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WHATCHA GOT?

James Delbourgo

Neal Thompson. *A Curious Man: The Strange and Brilliant Life of Robert "Believe It or Not!" Ripley.* New York: Crown Archetype, 2013. 432 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$26.00 (cloth); \$15.00 (paper).

Shelley M. Bennett. *The Art of Wealth: The Huntingtons in the Gilded Age.* San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 2013. 366 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$40.00.

Guests carefully lured to BION Island in the 1930s, ranging from Somerset Maugham to Shirley Temple, were greeted on arrival by a bewildering array of curiosities: totem poles, a "man-eating" clamshell, African idols, Buddhist sculptures, statues of Chinese warriors, Japanese bells, Indian carpets, torture devices, whips, narwhal tusks, and part of the anatomy of a whale. "Let's just say it was very dear to the whale," cracked the host when queried about *which* part (p. 250). BION Island was not some occluded Pacific atoll quietly shunning the attention of the world, but a private fantasy island in Westchester County, New York, desperately calling out for it. The host was a poor man's Gatsby, the most famous cartoonist—yes, cartoonist—of his day: Robert Ripley, whose "Believe It or Not" strip first appeared in 1916, catapulting him to a peculiar kind of fame. "Tell me something odd," Ripley fatefully demanded of his personal researcher Norbert Pearlroth, who mined the shelves of the New York Public Library in utter obscurity to furnish his employer with bizarre "blobs of knowledge" that ultimately enabled him to propose that "truth is stranger than fiction" (pp. 113, 157).

"What's the strangest thing you know?" Ripley would ask people. He figured he understood that the march of modern life left people hungry for amazing stories out of step with science, reason, and progress, and that they would pay good money for what one reviewer called his "thrill pills" (p. 156). He was right. The curiosities he collected at BION—an acronym of *Believe It or Not*—were the souvenirs of his own global travels and embodied an unabashedly vulgar embrace of the exotic, epitomized by the shrunken heads that became the signature of his freak-show brand.

In his eye-opening biography, Neal Thompson explores how Ripley was an avid collector who helped invent a mass public audience for his wares. As such, he represents a fascinating low-culture variation on the classic story of American collecting in the Gilded Age, in which ruthless industrial capital philanthropically collided with the refinements of high culture and resulted in the creation of enduring public institutions. That narrative is embodied by the rather more stately collections of European art assembled by the Huntington family, whose dynastic enterprise is more punctiliously documented in Shelley Bennett's *The Art of Wealth*. The two stories make for interesting comparisons between the first Gilded Age and our own.

The Huntingtons' fortune originated with Collis Huntington. Huntington was a merchant and California gold-rusher who became one of the so-called "Big Four" behind the Central Pacific Railroad Company and a bruising lobbyist who sprayed money around Washington to secure legislation favorable to the construction of the nation's first transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. He soon sought to transmute infrastructure into art, commissioning Albert Bierstadt to paint *Donner Lake from the Summit* in 1871 to celebrate the beauty of the Sierra Nevada Mountains—which he associated with "the spirit of the Indians" and "their love of nature and the dread of the artifices of civilization"—to commemorate the conquest of nature by his company's engineers (p. 14). The subsequent history of the painting is indicative of the private benefits of public exhibition. Huntington had the painting shown in San Francisco, New York, and Vienna, when it was not hanging for friends to admire at his Park Avenue home in Manhattan. Public exhibitions were a novelty at the time: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in whose founding Huntington was active and to which he ultimately donated most of his collections, first opened in 1872. Exhibiting made Huntington news in the society pages and produced several kinds of value. Cultivating the public's taste for art created a stage for both the admiration of his aesthetic judgment and his selfless patronage. Such public shows of beneficence were nothing if not canny. When Huntington later lent his Bierstadt to the Met, it was to save space in his new home at 57th Street and Fifth Avenue.

Collis was only the first Huntington collector, however. He was followed by his wife Arabella; his step-son Archer (Arabella's son by a previous husband); and Henry Huntington, who happened to be Collis' nephew and became Arabella's second husband after Collis died. Arabella compensated for her own humble background by using her husband's fortune to speculate in property, posing for innumerable portraits decked out in pince-nez and furs, and stocking their grand New York residences with original Louis XVI furniture. Collis' initial austerity—"we are quiet people"—yielded to his desire to keep pace with the opulent San Francisco residence of his business partner Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University (p. 80). Like both her husbands,

Arabella eagerly bought up notable works by Rembrandt, Gainsborough, and Constable; “almost everyone,” her observant son Archer noted, “is a collector of something” and wants “a little museum of his own” (p. 293). On tour in Europe, Arabella and Henry joined the ranks of the “picture pirates” engaged in the grand grab of European art. After Henry bought up Gainsborough’s *The Blue Boy* in 1921, Cole Porter wrote a song from the painting’s point of view:

As a painting you must have heard a lot about me,
For I lived here for many happy years;
Never dreaming that you could ever do without me,
Till you sold me in spite of all of my tears . . .
We’ve got those Blue Boy blues. [p. 240]

The man who sealed the deal was the “infallible” art dealer Joseph Duveen, who knew how to play the market and his clients like no one else. One could easily rewrite the story of the Huntington collections with Duveen as its protagonist—the go-between who collected the collectors. Henry had the greatest eye for English art in the world, or so Duveen liked to tell him as he pressed his client to show off his acquisitions to fellow tycoons William Randolph Hearst, the magnate who ran King Features, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., heir to Standard Oil, to help Duveen “get nearer these people” (p. 280). Arabella was spoken of in the pages of *The Connoisseur* magazine as “draining” Europe of its masterpieces, but who was draining whom? (p. 164) Duveen played Humbert to his American protégés, thriving on the “energy and vitality” he enjoyed from marrying Old Masters off with new American money. For the Huntingtons, travel meant Europe, Europe meant art, art meant shopping, and shopping meant shipping. The Old Masters now had new masters, and public exhibition was essential to the social respect and moral credibility they craved.

So the Huntingtons ensured that their legacy was institutional. In addition to contributing to poor relief in the wake of the 1873 and 1893 depressions—caused in part by the instabilities of the railroad industry Collis Huntington had helped to create—Collis left his collections to the Met; Arabella funded a number of charities; Henry founded the Huntington Library and Gardens in Los Angeles (“Capitalist Aids Scholars,” trumpeted one headline); and Archer, a devotee of Spanish culture, founded the Hispanic Society of America at Audubon Terrace in upper Manhattan (p. 291). These enterprises took advantage of lowered tariffs on foreign imports and new tax laws providing exemptions for charitable giving. The Huntingtons thus embodied what might be called the weighty model of cultural accumulation: creating publicly accessible institutions stuffed with beautiful and significant things, intended to advance taste and knowledge and to endow their patrons with cultural and moral weight in the eyes of their friends, the public, and posterity. “Your name will live forever,” Duveen promised Henry (p. 282). There was an art of wealth,

Bennett's book suggests, centered on civic uplift, and the Huntingtons were good at it. They knew how to be rich *well*; they understood how to *do* wealth.

We seem to be missing their kind today. As art historian John Richardson recently noted in his endorsement of Marjorie Cohn's biography of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. (who was instrumental in introducing modern art to the Midwest), "people are beginning to forget how salutary art collecting used to be, before it was taken over by Wall Street."¹ Richardson's remark shows a discernible nostalgia for the wise patrician who knows how to use wealth for the public good, rather than for simply making more money. At the 2012 Whitney Biennial, the artist and critic Andrea Fraser drew attention to the statistical correlation between income inequality and rising art prices in recent years, and the alignment of leading American collectors and patrons with neoliberal public policy. Stephen Schwarzman, the New York Public Library trustee and founder of the private equity firm Blackstone, compared Barack Obama's proposal to close tax loopholes in 2010 to Hitler's invasion of Poland; while "the hedge fund king" Steven A. Cohen of SAC Capital Advisors, who bought Willem de Kooning's *Woman III* for \$137 million in 2006, pled guilty to insider trading in 2013 and was fined \$1.2 billion. Patrician commitment to public institutions appears to have dramatically eroded since the time of the Huntingtons when, as Archer put it, collectors should "labor toward a certain point where their collections will do good to the public" (p. 145). Do collectors need publics any more? The billionaire hedge-funder, philanthropist, and Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art trustee Eli Broad has, for one, openly expressed reservations about bequeathing his art to public galleries. The art of wealth that helped foster public appreciation of art in America now seems happy to cheerlead instead for stripping public assets and gutting public services. Tycoons used to see public institutions as the way to make their names live forever, but maybe we're now witnessing the privatization of immortality. One can at least argue the point on the new David H. Koch Plaza, which opened at the Metropolitan Museum in September 2014, where Koch himself was greeted by protesters bearing signs with the words "The Met: Brought to you by the Tea Party" and "Koch = Climate Chaos."

The name Ripley also lives on, exemplifying a fluid rather than a weighty model of accumulation, one that also emerged out of the Gilded Age. In Ripley's case, it was not the establishment of public treasure houses that made his name but the harvesting of human experience and its commodification as mass entertainment transmitted across a variety of media (newsprint, radio, film, and television). Like the Huntingtons, Ripley's is a story of bicoastal fortunes, one that transported him from his own gold-rushing roots in Northern California to New York in 1910. Cartoons were his railroads. From an early age, he was fascinated by sport and began sketching images of extreme athletic prowess. Cartoons were big business, a popular art form that could appeal

to industrial America's immigrant classes because they transcended language barriers. "Unusual Records" debuted in 1916 before "Champs and Chumps," and, ultimately, *Believe It or Not!* expanded to include strange feats of all kinds. Ripley collected these into a wildly popular book in 1929, landing him a six-figure salary and syndication deal with Hearst's King Features. The worlds of Ripley and Huntington were at odds, yet linked: Hearst's ability to stock his own mansion at San Simeon, California, with art and antiquities—immortalized in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941)—depended on yellow-journalist geniuses like Ripley to sell their papers to the masses. Realizing that "Rip" was part of the story, Hearst bankrolled a series of epic travels, affording him a global stage. Buck-toothed and shaky-voiced, Rip made a tireless if sozzled and philandering chronicler who nevertheless struggled—not unlike Arabella Huntington—to find his place in New York society, despite regularly sipping cocktails with the likes of the Marx Brothers and George Gershwin. His fame became a curiosity in and of itself: Rudy Vallee crooned about him to lyrics penned by Irving Berlin, while the cartoon character Elmer Fudd appears to have been based on Rip's "egg-headed" stuttering.

Where magnates such as the Huntingtons amassed objects, Ripley was a collector of human experience in all its curious variety. The human "queeriosities" he presented included an eight-year-old girl who'd been driving a truck since the age of five, a blind armless man who could read Braille with his tongue, and sisters who made clothing from newspaper. This quest for the bizarre also entailed travel, and not just to London or Paris. "To travel is to possess the world" was the motto of Ripley's hero, the inventor of the travelogue, Burton Holmes (p. 201). "Whatcha got?" Ripley had asked of Europe on his first such trip back in 1913, only to be disappointed (p. 51). Sure, he wrote, the Coliseum may have been ancient Rome's answer to Madison Square Garden, but who cared? Unburdened by the Huntingtons' quest for European taste, his vulgarity opened him up to radical cultural curiosity, leading him to embrace China and India instead. These were grand if decrepit alien civilizations, as he saw them, that could furnish dazzling wonders for his audience, such as the "fakirs" who sat on beds of nails or held their arms aloft all day ("up-arm men"). Benares epitomized "squalor and splendor" in equal degree while China was "the vast, old decaying land of the Celestial" (pp. 101, 70). Here, curiosity, true to its early modern origins, feasted on a racially exoticized otherness. Ripley felt both disturbed and seduced by what he saw as the authentic backwardness of Asian religions. He picked up Chinese girlfriends and bought and redecored "Nirvana," Burton Holmes' Central Park West apartment, in Chinese styles.

If the Huntingtons aspired to a form of public authority built on trust in their taste, judgment and benevolence—trust in their solid judgment of solid

things—Ripley commodified the fluidity and uncertainty of judgment, selling himself as the person who dared you to trust him no matter how outlandish his claims. Charles Lindbergh was the *sixty-seventh* person to cross the Atlantic in a plane, he announced; the United States had no *official* national anthem; and Buffalo Bill never *shot* a buffalo—all technically true and backed up by Norbert Pearlroth's unsung researches. Making a buck meant getting a rise. "Go to Hell!" Ripley once told his readers: the town of Hell in Norway, that is, unleashing a string of one-liners. (He had been to Hell and back, Dante must be mistaken, etc). Not that he thought there was a sucker born every minute. "Barnum was wrong," said Ripley, who claimed he loved, not loathed, the common man for his desire to believe the unbelievable. Ordinary folk were the stars of his shows, and he received stacks of letters every week from fans who hoped he'd tell their story and make them famous. "There's a little bit of Ripplianism in all of us," observed the *New York American* (p. 182).

With the onset of the Great Depression, the cultural politics of this populism make for fascinating reading. It was no coincidence that Ripley rode on horseback into the Grand Canyon in 1940 for a radio show with the young Arizona politician Barry Goldwater. For all his wonder-mongering, there was a fervent documentarian impulse in Ripley, through which the spirit of the *Wunderkammer* merged with that of *National Geographic*. In the 1930s, his live appearances featured people with freakish-seeming disabilities—and abilities: a man who could dislocate his jaw and "swallow" his nose; the "Crocodile Man" and "Leopard-Skinned Man," both skin disease victims; and an "armless wonder" who smoked cigars and threw knives at an assistant using his toes. Despite their oddity, these were, in effect, a variant on New Deal-era popular cultural documentary. Ripley valorized ordinary Americans as victims of fate—not unlike Dorothea Lange's photographs of Dustbowl victims for the Farm Security Administration—even as he railed against FDR's "handouts." There was something authentic about ingenious victimhood for Ripley that state assistance threatened to denature. His was the opposite impulse from the liberal patrician charity of the Huntingtons, who made donations to a variety of African American and educational causes: Ripley wanted to vindicate ordinary folk but not help them. If there was an art of wealth, there was also an art of poverty; and this was why he so revered the Chinese, at least before the Communist takeover: they knew how to be poor. So too should hardscrabble Americans. In this way, Ripley embodies an enduring strain in American political psychology, one that continues to vex liberal commentators and has most recently been on view in the Tea Party crusade against "Obamacare," for which resisting assistance is an existential test of true Americanism.

Ripley's distillations of strange experience never quite coalesced into tangible collections: his "Odditoriums" never resulted in a grand museum, and various bidders bought up his curiosities at auction after he died. Others

did subsequently seek to cash in by creating a chain of suitably kitsch BION museums, one of which now adorns midtown Manhattan near Times Square. But Ripley's racially charged freak-show exoticism is no longer fit for prime time, even though traces of it can still be glimpsed in network reality shows like *Survivor*.

Things weren't really the point for Ripley anyway: his curiosities were the souvenirs of his own commodified experience, not weighty objects of public attention like the collections assembled by the Huntingtons. The new billionaires of our own gilded times, meanwhile, no longer wear pince-nez and furs; in the Age of Zuckerberg, slacker tycoons slap on jeans and sneakers. Being seen in public is evidently a hazard of new fortunes: in the Bay Area, Google marshals its employees in private buses operating on secret timetables. But despite the art of not being seen, some fashions never go out of style. At a lavish Los Angeles birthday party in 2012 for the former PayPal executive David Sacks, word leaked out via social media that the dress code was apparently Louis XVI. Ripley, who by turns aped and mocked his betters, would likely have been bored stiff, but Arabella Huntington might just have felt at home. Pince-nez, anyone?

James Delbourgo is associate professor of history at Rutgers University. His next book, forthcoming from Penguin UK and Harvard University Press, is about early modern global natural history collecting and the career of Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum.

1. Marjorie B. Cohn, *Classic Modern: The Art Worlds of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr.* (2013).