thus museum, begins with the front entry porch (figure 5). Before entering the Nicholas home, the visitor is confronted with the first of the multitude of Avon pieces he or she will see. The door bell on O.R.'s front door is an "Avon Calling" two-tone ("ding dong, Avon Calling") bell won by a representative at the 1979 Avon President's Celebration. Inside the front door, the porch is home to many of O.R.'s favorite and more prized Avon collectibles, all enclosed in glass cases. Moving in a clockwise direction upon entering the Nicholas home, the first group of Avon objects displayed is a vertically hung collection of Mrs. Albee plates dated 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1991. These plates depict four different poses of Albee, the first "Avon lady," in light blue, yellow, rust, and maroon color schemes. Located next to the plates is a television cabinet placed diagonally across the southwest corner of the porch. The television sits on top of the display area of the cabinet, which is 2'8" by 2'6". Items are displayed at
random, it seems, and include an Avon house in a bottle, Avon bunny rabbit statues, a "crystal" (plastic) Christmas tree, several acrylic President’s club engraved awards for sales achievement, four Circle of Excellence wine glasses with embossed logos, paper cocktail fans from the 1979 Circle of Excellence annual awards banquet, and Sales Manager badges from 1979 to 1985 regional meetings.

On the west wall of the entry porch are two stacked display cases. The top case measures 1'10" by 10" and contains O.R.’s eight-piece gun collection joined by four plastic bullet shells that once contained cologne. These guns are blue, green, and brown glass reproductions of antique weapons and contain cologne. The bottom case is 2'1 1/2" by 4'1", and has four shelves stocked with a variety of objects. Some of these items include a group of miniature Avon Christmas plates, a nativity scene, an Avon bracelet in a box, and two shelves of Avon childrens’ items -- a Garfield comb and brush set, lip glosses, perfume cachets, and an Avon telephone.

The premiere showcases of O.R.’s collection face each other on opposite sides of the hallway leading into the main body of the house. Both cases are 4’ by 8’, a measurement frequently found in O.R.'s museum design concept. Again, these dimensions are significant because they are the standard size of a piece of plywood from the lumber store in Clifton Forge. O.R. has taken the most simple unit -- and used it to
order his museum. In the case hung on the west hallway are
jewelry and medals, mainly donated to Nicholas by Avon
collectors or representatives from whom he solicited objects.
Pieces include watches, rings, necklaces, broaches, pins,
medals, and pen and pencil sets. There are over three hundred
items in this case, and most are carefully hand-labeled;
proper credit is given to the representatives who contributed
each item. Other labelling information includes dates of
production, acquisition date, and, if an award or memento from
a particular meeting, the date and place of the meeting.

Opposite the jewelry case, on the east side of the
hallway, is another 4' by 8' showcase that displays other
prized Avon objects, categorized by O.R. as "fine quality
household objects" given as awards to representatives. Many of
these objects are similar to gifts found in a catalogue
showroom: cheaply boxed and manufactured in Taiwan. Included
in this sub-collection are an Avon radio, telephone, and
camera; a 1977 glass coffee canister; silver plated spoons;
perfume atomizers; clocks; Avon yo-yos and Avon mugs; and
plastic Avon picture frames. Nicholas has placed pictures of
several Avon representatives who are his friends in these
frames, as well as pictures of his favorite collectibles.

Along the north wall of the entry porch hang three
"limited editions" of the Avon Bottle Collector's Encyclopedia
from the years 1979, 1981 and 1983. These books are guides
for collectors, and provide price and identification
information for over 14,000 Avon collectibles. O.R. is especially proud of the 1979 Encyclopedia, in which color photographs of his collection are featured. The publisher of the encyclopedia, Bud Hastin, visited O.R.'s museum to personally photograph the collection. This public acknowledgement of his collection was definitely a highlight in O.R.'s life as a collector, for Bud Hastin is quite a celebrity among Avon collectors, and the Encyclopedias are widely read by Avon collectors.

On the east wall of the entry porch there are three display cases. In two stacked 2' by 4' cabinets with two shelves each are four Avon nativity scenes. The sets of figurines are displayed in order of their size; a miniature manger scene is on the top shelf with progressively larger figurines on the bottom three shelves. Each nativity scene contains sixteen pieces. A 1'9" by 2'7" corner cabinet stands next to the stacked shelves. This cabinet holds thirty Representative Achievement Awards. These awards are silver-plated coins encased in 2" by 3" blue acrylic display stands.

Moving through the entry porch hallway, the museum visitor turns left into the Nicholas family room which is filled with five large display cases, and a single display shelf (figure 6). The southeastern case measures 4' by 8' and is 1'3" deep. O.R. has labeled this case the "small animal and figurine case," and on its eleven shelves are an assortment of stuffed and ceramic animals. These animals
include pheasants, quail, eagles, owls, birds, horses, reindeer, foxes, sheep, bear, deer, rabbits, teddy bears, and dogs. These animals are labeled with hand-written tags identifying their Avon item name, and the date, or campaign, in which the objects were sold. On the bottom two shelves of the small animal case is O.R.'s duck collection. This series includes six full-size Avon duck decoys filled with men's cologne, and twelve miniature decoys. They are all arranged around, and garnished by, miniature green shrubbery.

The center of the grand display on the western wall of the living room is O.R.'s photograph of the United States Capitol which he was given upon retirement from the Railroad. This photograph is important not only as a milestone marker in O.R.'s life, but because of its thematic significance to the groups of objects that surround it. Objects that complement the essence of the "life on the railroad" photograph include those with masculine messages that are found in Avon catalogs under the "Men's Decanters, Ceramics and Figures" headings. These male gender objects include transportation bottles like cars, trucks, boats, and train cars, a collection of beer steins and mugs, and the aforementioned hunting and fishing group of ducks, pheasants, fish, and other game, as well as boots, guns, and ammunition "shells." Finally, a sportsman's collection of assorted gaming devices like bowling balls and pins, tennis cans of cologne, football, baseball, and basketball bottle variations, chess pieces and tool sets of
cologne depict the rugged athleticism O.R. associates with being male.

To the left of the photograph is another 4' by 8' display case that contains four shelves of steins and mugs. There are twenty large steins that measure one foot high each, and eight smaller steins. The bottom three shelves are devoted to other glassware: tankards, coffee mugs, travel mugs, vases and cookie jars. Some of these have the name "Avon" printed on them; others are decorated with scenes of children or small animals, and have Avon labels identifying them on the bottom.

To the right of the photograph is a mirror 4' by 8' display case that contains O.R.'s transportation collection and gentleman's shaving kits. Items in the transportation group include a fire engine, 22 cars, a train set, a cement mixer, and a bus. Other shelves house glass and "brass" (plastic) bells, cookie jars and ceramic canisters, jewelry boxes, glass eggs with flora and fauna decorating them, and odds and ends -- a clock, a Statue of Liberty decanter, Avon mirrors, and a silver-plated bowl.

The next display area in the family room is located in one of the only cases not made by Nicholas. The antique case, an undulating cherry wood cabinet, is 3'6" wide, 1'5" deep, and 4'2" tall. The case holds Fostoria glass, one of Avon's more "expensive" lines, which is milky white in color and decorated with a coin motif. Included in O.R.'s collection are candy dishes, a cake plate, two whiskey decanters, and
eight glasses. On the top shelf of the case sits the "It's a Small World" collection of international plastic dolls that contain perfumed bubble bath.

Moving out of the family room and back into the hallway, the museum goer faces a large 4' by 8' by 2 1/2' deep display case that contains many different varieties of dolls. The most valuable of these dolls are the porcelain Mrs. P.F. Albee collection. The bottom floor of the case is devoted to Albees, and O.R. has every one ever distributed. These dolls are precious to O.R. because they are awarded only to President's Club members (those who sell a certain amount of product), and are somewhat "rare." Nicholas has 32 porcelain Albees, and 14 gold and silver award Albees (these are the equivalent of an Oscar for Avon Representatives, although they are merely painted glass). There are five shelves on either side of the case, and these hold an assortment of other dolls. Some of them include: current collectible porcelain figurines -- Rhett and Scarlett, John Wayne, Fred and Ginger, and Elvis; International Dolls dressed in their native costumes from Ireland, Nigeria, Scotland, and France; and various sentimental children and female figurines -- figures decorating Christmas trees, giving gifts, holding pets, and playing baseball. This case holds a premier spot in Nicholas' house, and the dolls within it are highly valued by O.R.

Walking through the remainder of the hallway, the museum visitor enters the dining room/kitchen area of the Nicholas'
home (figure 7). The dining room is designated the "plate room," but also contains four cabinets that display an assortment of kitchen and related household items. The 65 or more plates are hung along all the walls in this room, but are primarily located above and around the buffet on the south wall. The plates are neatly arranged in six rows of plates, with different series and years grouped together. The contents in the four cabinets (two 4' by 8' cabinets stacked on top of two 3' by 8' cabinets) include tarnished silver-plated campaign awards, and three silver-plated tea sets. Other objects are wicker items distributed by Avon but not specifically marked as such: napkin holders, bread baskets, plant holders, paper plate holders, and stationary boxes.

Through the kitchen is the staircase that leads to the basement where the bulk of O.R.'s collection is displayed. The visual shock the basement induces is hard to describe, but as Dave put it, "you ain't seen nothin' yet!" Upon entrance into the basement, the museum-goer is bombarded with Avon objects and memorabilia. The objects are so numerous, varied and eclectic, that the collection is really too vast to try to list and discuss. The best attempt follows -- the map is labeled accordingly.

On the trip down the stairs, framed advertisements, Avon pins and buttons displayed on squares of felt, Avon scarves, and Avon product display boards flank the walls. Hanging from the ceiling at the bottom of the staircase is a banner from
the 1974 Avon President's Celebration, and an Avon floormat is strategically placed at the bottom of the steps. To the right of the staircase is a 1'5" by 5' case that holds ribbons, buttons, and pins with an "Avon Smile" theme. Around the corner and to the right, the visitor begins what will be a solid Avon-lined trip around the perimeter of the entire basement (figure 8).

The first case measures 2'7" by 5', and is labeled the transportation cabinet. Here O.R. has displayed all transportation objects ever made by Avon -- the transportation objects upstairs have special meaning to him, some were gifts, others rarities, others reminiscent of his railroad days. Members of this group displayed on ten shelves include boats, airplanes, fire hydrants and fire engines, train cars, and campers.

The second in a series of 2'7" by 5' cases consists of eight shelves reserved for perfume sets in boxes and Avon demo products. O.R. places high value on these, as they symbolize the "early days" when Avon Ladies used to make home visits with their products in tow. The third case in the series complements the women's grouping next to it. It has seven shelves which are devoted to men's gift sets. These sets are comprised of cologne and a razor, cologne and a tie, cologne and cuff links, cologne and poker chips, and soap with a deck of cards. The fourth case returns to women's products. Its seven shelves host more perfume samples, boxed perfume sets,
and a vanity set. Turning the first corner of the museum, the tired museum-goer might be tempted to stop and rest in the Avon Director's chair he or she faces. The words on the back of the red chair read "Avon Proudly Presents ..." On the seat of the chair lies a pillow that commemorates the opening of O.R.'s museum on October 13-15, 1978. His four museum docents made the pillow for O.R. in his honor.

Around the corner, the final case in the 2'7" by 5' series contains eight more shelves of perfume sets and powder puffs. Hanging above this case is a framed portrait and letter from Ronald Reagan. The President was helping Avon celebrate its Centennial Celebration in 1986, and sent every Representative a copy of the photograph and letter. Along the same wall are eight long shelves that measure 7'5" by 4'8". These shelves hold entire lines of various product groups, including those dating 1948, 1951, 1963, 1972, 1975, and 1978. Some of the lines' names are: Quaintance, The Frivoly, Flower Talk, Forever Spring, Tempo, Unspoken, and Lilley of the Valley. Also on these shelves sit a full line of Avon Room Freshener sprays -- Evergreen, Swiss Snowdrops, Scottish Heather, French Lavendary, Bayberry, Caribbean Ocean Orchid, Oriental Iris, and Dutch Tulip. The exotic names, however botched, of the Avon lines appeal to O.R. He is fascinated by "different places," and although he's never had an opportunity to go abroad, Avon takes him to these "different places" through their product names and images.
Rounding the corner (figure 8-a), the next display is a 4' wide by 3' deep triangular corner cabinet. Located here are nine shelves of lipsticks and nail polishes from various years' campaigns. Also included in this group are manicure sets, powders, and compacts. Along the next wall (figure 8-b) measuring 12'5" long are several shelves of varying heights. Located in this section are older product lines that are carefully labeled and meticulously arranged. Some of the labels are typed and some are handwritten, but both announce lines like 1935 Topaz, 1947 Swan Lake, 1948 Golden Promise, 1968 Silken Honey, and 1969 Lemon Velvet.

At the corner of that wall is another corner display with the same dimensions as the last. This display also has ten shelves, but contains "finer," top-of-the-line products. These items are a bit higher priced in the Avon campaign books, and are therefore "worth more" in O.R.'s collection. These "better" bottles include those in the 1960s Unforgettable line. Unforgettable's coral-colored bottles are "really elaborate and Grecian-looking," and are among O.R.'s favorites. Incidentally, to accent both of the corner displays just described, O.R. has built the shelving so those that border the corners stagger to enhance the targeted corner displays.

Moving back into the interior of the room just circumscribed, there are two very important displays that attract a great deal of attention in the museum. One is a
four-sided display case with a pediment on top, that measures 5'2" tall by 3'2" wide by 1'8" deep (figure 9). Its four sides contain, under glass, the following: five rows of children's animal puppets; Christmas ornaments, holiday perfumes, and children's lip glosses; stuffed dolls; and Avon note pads, bow ties, ribbons, kids' books, and cards. Perhaps the showpiece of the collection, O.R. is most proud of his chess board. The chess board is 2'6" square with spindle legs, and is hand-crafted from oak and walnut woods. Sitting on the chess board are a complete set of Avon chess pieces, filled with men's cologne.

Returning to the perimeter of the basement, the next area of display is devoted to men's products (figure 8-c). On glass shelves measuring 4' by 5' sit groups of cologne and talcs, labeled according to their line and year. Next to those are a group of 2'9" by 5' shelves upon which sit various men's products -- after shaves, talcs, shaving cream and shaving kits. In the next three 2'1" wide by 4' tall by 1' deep cases, sitting side by side, are more men's items. Bottles of aftershave, carefully labeled according to date and line, consume seven shelves in the first case. Bottles of glass "books" (cologne bottles designed to look like a bound set of leather books) sit on the top shelf of case two, while ten imitation wood hairbrushes, and an athletic collection of six football helmets, a pair of old football cleats, and four baseball mitts (all cologne bottles) complete the case. In
case three are housed eight shelves of assorted bottles. On one shelf sit two log cabin bottles and an old school chair with an apple as lid; the other seven shelves hold tennis balls, rolls of money, and Taurus and Capricorn perfume decanters.

The next section of the perimeter consists of a 2'1" wide by 4'6" tall cabinet that borders the door to the back room of the museum (figure 8-d). This houses a pair of Avon brand women's slippers, boxed sets of bath beads, boxed stationary, and a collection of bottles manufactured by the National Association of Avon Collectors that depict "Avon Ladies through the Years." Located above this cabinet and the three previous cases are three shelves measuring 9' long. They hold a variety of soaps, children's products, talcs, and sprays. They are very neatly displayed, but are not labeled.

Passing by the door to the back room, a 2'1" by 4'6" cabinet sits along the next part of the wall perimeter (figure 8-e). This cabinet contains many older Avon perfume samples, and early products (1940s) like Avon Hairguard and Handguard. O.R. also has a select few California Perfume Company glass bottles and tins, which date from 1900-1929. Some of these CPC objects, which are nearly one hundred years old, actually are valuable to antique collectors who specialize in glass and tin. Above this case and hung over the doorway are seven shelves of various lengths which hold ceramic and metal kitchen canisters, ice buckets, mug sets, Avon makeup bags and

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carrying cases, Avon towels and t-shirts, an Avon jewelry box, and an Avon Wheel-of-Fortune jacket.

As the visitor turns the corner, he finds an Avon clothing collection enclosed in a 5' by 5' glass-door wardrobe case (figure 8-f). Hanging on the rack are kimono-type robes, pajamas, nightgowns, house dresses, and a "Thanks America -- Avon" towel. Standing in front of the wardrobe is a full-size female mannequin decked out in Avon clothing. She sports an Avon nightgown, robe, Avon broach on a necklace, and an Avon cowboy hat from the 1978 National Association of Avon Collectors' Convention. On top of the wardrobe O.R. has created a library of Avon clothing catalogues, campaign books, and magazines containing Avon color advertisements. He also has amassed, and stores here, a collection of videos and filmstrips that have been used by Avon over the years to train their sales representatives.

Along that same wall (figure 8-g) is a series of nine shelves that span the length of the 16' wall and reach 6' high. They are organized in sections of men's products, women's items, and children's soaps, bubble baths, and toys. The men's products are all figural bottles that include: ink wells and quills, Avon bowling pins, cowboy saddles with pseudo ingrained leather (plastic) labels, hitching posts, gavels, barometers, telephones, and fish, bears, rhinos, elephants, and pheasants. The women's items include several jewelry cases filled with Avon costume jewelry, Christmas
ornaments and decorations, powder sets, and "softer," or more feminine, animal bottles like bunny rabbits, deer, and puppies. Children's objects include: banana and carrot-shaped sun tan lotions, a Garfield hairbrush, an ice cream cone perfume dispenser, an Avon lite-brite, a variety of animal-shaped combs, a bubble bath space ship, and a plastic fishing pole with fish.

Continuing along the perimeter and turning the corner, the next wall (figure 8-h) is lined with five cases that measure 2'8" wide by 5' tall by 1'1" deep. The first case contains eight shelves of labeled powder containers. Housed in the second case are lighted ceramic models of villages, ceramic candle holders, and a ceramic gingerbread house. Cases three and four hold more children's items -- mainly toys and bubble bath containers. The last wall of the perimeter meets the stair case, and has one 4' long by 4' case standing against it. Located in this case is one shelf of "Fred and Ginger" plates and music boxes, a shelf of smaller perfume bottles, a shelf of 5th Avenue products, and a shelf of kitchen appliance awards.

Moving back into the interior of this room, three large free-standing, double-sided display shelves complete the first section of the visitor's tour (figure 8-i). The shelves were purchased from a department store, and are uniform in size -- 5'6" tall by 6' long with 10" of display area on either of the seven shelves of the unit. These three units are brimming
with a plethora of vastly different objects, so it is difficult to itemize them, but a few are worth mentioning. These include: various Avon incentive gifts -- a thermal zip-up case and thermos, t-shirts, picture frames, and a camera in an orange juice can; an Avon laundry bag; an Avon license plate holder; an Avon Territory Directory; a thimble collection of eight Avon ladies; stuffed animals; Avon purses, billfolds, and vinyl bags; a vanity mirror with "Avon" in lights; an Avon "I Love Paris" apron; Avon sheets and comforter; an Avon telephone; a plastic penguin pitcher and glasses; an Avon "Sharp Recruiter" pencil sharpener; Avon gym socks and sweat bands; a set of plastic terrarium planters; an Avon Games-on-the-Go activity book; and a framed letter (a mass mailing thank you for a memorial donation) dated September 1, 1944, announcing the death of Avon's founder, Mr. David McConnell.

From the main museum "gallery," the visitor moves through the doorway into a rectangular room that contains several lines of Avon dishes, a wall of soap sets, O.R.'s foreign Avon collection, and assorted glass figurines. On the right wall (figure 10-a), three different sets of dishes are partially displayed on six shelves in three sections measuring 4' by 6'. Only one-half of O.R.'s Cape Cod Collection ("brilliant" red glass) and Currier and Ives dishes are currently in the museum -- the other half is displayed at his trailer home in Florida. The third set of dishes is an "expensive group" of crystal
that only Representatives can buy, and "they don’t get no discount either." Next to the dishes is a display case that is 8’ wide and 6’ tall, with nine shelves. Stored on these shelves is a series of drinking glasses, candy dishes, whiskey decanters, cake platters, tea sets, and etched glass pitchers and glasses.

To the left of the doorway hang old sales books, several dating back to the early California Perfume Company, and original campaign (product catalogues) books. Hidden behind a curtain along this wall is O.R.’s laundry room. It is nearly beyond reach, and access to it must be quite difficult, especially for an older man. As much of the museum tour describes, however, the collection takes precedence over "living" in this home, and O.R. is not likely to place his needs above those of the collection. In other words, he is quite satisfied to inconvenience himself for his "friends," the objects in his collection.

In the center of this room (figure 10-b) sits a four-sided display case of interesting design, another of O.R.’s woodworking creations. It measures 2’3" wide (on each side) by 5’ tall, and has eight areas for display, because each side forms a triangle that juts out from the square case. Displayed in this curio cabinet are many pieces of Avon costume jewelry, including cuff links, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, rings, broaches, and watches. O.R. has cut out pictures of jewelry from the corresponding ads in campaign
books, and displayed his jewelry (the "real" thing) around these pictures. He is quite pleased with this effect, because "while the picture's beautiful, the actual jewelry's a work of art."

On the right hand side, in the very back of this room, stands a 6' wide by 7' tall case that exhibits figural cologne bottles (figure 10-c). These include Presidential busts, Betsy Ross, Tom Sawyer, and Huckleberry Finn figurines, and football player and golfer statues. This case is also home to O.R.'s foreign Avon bottles. He has objects and their boxes from Canada, Mexico, and France, and would really like to expand his collection in this area.

The far back wall of this room is 10'6" wide. It is divided into two sections of 10 shelves. Located along this wall are candles, soaps, and lotions. Next to the back wall, on the left side, is an 8'6" wide case that contains pomanders, children's soaps, Demo cases, and powder puffs. Along the edge of the case hang an Avon "fruits and flowers" 12-spoon collection, as well as ceramic hot pads and a parasol brought back from a Circle of Excellence Managers tour of Japan, and given to O.R. by a friend. The degree of documentation O.R. has implemented into his collection is incredible. The majority of objects and groups are hand-labeled with the names of the object, their date of production and distribution, and their date of acquisition carefully noted.

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If an object is received as a gift, O.R. is especially precise in recognizing its donor and his relationship with the donor. O.R. is a very appreciative man who thrives on the occasional attention paid to him; interest in his collection, or the gift of an Avon object, to him, is the "gift of life." In writing this thesis about O.R., his family, and his collection, I too feel as if I have given him a gift and perhaps an additional "breath of life" -- interest in his collection was a very bright spot in what is becoming a dark life for an old, lonely man. O.R. is also a sick man, and emergency surgery is the reason I was never able to meet him in person. He had gall stones removed early in April, and was unsure if he would ever be able to return to Clifton again. A letter Nicholas wrote to me on May 3, 1991, expressed thanks that I had been able to see his collection when I did, for "now I suppose it will be boxed up and the house sold because of Cynthia's condition and now mine. I don't think we will be able to go back" (figure 11).

Amidst this sadness, however, is the long-term underlying joy Avon collecting has brought to O.R. Nicholas. His collection has delivered meaning and relevance to his life. It has been a means for him to exhibit and observe his traditional view of the world. Gender divisions are clearly important to O.R., and he has a strong sense of what is "feminine" and what is "masculine." With this strong demarcation O.R. makes between male and female, it is highly
ironic that his grandson-in-law is involved in a career that was once "for women only." O.R. also reveals his sense of the world's hierarchy with the display of his collection. Status statements are made through the placement of objects in high visibility areas, and from this "law" we see that O.R. highly respects Avon Representatives and their history, for their Awards are among the most prized pieces in the collection.

Another source of enjoyment Nicholas has reaped from his collection is the challenge of physically creating the world that represents himself. His collection and display cabinets have transformed his surroundings into a "reality" of sorts, and in doing so, the outside world becomes a fantasy. O.R. has created a playland for the mind and senses to see, feel, touch, and experience. He has reversed the typical escape mechanism -- "escape reality to a fantasy world" -- to "escape reality to a created reality," a reality that he believes exists and is true.

Nicholas' "created reality" has physical characteristics, though, and these are also important to his ability to control his chaotic universe. Through the building of cabinets, shelves, the chess board, and other display devices, O.R. is aesthetically empowered. After retirement from a career where he was used to long hours and hard work, O.R. has a need to make things with physical labor. The cabinets keep him busy, active, and productive. Nicholas perhaps also identifies ambitious building and rebuilding projects with the
prolongation of his own life. Thus, the world in which Nicholas lives is made much more pleasant and manageable through the collection and display of his precious Avon bottles.
CHAPTER 4

O.R. Nicholas never joined an Avon collecting club because there are none chartered in the state of Virginia, but he certainly has a relationship with many collectors across the country. He meets them through the two newsletters of Avon collectors, *Avon Times* and *Western World*, and at Avon "Show and Sales" and Avon Collectors’ national conventions when they are close enough to Virginia for him to attend. Many NAAC members are familiar with Nicholas and his collection, if only from ads placed in Avon collecting newsletters, the article in Avon’s *Outlook*, or through tales of his collection passed on by other collectors.

Avon collectors across the country are organized into local collecting clubs that belong to the umbrella organization, the National Association of Avon Collectors (NAAC). The NAAC is the governing body of Avon collecting in the United States. As of December 1990, the NAAC had 107 member clubs in 22 states, and an approximate 10,000 members under its jurisdiction.¹ An Avon club is defined as "any bottle club with ten or more memberships which prints at least a bi-monthly newsletter or holds a meeting of the membership monthly at least ten times a year."² The NAAC

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¹. NAAC 1990 Membership listing.
². NAAC By-Laws, 1.
has professionalized itself to a high degree, and has established an extensive set of by-laws. By-laws cover the following areas: membership, duties, and privileges; government of the association; meetings of the association; national officers and duties; voting privileges, nominations, and elections; ratification of amendments and by-laws; and funding, bank accounts, and fundraising.3

The NAAC was founded in 1971 and since inception its goals have been "to promote and encourage Avon collecting; to supply all clubs with accurate and timely information about the hobby and assist them in attaining their goals; and to provide harmonious relations between member clubs."4 The NAAC has a President and Board of Directors that each serve three-year terms. All officers carry NAAC business cards that announce their name and position amidst a card design that includes the NAAC logo -- Mrs. P.F. Albee superimposed over an outline of the United States, NAAC's slogan "Encouraging collecting through organization," and NAAC's motto, "Provide information, Protect investment, and Promote collecting."

The National Association of Avon Collectors is indeed professionalized and well organized, but even so, has a very strained relationship with the Avon Company. In the last five years Avon has created a Collectibles Division to

3. NAAC by-laws.

4. NAAC informational flyer.
produce and market items specifically targeted at collectors. Many of Avon's newer collectibles are simply non-functional statues and dolls. They contain no colognes, bubble baths, lotion, or other Avon products. The Company, it seems, is trying to upscale its high profit collectibles line, and is somewhat embarrassed by its older "garage sale" collectors. The new collectibles are more expensive than previous products, and unless "old school" collectors are willing to become "contemporary collectors," Avon would rather not be associated with them.

The Avon company consistently refuses to recognize its committed following of collectors. It was difficult to find anyone within the Avon Company who would discuss their collectors, and the manager of the Collectibles Division had to be contacted repeatedly to locate basic information regarding Avon's collectors. Avon refers all inquiries about collecting to the NAAC, and for each letter the NAAC answers, they receive $1.50 from the Company. In 1990, NAAC answered 4,462 letters from inquiring collectors ($6,693.00 total). This "letter money" is the NAAC's primary means of supporting itself, so Avon collectors rely heavily on the Company for funding. While this relationship is somewhat acceptable, many Avon collectors are quite displeased with the Company's lack of commitment to them. They want Avon to create specialty items for them to buy and sell, support the National Convention and local shows, and publicize the NAAC.
They feel their support as customers through the years is now being shunned by a Company which is getting too big for itself.

Avon's stance on its collectors' many demands for information and attention is that "our business is cosmetics and toiletries, not bottles."\(^5\) The Company is besieged with letters requesting information on the history of their bottles. "Avon was founded in 1886, and it would be practically impossible to put together a complete list and description of the different bottles we've made since then."\(^6\) It goes back to the fact that from a corporate standpoint, Avon bottles are mass-produced, not valuable, and not worthy of historical documentation. They are viewed as a marketing ploy that has gotten out of hand. The company is plagued by having "to avoid antagonizing its collectors, or at least determine whether it is worth it, in issuing similar bottles in subsequent years and campaigns."\(^7\) Collectors are relentless and do not take it lightly when the Company "devalues" their collections with reissued bottles. At the same time, Avon cannot afford to anger its strong supporters who keep the memories of Avon Ladies and the early days of the company alive. Avon thus has to try to appease its old collectors, keep them somewhat

\(^7\) Ibid., 216.
satisfied (and quiet), while at the same time attracting new, middle class collectors.

Not surprisingly, then, an Avon Collectibles Division representative did attend the Collectors' Show and Sale held on April 19 and 20, 1991, in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. It was irony at its best, however, that the representative in attendance was Marlene Armstrong, Manager of Avon's Collectibles and Special Gift Markets. Armstrong is the same woman who dodged phone calls and letters to Avon requesting information for months. She was embarrassed to have to deal with an angry researcher face to face in such an unsuspecting setting. She was let off the hook gently after answering only a few questions, however, because it had been decided long ago, partly due to Armstrong's uncooperative behavior, that the focus of this thesis would be collectors and not the Avon Corporation. At any rate, justice was served.

Avon Show and Sales are events staged by various local collecting clubs to promote awareness of the hobby and to sell and trade bottles. The format is generally a two-day event, with a banquet staged after the first day. Avon generally tries to send a speaker if the Show is held on the east coast. The Shows attract many collectors from all over the country. There is a circuit of Show and Sales that hard-core collectors attend with regularity. At the Pottstown Show collectors were met from 21 states and

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Canada, as well as the NAAC's President and three members of the Board of Directors (the Board's Chairman was in the hospital).

The Delaware Valley Avon Collectors Club welcomed Show and Sale attendees to the Pottstown Days Inn, the official "Hotel of Avon Collectors," with a sign in front of the hotel that read "Welcome Avon Collectors." Anna Breidenbach, chair of the Show, had been contacted earlier in the week to ask whether the Show and Sale was open to the public, and to make banquet reservations for Saturday night's festivities. She was a bit cautious about giving information out to a stranger, and became especially so after being told that Avon collectors were the topic of a research project. Upon arrival at the Pottstown North End Firehouse, site of the Show and Sale, Breidenbach greeted me with suspicion and a warning "not to use that tape recorder, and only photograph those who give you permission."

Introductions to collectors, however, and spread of news that a "master's thesis was being written on us," caused many collectors to warm up and freely volunteer their experiences in collecting. The method of interviewing used was to walk up and down the rows of Avon displays and talk with collectors until an interesting and willing interviewee was discovered (figure 12). Realizing after only a short time that a clear hierarchy exists among collectors and that collectors on all levels of the structure are willing to
discuss it, an attempt was made to "classify" these various collectors. Respectability is important to the officers of the NAAC, who are at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, as is the area of collectibles on which a collector focuses. Collectors gain prestige and status in the eyes of those who hold power by educating themselves about the hobby and objects, and by learning facts about the history of the Avon Company. Display prowess and quality of the objects "dealt" by collectors at the Show and Sales is also important in achieving recognition among collecting peers. Collectors know and recognize who the "quality collectors" are, and word of who's "in" travels quickly at the Shows.

The bond felt between long-time collectors is discernible to an outsider. In-group/out-group barriers exist at a Show and Sale that brings together collectors with varying experience and expertise. These barriers are due in part to the rituals that are shared by members of the NAAC community of members. Rituals, again, are repetitive patterns of behavior that serve to affirm the group's sense of solidarity and reinforce group values. They include the language collectors use to communicate and barter with each other. An outsider must be invited into the conversation, for the language used by collectors is somewhat of a mystery to the unfamiliar. A certain amount of secrecy is maintained when collectors try to determine who has what item, available at what price, and displayed how.
Conditions of bottles are discussed in terms like O.S.P., original selling price, "mint," a bottle in perfect condition, and "mint-boxed," a bottle in perfect condition in a box in perfect condition -- quite mysterious to the unaware. Other rituals include the format of the Show and Sales themselves. Every Show and Sale is run exactly the same; all are called "Show and Sales," are two-days long, have a "club hotel," and host a banquet with a speaker and program. Themes are important rituals for all collectors, and are reinforced consistently when collectors discuss collecting (figure 13). Most collectors, in fact, specialize around a theme, whether it be bears, chess, animals, or automobiles (figures 14 and 15).

The ritual of professionalization is also very important to NAAC members, and they also print a brochure to "promote the hobby of Avon collecting" (figure 16). Many members have even had business cards printed in order to properly announce themselves as Avon collectors (figure 17). This ritual also encourages the education of members -- there is an intellectual component to all Show and Sales. Collectors discuss and argue over the classification, comparison, and analysis of Avon objects, and ultimately determine the aesthetic and market values of the collectibles. A hierarchy develops as individual collectors become more and more professionalized in their collecting endeavors.
Beginning at the "top" of the collecting hierarchy, the following collector-"experts" were interviewed: George Gaspar of Joliet, Illinois; Bill Armstrong of Newton, Indiana, President of the National Association of Avon Collectors; Connie Clark, of Kansas City, Missouri, Secretary of NAAC; and Leonard Talys, of Reading, Pennsylvania, a collector of California Perfume Company glass and tin objects. Two transitional collecting figures were Bill McGraw and his wife Marge of Victoria, Texas. Lee Broadwin of Morris Plains, New Jersey, was the "new blood" at the Show, and will undoubtedly be a fast riser on the collecting scene due to his specialization. An old stand-by among collectors was Anna Breidenbach of Pottstown, who has been a part of the organizational team for the Delaware Valley Show and Sale for 15 years. Other collectors, at the lower levels of the hierarchy, included Iris Gross of Princeton, New Jersey; Bob Pauley, Jane Pauley's uncle, of Indianapolis, Indiana; and Arlene and "But-n-Bob" Cherry of Rochester, New York.

George Gaspar, a former NAAC officer, has been involved with Avon collecting since 1975. Gaspar claims his "late start" in collecting encouraged him to really throw himself into learning about the objects and the history of the Avon company. For ten years, Gaspar claims, his life revolved around Avon. He was local President of his Avon Club, served as President and Secretary of NAAC, and worked with
Bud Hastin pricing items for the Avon Bottle Collector's Encyclopedia. He is held in high esteem by other collectors, for they feel he is very knowledgeable about Avon. Gaspar does indeed know a great deal about the early days of the Company. In fact, he has consulted as a historian for Avon on projects for their Centennial Celebration.

At the high point of his commitment to Avon, Gaspar experienced complete "burnout," and had to cut back. His collection was beginning to take over his life; his priorities had slipped and he was under severe stress. Gaspar was spending 40 to 60 hours a week on Avon, and was having difficulty "fitting in" his full-time job as quality control specialist for Quantum Plastics. Today Gaspar spends only 8 to 10 hours each week on his Avon. He enjoys again what initially attracted him to the hobby. He loves his fellow collectors; he finds pleasure in the quality and testing of Avon products; and he has fantasies about "old history." Faith was lost in George's knowledge when he discussed the grand door prize of the Pottstown Show, a porcelain Mrs. P.F. Albee doll. George remarked that what he liked about the bottle was "its very high quality and craftsmanship, and its beauty." The box for the doll read "made in Taiwan," however, and after having this pointed out to him, George immediately responded, "Well, yes, their [Taiwanese] little fingers are really good for that
intricate, fine painting."

Bill and Joanne Armstrong were the second ranking experts in Pottstown on the Avon hobby. Bill has collected since 1969, and has served as an officer of NAAC since 1978. He devotes six hours a day, six days a week to his office of NAAC President. He retired one year ago, and now he and his wife are able to spend most of their free time traveling for NAAC and building their collection. Bill had more objects until he began specializing, but estimates current ownership of 8,000 pieces in his collection. His areas of focus are representative's awards, steins, and dolls. The Armstrongs have numerous curio cabinets to display parts of their collection, and they try "tastefully decorating with Avon" to incorporate their hobby into their lives. The Armstrongs don't view Avon collecting as an investment. The rewards of the hobby for them are fun and friendships: they "have to love it to put out all the money and time we do."

Connie Clark is also an avid and committed servant of the National Association of Avon Collectors. She has been involved since the early stages of NAAC's organization, and is currently the Secretary of NAAC. Clark began collecting in 1970 when her husband, a collector of Playboy memorabilia, encouraged her to get involved in active collecting. A short time later a friend gave Clark several Avon figurals and a book on collecting, and she was hooked. She and her husband began to flea-market, swap-shop, and
garage-sale, and their Avon collection soon overtook the Playboy collection, and then eventually the house.

Connie guesses she has 5,000 pieces in her collection. All her Avon objects are displayed in her home in one panelled room with glass shelves. The focus of her collection is CPCs (California Perfume Company), Children’s and Soaps, Awards, and Fragrance Items. Clark feels her love affair with Avon objects has drifted away and changed as her interest has shifted, but the thing she’s always loved about Avon is the people, and they never change. She is a less active Avon collector these days, and instead focuses on Disney collectibles, but still attends all the Shows and Sales and Conventions. Clark grew disillusioned with the value of Avon; in the "early days it was hot, items held their value, and you could make a fast buck ... times have changed today." She will never regret her allegiance to Avon, or the loss of money invested in objects. Clark is frustrated by those who hold a "jaded" attitude towards Avon collecting: they have expected too much "return" on their investment in a hobby.

One of the so-called collecting "snobs" in the group was Leonard Talys, of Reading, Pennsylvania. Leonard’s attitude toward Avon collectors is similar to the conservative scholars’ research on kitsch presented in chapter one of this thesis. Talys finds it hysterical that "people kill for this shit [Avon]." He collects Avon that
is older than 100 years, primarily California Perfume Company glass bottles and tins and literature. He is actually, then, an antique collector, and not a accumulator of twentieth-century mass-produced collectibles. The difference he says, is one of class -- "it's like driving a Rolls instead of a VW." Leonard purchases many of his objects through the mail order outfit Dancing Trader, or at antique shops. He spends his weekends at flea markets, hoping to find one of his "treasures" amidst the "trash of the new stuff." He spends 10-12 hours a week on his collection, writing articles for Western World and researching his pieces. Talys has 660 objects in his collection, and devotes the top bedroom in his home to their display. Leonard is a woman's hairdresser and is also attracted to other beauty products of the era.

Marge McGraw began collecting Avon in 1968. Her husband Bill, while extremely active in NAAC leadership, claims he is "not an Avon collector... she's the crazy one." Marge stores her collection in two 25' by 10' rented storage barns that are stacked from floor to ceiling. Her award pin collection is the self-proclaimed "most beautiful in the United States," and is displayed on a 16' by 1' piece of maroon velvet that is "totally filled." Marge's attraction to Avon is its accessibility. "It's not like coins which cost the big bucks -- it's a hobby that anybody can get into." Bill's love of the hobby is really a love of those
who participate in collecting. He comments: "To some people the objects really mean a lot; personally I'd take them all out and break them. To me the important thing is that we're all one big family. I can go anywhere across the country and have an Avon friend. And even if folks are not Avon 'collectors' per se, 9 out of 10 people have something around the house that's Avon, so they're familiar with what you're interested in."

Bill and Marge are both retired and spend a lot of their time traveling around the country in their 80' by 14' trailer going to Avon Shows. They've had to specialize their collection because of space limitations, and "right now don't have that many pieces, maybe only 2,000 or so. A while back I sold 10,000 pieces at $2.00 each, but I paid $10.00 to $12.00 for them originally." Fortunately, Marge doesn't collect as an investment. She finds collectors to be lovely people who have a lot of fun, and her attraction to Avon bottles and pins is their "beauty and rarity."

While Marge is not bitter about her financial losses, she is angry with the Avon Company and refuses to use their products -- "wouldn't use 'em on a bet." She and Bill feel that Avon doesn't care about their collectors. "Other collecting clubs (like Coke and Beam) provide money for administrative costs, give away goodies and free products, and produce 'limited series bottles' especially for collectors. Avon's limited series are 2 and 1/2 million
mass-produced collectibles."

One new collector who is still excited about the collecting aspect of his hobby is Lee Broadwin. He has an interesting specialization, and really lives the part of the objects he collects (see figure 13). He and his wife began collecting Avon chess pieces one and a half years ago, and travel on the weekends to Shows, flea markets, and garage sales to pick up pieces. The chess pieces are glass and plastic 4" high cologne bottles, and come in either amber or silver (painted) glass. Lee will be retiring in a few years, and wants to have something to keep him occupied. He has always played chess, and additionally finds the bottles attractive, so this specialty was an obvious choice. Broadwin had an elaborate, thematic display at the Show in Pottstown. He had two chess boards set up -- one in solid colors, and the other in contrasting colors (all silver, all amber; amber/silver, silver/amber), wore a chess motif shirt, and had Pepperidge Farm "chessmen cookies" accenting his display. Broadwin currently charges customers $175.00 for a complete chess set and board. He had no buyers in Pottstown, but fears not; Avon stopped manufacturing the chess pieces in 1978, and "they will soon be truly antiques and in high demand."

Anna Breidenbach, chair of the Pottstown Show, eventually became friendly after seeing the spark that was set off in other collectors who were lined up to be
interviewed. It was clear that she, too, wanted to be "immortalized" in a master's thesis. Anna is an experienced collector of 15 years. She became interested in Avon collecting when her husband, who worked for Firestone, told her about Avon cars. She finds the enthusiasm among collectors "catching," and "loves the wonderful people she's met from all over the country". Her "Delabear" Collecting Club is her social circle, and the collectors are her support system. Anna was very secretive when answering questions about her collection. She has "whole showcases of Albee awards, soap, and ladies fragrances," but would provide no numbers, nor reveal where she lived.

Iris Gross is also a member of the Delaware Valley Club. She is a widow and works as a nurse in Princeton, New Jersey. Iris finds that collecting Avon passes the time, but she also really loves the hobby. She collects bells and is "in love with Albee awards." Iris began collecting ten years ago after her husband died. She travels to Shows frequently, and calls her involvement in Avon "a lot of work, but a lot of fun, too".

Bob Pauley is an odds and ends Avon collector. He's quite a character, and proudly said "bet you don't know who's uncle I am." Bob, it turns out, is Jane Pauley's uncle. He has been a collector since 1972, and at one time had 8,000 pieces in his collection. He began breaking up his collection several years ago because he "just had too
much tied up in it." Currently he has his favorites displayed in one room that is walled with mirrors and has specially built cabinets.

Bob Pauley had the Pottstown "joker award" wrapped up until "But-n-Bob" Cherry and his wife Arlene were interviewed. The two began collecting "for fun" fifteen years ago, but now deal and sell a bit and are trying to break even. Bob likes what he terms "junk items" -- convention memorabilia. He has a hand in creating convention souvenirs (buttons), and has earned his name through his button making prowess. Bob and Arlene also collect awards, porcelains, and plates, but have to be discriminating because of their budget and room limitations. Bob "doesn't even want to think about how much money" he and Arlene have spent on their hobby. It's been worth the cost, however, for Avon collectors are super people and the two have many friends.

Not all Avon collectors are satisfied with the returns from their years of devotion to the hobby, however. Most of those I met in Pottstown were involved in the hobby for other reasons than investment: aesthetic pleasure, fun, travel, and friendships. And while O.R. Nicholas' story is a sad one, it is also sweet. Avon collecting has brought him years of happiness and pleasure, although unfortunately the pleasure he reaped he feels has not been passed along to others. Unhappiness and discontent is evident in the
advertisement sections of *Avon Times* and *Western World* newsletters. In the back of each issue space is allotted for personal letters and comments in addition to classified ads. Unlike the basically content collectors who were met in Pottstown, some subscribers to the newsletters appear to be disillusioned with, and feel cheated by, their hobby of choice. The following classified ads were placed in *Avon Times*:

I am another disillusioned Avon collector. I saved and collected Avons for about 30 years. Now in retirement I hoped to realize a bit of money from selling them. I took them to a large Show and Sale but I found that there were only dealers there and few buyers. They all wanted to buy for resale and offer pennies. Next I went to a yard sale and sold a few for "peanuts". Next I tried a second-hand store who refused them altogether. Our section of the country seems to be saturated with them. Even advertising in your paper brought only one inquiry so far. I think the next thing to do will be to put them out for the recycling effort. I thought I had about $600 worth but now find that I can not even give them away.\(^8\)

Enjoy receiving and reading *Avon Times* but am amazed at the lack of response to my ads. Even when I answer ads requesting items that I do have, I get no feedback either. My prices are fair because I’ve seen ads asking much higher prices for the same items. In the 10 months that I’ve been a subscriber I’ve sold one item and purchased two. I thought that discontinued products would have collectible monetary value, but I’ve had no selling success. I’d like to clear out 19 years accumulation of Avon awards and products in order to recoup some of the money I’ve put into them. I wonder where I went wrong. Guess I’m just destined to work hardest to earn and recover my money.\(^9\)

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A fair analysis of "letters to the Avon editor," however, must include the positive as well as the negative reactions to the hobby.

I just want to take this opportunity to say "hello" and tell you how much I enjoy the Avon newsletter, to keep up the good work and most importantly -- you are appreciated for what you do in being the "glue" binding hearts, minds and collectors together nationwide!! If someone said I would be collecting Avon figurals, plates, awards, etc. as recently as two years ago, I would have told them they had the wrong guy!! It all started with my favorite hobby up until then -- antique cars and trucks. From there I was hooked and it grew from there. Avon collecting has brought many hours of happiness, study, challenge, friendship and sometimes frustration on my wife's part, but we have worked through it before it became an obsession and idol.\(^{10}\)

It seems, overwhelmingly, that Avon collectors are happy with their hobby. The time they devote, the money they spend, the distance they travel, and the space they allot to their collections is truly immense. These sacrifices, however, are all rewarded tenfold with friendships and enjoyment. Avon holds a special place in these peoples' hearts, and not only in their hearts -- displayed in their homes as well.

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Conclusions

Mass-produced objects like Avon bottles are popular icons of late twentieth-century American society. They are symbolic of a culture that values the pursuit and possession of material objects. Tocqueville recognized over 160 years ago that Americans are never satisfied and can never have enough. They believe in "indefinite perfectibility," and the ability to consistently improve their place in society. Having the means, or the resources, to purchase material objects allows consumers to live the "American Dream." Ownership is powerful, and the freedom to express individuality and creativity is an important part of "the dream" as well. Material wealth plays a large part in the way the self is presented to others. Possessions are intimately linked to identity and self-esteem. People surround themselves with the things they most value, and these objects represent what they believe to be most precious, whether that be status, beauty, wealth, or power.

Avon bottles provide collectors with a "quick material fix:" they are inexpensive and easy to locate at junk shops, flea markets, and garage sales. Avon bottles are products of a modern technological world, yet they evoke feelings of nostalgia and an appreciation of fine craftsmanship in their owners. They are contradictory in many ways -- modern plastic and glass materials imitate real, or authentic, materials; and mass-produced series are called "rare, limited editions." Avon bottles and the collectors who so value them appear to be the ultimate irony, but are they?

The traditional scholarship on popular culture calls it
imitative, cheap, levelling, and imposed from above. Critics of popular culture consider it detrimental to high culture, and chide popular art for its poor taste and design. Scholars who advocate the study of popular culture consider it an everpresent fact of twentieth-century consumer society. Using the scholarship of popular culture scholars like Fred Schroeder and the work of sociologist Herbert Gans, this thesis illustrates that although definitions of "art" vary by social class, objects that are elevated to "art status" become powerful and can fulfill important human and aesthetic needs that do not vary by class. As Schroeder states, "the object is not the message, but the medium."¹ Many aesthetic and human needs are fulfilled through the collecting of Avon "art." Some of these include the need to exercise creativity and freedom; to feel success; to make friends; to fill time and to slow the process of aging; to love and express affection; and to feel control and order. Collecting also allows collectors to find expression for beliefs, experiences, and values that are difficult to express. These include ideas about beauty; gender; nostalgia; status; the definition of "home;" history; the future; and fantasy and reality. Avon bottles may seem like simple and ridiculous "things" to collect and display, but what they represent to their collectors may be profound and complex.

Ultimately, a collection is really just an autobiographical display of the souvenirs of life: a mosaic of bits and pieces of life melded together to disclose meaning and experiences about the

¹. Schroeder, 166.
collector.
VI. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Avon Gets Ready for a Makeover." Quad City Times, 17 November 1990, 3(B).


popular literature:


"People call me 'Avid Colle.'"

"They say I'm the most bi and the most bi."

The 82-year-old was perched on a stool.

Clifton Forge, Va.

Fig. 1
Entry Hallway

Figure 5

plate (6) collection
Figure 6

Living Room
Figure 7

Diagram showing a layout with labels such as 'sliding door to "living" addition', 'dining table', 'stacked display cases', 'to basement staircase', 'hallway to bedrooms and bath', 'Avon Plate Collection', and 'buffet'.
May 31, 1991

Dear Kerley,

Thanks for the card. It sure makes a person feel good when your friends remember you when you are down in the dumps. My doctors tell me I am doing fine but sometimes I think they are just trying to make me feel good. Of course, they remind me I have been here 82 years.

I am glad you did visit my Avon Collection when you did because now I suppose it will be boxed up and the house sold because of Cynthia’s condition and now mine. I don’t think we will be able to go back.

I wish I could have been there to talk to you because I have followed the history of Avon and how a young man could leave
The farm become a book salesman, then buy the company then start and build a business like he did and provided millions of Women a living interested me as much as anything else. If you will get a copy of Western Worlds, I won & and the Supplement and read Dorothy Bernard's's History of I won it is the best I have found.

If you are ever in Florida be sure to come by to see us.

If I can help you any way just let me know.

Yours,

OR V. Charles
Figure 13

Delaware Valley
Avon
Collectors
SHOW & SALE

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6:30 p.m.
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