

Kenshur Prize: Sean Silver, *The Mind is a Collection*

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Good Afternoon. I am Rebecca Spang, Director of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University and it is my very great pleasure to welcome you to this our ninth annual Book Prize symposium. From a very strong short list, we selected Sean Silver's remarkable book, *The Mind is a Collection*, as this year's winner, and I am delighted that three campus experts on the subject of collecting have agreed to participate in this discussion along with our colleagues from Eighteenth-Century Studies. This means we have a full program and an especially rich one, so I will keep my own comments brief. I do nonetheless, want to introduce our participants and say a few words of my own about the prize-winning book.

We are fortunate on this campus to be home to many and varied collections, from the 1.3 million specimens in the Paleontology Collection and the nearly 3000 mammal skeletons in the Zooarchaeology Lab to the more than 30,000 items that make up the world's largest puzzle collection. We also have many extremely talented colleagues who have spent their careers, at least in part, working in and on collections (work that has no doubt helped to shape their thinking on many other subjects as well). Three of those colleagues are with us today:

Jason Baird Jackson, our gracious host for today,¹ is Professor of Folklore and Director of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. He has collaborated with Native American communities in eastern Oklahoma for decades, previously served as editor of *Museum Anthropology*, and is the founding editor of the open-access journal *Museum Anthropology Review*.²

David A. Brenneman, the Wilma E. Kelley Director of the Eskenazi Museum of Art has a doctorate in Art History and a strong background in eighteenth-century studies (having written his dissertation on critical responses to Gainsborough). Before coming to Bloomington a little over a year ago, he was Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

My colleague and neighbor, Eric Sandweiss, is currently Chair of the History Department (in which he also holds the Donald Carmony chair and edits the *Indiana Magazine of History*). His recently published and very widely reviewed book, *The Day in its Color* was inspired by another of IU's unexpected holdings, the Charles W. Cushman collection of more than 14,000 Kodachrome color slides taken over three decades (starting in the 1930s).

In addition, we will also have comments from two colleagues in Eighteenth-Century Studies, both of whom are well known to many of us. Jesse Molesworth, Associate

¹ The Symposium took place in the Mathers Museum on the IU Bloomington campus.

² Professor Jackson's "Reflections on *The Mind is a Collection*" can be found on his blog, "Shreds and Patches" ([here](#)).

Professor in the English Department, has been a pillar of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies since he joined Indiana University in 2009. He is the author of *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic* which was awarded Honorable Mention for the Perkins Prize (given by the International Society for the Study of Narrative) and he is currently working on time, the gothic, and comic books. Joanna Stalnaker (Associate Professor of French in the Department of French and Romance Philology at Columbia University) is also well known to many of us, since she participated in the Center's most recent Workshop (on Eighteenth-Century Futures) and was the winner of the Kenshur Prize several years ago for her *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Cornell University Press, 2011).³

This year's Kenshur Prize winner is Sean Silver, Associate Professor of English at the University of Michigan. He received his PhD from UCLA in 2008 (after having worked for a time as a carpenter) and he is currently interested both in accidents and in craft. I think it is part of the brilliance of Sean's book that while it was obviously crafted very carefully, the experience of reading it nonetheless feels much more like serendipity. John Woodward, we are led to understand, did not *set out* to become the foremost Augustan rock hound, but became so because of his chance encounter with "a gritty *Peble* [sic], of a very light brown colour and an oblong, oval shape." Woodward did not have the mind of a collector, until he started collecting. Moreover, in his final published work, he decried "the Man who should be perpetually heaping up Natural Collections without design of building a structure of Philosophy." (73-75)

This account of a collection both accidental and highly crafted falls in a chapter—or, a room of the exhibition—entitled "Design" and is on display between Raphael's *Judgment of Paris* and a portrait of John Woodward himself. (*The Mind is a Collection* is also a "born digital" museum, the exhibits of which only partly follow the structure of the book; be sure to [visit it!](#)) The juxtaposition *feels* like a felicitous chance and yet it is certainly anything but. I could say much more about my experience of reading other pages, encountering other "exhibits," but I will sum them up by saying I don't recall when last I encountered a book it was so hard to skim. I never knew *where* Sean's analysis would take me next, how he would further demonstrate the ways that eighteenth-century thought both depended upon and fully rejected the mind-material dichotomy. For the acuity of its close readings, the extraordinary range of its sources, and the genuine creativity of its construction, *The Mind is a Collection* is a most deserving recipient of the Kenshur Prize and I am honored to be able to award that prize now.

³ For comments at the Symposium on her book, see [Number One](#) of this journal.