The Limited Factor

By Swabie2424

Doing research for this article, I realized something pretty amazing; there hasn’t been a ton of published research into the psychology of collecting. There’s a plethora of information on bizarre anti-social behavior such as hoarding (everything from cats to discarded polystyrene drink containers – yuck), but not much on simple collecting. I came across a few books that touch on this topic – some interesting – some not so interesting. From what I could find, experts think there are a lot of reasons we like to collect. Among these are:

- a psychological need to control our environment – some experts even assert that collectors are unhappy mini-despots! (Interestingly, they point out that many actual rulers/despots have large collections.) Experts claim collectors are attracted to the fact that they can control something without the risk of negative reinforcement (unlike human relationships, of course)
- a deep need to reclaim our childhood
- a desire to make up for a perceived lack of parental attention
- an attempt at immortality. Experts think that collectors find it comforting that their collections will remain after they are gone
- an outlet for obsessive-compulsive behavior
- an atavistic need to experience the “thrill of the hunt”
- simply, for fun

I would like to take this discussion to the next level. When most collectors receive an item from a high-end collectibles manufacturer what is the first thing they do before opening the box? That’s right… they check to see what number they received. This ritual is much more important than most of us realize. “Why’s that?” you ask. The answer is quite simple actually; human beings have the innate psychological desire to possess what is limited and/or rare. And collectors seem to have a magnified case of this human condition. I’m sure there’s a word in some unabridged dictionary to define this whole idea, but I couldn’t find it in my research. Whether collectors consciously realize it or not, we are all comforted by the fact that we possess something that is desired and cannot be attained by more than a certain number of other people. It’s a power grab of sorts – part of the reason why we enjoy collecting.

So, psychological mumbo jumbo aside, limited edition/rare collectibles scratch us deep down right where we itch. I believe that is one reason (among others) why many Star Wars collectors have jumped off the Hasbro bandwagon in favor of companies like Gentle Giant, ACME and Sideshow Collectibles. As well as wanting bigger sculpts, better paint jobs and pieces with more amazing detail than 3 ¾” action figures can provide, I submit that many collectors weren’t being psychologically fulfilled by collecting items that weren’t perceived as “limited” or “rare” any more. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard people chirping about how standard action figures “stink” because they’re “worthless”. It’s a notable observation considering that those same
people were very excited to buy and display them just a few short years prior. So did the action figures get worse or did the collector’s perception of them just change? Interestingly, this notion continues to be prevalent despite the fact that Hasbro’s 3 ¾ inch Star Wars line has constantly gotten better from a quality/artistic standpoint. I would argue that some of the new 30th Anniversary Collection figures are borderline masterpieces at their scale! Yet a certain percentage of collectors still dismiss them as dime store clutter due to their “unlimited” nature.

As I considered the limited/rare debate for this piece, I began to realize the depths to which it has influenced my own collecting experience. I, like many others, am drawn to limited items and, more particularly, to what are rare limited items. Am I just a selfish, greedy swag monger? God, I hope not! I really do enjoy and value my collection – from the most common piece to the rarest. But I’ve had an epiphany; I enjoy the limited - especially the rare limited items - on another level. They elicit a stronger visceral response from somewhere deep inside me. I can’t help it! Is it because they were harder to acquire somehow? Maybe - although not always. Do they all have better “stories” behind them? Some do – some don’t. Is it because they’re worth more money on the secondary market? Even though I’m not selling my collection, I’ve realized from writing this piece that this is certainly part of it. I’ve determined that I shouldn’t feel ashamed of that; it’s a natural part of collecting. It’s a natural part of being a human being.

All of this has made me have a deeper understanding of why edition sizes are so important to collectors. (They’re obviously important to the companies themselves for practical business reasons as well.) There seems to be endless debate, conversation and downright arguing in the forums of collectibles websites whenever an edition size is announced. There are clearly distinct camps of people – some who think the smaller the better and others who think just the opposite. Those who want smaller edition sizes are perceived as people who want pieces that will retain their value and appreciate more quickly on the secondary market. This mindset is often met with a great deal of criticism and sometimes accusations of a base desire to scalp items and make money. The validity of those accusations aside, I think to be fair, people must consider that there are some people out there who really just want to own super-limited items because it makes them enjoy their collection more.

Look at how edition size and rarity has cast its shadow over Gentle Giant Star Wars mini-bust collecting. There are amazing pieces that are certainly underappreciated due to large edition sizes. In my mind, the “Revenge of the Sith” Darth Vader is an amazing bust, but at 20,000 pieces it’s rarely discussed for its artistic virtues. Meanwhile, the Blackhole Stormtrooper with the smallest edition size (and smallest U.S. release) of any bust in the line is still discussed almost daily in newsgroups. Its popularity even has merited two entries in the image guides at GentleGiantCollectors.com! Most collectors give it a place of honor at the dinner table even though it is a simple repaint and depicts a character from the comics of which most are unfamiliar. Ask yourself this: Considering all the “Revenge of the Sith” clones are the same sculpt, is the Utupau Clone Trooper really any artistically cooler than the 501st Special Ops Clone Trooper? Unless you have an orange fetish - probably not! It’s
simply a smaller edition size and a matter of supply and demand that makes it more sought after. Because of that many collectors subconsciously enjoy the Utupau clone bust more and think of it as a “better” piece than its clone brethren.
While edition size continues to be king in the world of limited collectibles, once and a while a piece is so amazingly done that its artistic merits outweighs all else. For example, the Boba Fett bust (which was recently voted as the best piece in the line by forum members at GentleGiantCollectors.com) has an edition size of 7,500 pieces. This was quite high for a bust at the time it was released - although the character’s popularity certainly was deserving of a higher edition size than most others. Demand for this piece continues to be strong - most collectors have no desire to sell their Fett, and new collectors continue to jump into collecting Gentle Giant and immediately seek out this piece. Its value is simply amazing on the secondary market despite that fact it has a relatively “high” overall edition size. I currently own Boba Fett #20, which I got from the Gentle Giant booth at San Diego Comic-Con many years ago. He is certainly not for sale. In fact, I’ve even been quoted as saying he may go to the grave with me!
Funny, how I felt the need to say I have Boba Fett #20. The practice of individually numbering pieces feeds into this discussion as well. GentleGiantCollectors.com has a registry for people to keep track of their individually numbered Gentle Giant items, and with thousands of items registered, its popularity is undeniable. Isn’t it amazing that many of us seek out “low” numbered pieces in an edition run? The lower the number the more special we feel about it for some reason. People generally go bonkers if they receive #1 in any line. Some will even pay a premium for a “low” or “special” number, even though it is identical to every other piece in the edition. What makes a number special? Could be a lot of things. Some might think the Emperor Palpatine Gentle Giant bust #66 was special due to him executing order #66. I’ve seen people get excited over pieces of evil characters, such as the Sideshow/Weta Balrog statue, that are #666. Recently, a fellow collecting pal even started a campaign to get piece #42 of Sideshow’s Premium Format Boba Fett. Why #42? I have no idea – maybe it’s his favorite number. It really doesn’t matter. All’s that does matter is that the limited, numbered edition of the piece played an important role in his collecting of the item.

Interestingly, Sideshow Collectibles numbers their premium format pieces, but currently does not individually number their 12” pieces. Many collectors constantly crow about this, compelled by some subconscious need to know which Luke Skywalker Jedi Knight exclusive 12” figure they have out of the 1,250 that were produced. I’ve even
seen some collectible conspiracy theorists claiming they don’t number them so they can continue to “find” them in the warehouse. This is simply a ridiculous claim in my humble opinion, but again, it’s amazing how a figure lacking concrete proof of its limited nature can influence how people think of it.

I assert that this is why artist proof (AP)/Promo items from Gentle Giant are often seen as more desirable and command, at times, hefty premiums on the secondary market. Certain collectors try to attain only AP/Promo pieces for their collection. Even though these pieces do not differ from the mainstream editions of the items (other than being marked as AP/Promo on the base), some can’t resist having something they perceive to be even rarer – as these items are produced in smaller quantities for promotional purposes. Interestingly however, there are a small minority of people that see these pieces in just the opposite light - deeming them less rare because there are 50 or so of them all marked as “Promo” rather than having a unique number to distinguish themselves.

Here’s what I ask. Next time a very cool limited edition collectible is announced that you “must have”, try and avoid finding out what the edition size is. When you get the item in your hands, don’t look at the edition number on the base of the box (or of the piece itself) for a day. Then, after you’ve had a chance to really enjoy your new collectible… take a peek at the numbers underneath… and see how the limited factor comes into play.

Happy collecting!