

Harlan Crow's Collection Is Something to Aspire To

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Supreme Court Justice Thomas is under fire, but what else is new? The only difference today is the grounds. The Left has discovered that Thomas' friend Harlan Crow is not only a billionaire, but also a collector of unmentionables. Which of course has become another reason Thomas' critics say they hate him.

It is bad enough that Crow is a billionaire. However, in the view of the usual lefty suspects, what he does with his money is even worse. Horror of horrors, the *Washingtonian* breathlessly reported that Crow is not satisfied with something harmless like costume jewelry or Beanie Babies. Rather, his "collections include Hitler artifacts—two of his paintings of European cityscapes, a signed copy of Mein Kampf, and assorted Nazi memorabilia—plus a garden full of statues of the 20th century's worst despots."

Despite the publication's evident shock, the garden sounds truly spectacular: "It is a collection of history's felons. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first commissar of the Soviet secret police, looks smug. Fidel Castro seems crestfallen, Joseph Stalin resolute. The bust of Nicolae Ceausescu captures him in his youthfulness, the towering Lenin at his most powerful."

For the Thomas-haters, however, the outdoor collection is only the beginning of the terror. Observed a shocked *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie:

Crow keeps an even larger number of historical items inside. They include a painting of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale, a document signed by Christopher Columbus and a collection of Nazi artifacts and Hitler memorabilia. Visitors attest to seeing a signed copy of "Mein Kampf," two paintings by Hitler himself, Hitler stamps, Nazi medallions and linen napkins embroidered with the iconography of the Third Reich.

Bouie naturally is terribly disturbed at this revelation, declaring that "it is alarming to learn that one such collector of Nazi paraphernalia is a close friend of a Supreme Court justice and has strong ties to conservative media and the conservative movement. It is thanks to those ties, in fact, that Crow saw no shortage of defenders when news of his collection broke to the wider world."

As the de facto conservative leader on the Supreme Court, Thomas is an inevitable political target. I don't know whether he broke any judicial rules, but there is no reason to believe that his friendship with Crow affected his judicial opinions. Thomas' ideological course was set long before he met Crow. Thomas might have been careless about appearances, but he is one of the most principled justices to ever sit on the court.

More interesting, to me at least, is the barely suppressed shock about accumulating a collection of unmentionables, and the assumption that doing so is evidence of not just mental defect but of moral failure. It's not the first time that seemingly quirky collecting interests were used as a political weapon: a few years ago, Marc Garlasco, then of Human Rights Watch, was attacked as an anti-Semite because he collected World War II German militaria. His political enemies appeared to confuse the Iron Cross, which was first used in 1813, with the swastika, but why let facts get in the way of a good smear? Although Germany is one of the most popular military categories, Garlasco was targeted because of his criticism of Israel.

The issue is important to me because, like Crow, I have rather eclectic collecting interests, which include celebrations of dictators, and, like Garlasco's, my accumulation includes German militaria sporting both Iron Crosses and swastikas. Yet I'm neither a Nazi nor a communist. Nor do my illustrations of the Franco-Prussian War make me a fan of French Emperor Napoleon III or Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. And my Civil War items don't make me a neo-Confederate.

I collect some items because I identify with a person or event. Others because they horrify me, and my acquisition reminds me of what should not have been. In other cases, I just pick up interesting "tired old sh*t," as a good friend of mine referred to the antique beer steins he purchased in prodigious numbers, because of their intrinsic value — beauty and craftsmanship, for instance. Sometimes it is difficult to explain why I am attracted to something. I blame it on my collecting addiction, which periodically renders me helpless in a fashion similar to nicotine, alcohol, or heroin. I'm not quite ready to call it a form of mental illness, but then again...

For instance, I was struck by Crow's statuary. I have neither the money necessary to buy nor the space necessary to display statues of historical figures, whether kings of wokedom or guardians of tradition. My alternatives are busts. Lenin is very easy to come by. Stalin is reasonably common, though more expensive. So is Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the Cheka, or Soviet secret police. I have at least two of each. Beria, Stalin's notorious chief, was much harder to come by. I've only seen one type, and I lost out the first time I saw it on eBay. The second time, however, I bagged my prey.

I recently was quite pleased to pick up an Andropov — the former KGB chief who succeeded Brezhnev as Soviet Communist Party general secretary. Andropov briefly reigned before Gorbachev. It was the first time I'd seen the former's bust on sale, and I was very happy to snag it. His undistinguished face so well represents the banality of evil. I'm still waiting for a Gorbachev, Brezhnev, and Khrushchev. Why do I like having them? The desire is overwhelming. I grew up and entered the policy world during the Cold War, when these horrid characters managed what Ronald Reagan accurately denounced as the Evil Empire. I celebrated when the entire tyrannical edifice collapsed.

I'm heavy on Soviets and would like to branch out. A Mao would be great, though his busts were quite expensive when I saw them at his ancestral home in Hunan province as well as at Mao's

mausoleum, which dominates Tiananmen Square. A Xi would be fantastic, but I don't remember finding any of his busts on my last trip; porcelain plates appear to be more his style. Unfortunately, I never have seen a Castro, either Fidel or Raoul. The Cubans downplay public manifestations of personality cults. Even with these, alas, the tyrannical gallery still wouldn't be complete. Truth be told, I would like to pick up busts of some Nazi cadre, though I might hesitate to display them. Although I see no moral difference between communist mass murderers and Nazi mass murderers, the public reaction to symbols of communist and Nazi criminals differs dramatically.

I also have a few items signed by important figures, most of whom I respect. But not all: I have a book signed by Stalin, one of history's most monstrous dictators. A book with Lenin's signature, which I've never seen, would take me back to the tragic moment that transformed the 20th century, the Bolshevik Revolution. I wouldn't mind having one signed by Hitler, but that is too pricey of an acquisition. Part of the appeal in such cases is the sense of reaching back through history and touching people intimately involved in dramatic historical moments, even in terrible ways. In the case of the forgoing moral monsters, possessing books signed by them makes their existence and crimes more real.

However, the best explanation for my collecting is that *I am a collector*, doomed by habit ("hitting the shops," as my buddy put it, became a favorite weekly social activity, much better than getting a drink), heredity (my parents collected and took me along on their buying expeditions), instinct (hunting is an age-old male activity, deeply embedded in human civilization), and even destiny (the impulse to acquire is so strong, it must have a cosmic genesis). What I collect matters less than that I collect.

In high school, while in the United Kingdom (my dad was Air Force), I dabbled, buying cheap chess sets, bladed weapons, African clubs and shields, and a fantastic German World War I trench periscope. While in college and law school, my collecting lapsed, other than picking up an occasional tourist item when I traveled. Then I met a firefighter who couldn't be more different from me when he was selling some chess sets. We became fast friends. His girlfriend, later wife, and I also hit it off, especially since my appearance freed her from having to accompany her man to dusty antique shops and disheveled flea markets.

Unfortunately for me, heading out regularly unleashed the full force of my addiction and created endless temptations, which led to buying eagles, communist tchotchke, military art, icons, political posters, military cigarette cases, and some real oddities, such as Korean "turtle ships," which nicely linked collecting to my professional work on U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula, and a Civil War amputation kit, which powerfully illustrated the horrors of war. Among all these items are a lot of hammer and sickles and a few swastikas, not because I want them, but because I want what they are placed on. Although I didn't have the budget for old masters and fine antiquities, some of my cheapest acquisitions are among my favorites, such as plastic M&M figures, a tribute to my status as an uber-chocoholic.

I buy a lot less these days. My house is full of old, useless, though still enjoyable, stuff. I need to think more about retirement. My collecting buddy died a few years ago — I was his executor, an emotionally painful task — depriving me of my chief collaborator, enabler, and co-conspirator. Still, the passion has not disappeared. Remembering the "good ole' days," I occasionally venture out, on the hunt. I recently hit a toy soldier show for the first time in years. I came away with a few more Confederate and Union infantry, now spread across bookshelves downstairs. I also

picked up a small but finely painted Robert E. Lee bust, in a swipe at the wokeish intimidation against anyone who sees the slightest complexity in history.

What to think of Clarence Thomas? The fact that his rich friend collects some, er, unusual items matters not. Collectors are a breed apart. I would love to possess Crow's accumulated treasures. During the Garlasco kerfuffle, he was denounced for an internet comment: "That is so cool. The leather SS jacket makes my blood go cold it is so COOL!" While an SS jacket is not something I have any interest in owning, I have found plenty of items that caused my blood to run cold. Indeed, when collectors gather, they inevitably talk about their favorite acquisitions, unexpected finds, tragic losses, lucky wins, display advice, and spousal evasions. And everyone appreciates the other person's accumulation, even when the specific items hold no personal appeal.

Justice Thomas is a superlative jurist. I don't always agree with him, but he has spent decades pushing the high court to interpret rather than rewrite the Constitution. He will always be under attack for his philosophy, whatever the formal specifics of the criticism made. Hopefully he will be more careful in the future to avoid providing ammunition to those who believe in (progressive) judicial misgovernance.

However, the smear that Harlan Crow's collecting interests somehow discredit Thomas should be summarily dismissed. Crow evidently is a true collector. A great one, in my view. I can only wish that visitors to my home would describe it like his, with "family photos in one room, then all this WWII stuff in another room, and dictators in the backyard." Now that is a worthwhile ideal to aspire to!

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