



Some scholars might quibble with the hasty characterization of a misogynistic Revolution and an oppositional Enlightenment, just as the claim that half of these women were 'atheists' requires more evidence to convince. In general, their rebellious streak might be overstated: some of them embraced unconventional lifestyles, including living with a female companion, but others refrained from publishing, and d'Arconville in the 1790s ended up denouncing the *philosophes*.

Yet whilst the broader framework can be disputed, the skill and colour with which these biographical portraits have been executed is compelling. *Minerva's French Sisters* is a major contribution to the history of Enlightenment science and culture which, like its subjects, is both audacious and inspiring.

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## Christoph Irmscher, *The Poetics of Natural History*, 2nd edn

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Lisa Winters

Independent scholar

*The Poetics of Natural History* by Christoph Irmscher was originally published in 1999 and is described as a 'groundbreaking, now classic book' in the publisher's synopsis of this second edition. The book follows the central premise that in pre-Darwinian natural history, science and art were not separated into incompatible fields. The act of collecting and displaying (Part One of the book) was in itself a reflection of the collectors, and the exhibits they created were not only meant to instruct but also to create a sense of identity and wonder, something Irmscher equates with art. Furthermore, collectors represented natural history in publications, from letters to travelogues, catalogues and drawings. These representations (Part Two of the book), the author argues, were not just created as scientific records but were intentionally artistic, and can be considered collections in themselves. Irmscher covers American natural history, as the drive to document and collect the 'New World' in particular was closely related to identity, both of the emerging nation and of the individuals who were trying to establish it to cement their reputations.

Irmscher lays these central ideas down in the introduction and then presents the reader with six case studies of men who collected and displayed natural history, sometimes alongside objects of other types. 'Displaying' is made up of chapters concerning John and William Bartram, Charles Wilson Peale and P.T. Barnum. 'Representing' begins with a concept rather than a person: rattlesnake fascination. It continues with John James Audubon's fascination with birds and finally Louis Agassiz's drive to document the entire natural world and prove the fixity of species. The book ends with extensive notes, a selected bibliography and an index, leaving the main content of the book at 292 pages, including twenty-five colour and forty-five black-and-white images. Here Irmscher mirrors his subject very well, the book being a good mix of the scientific and the artistic.

If all collections hold a mirror to the collector, then this book does too. Irmscher identifies himself as a 'biographer and literary critic' on his website, and his background as a scholar of English literature is evident. Within art history, the question is often asked, what were the artist's intentions? Answers to this question often more accurately reflect on those contemplating the artwork than on the artists themselves. By framing these collections as artworks and considering the collector's intentions, Irmscher reveals his own point of view more than that of the collectors. His prose is engaging and at times beautiful, but it raises the question whether the emotions and adjectives used to describe the events are part of the historical narrative or products of the author's own reflections.

That said, this book is mainly biographical, and Irmscher's skill as a biographer shines through. The chapters are detailed while remaining highly readable, and they rely heavily on primary sources. Irmscher makes frequent use of quotes and imagery in order to let readers experience the 'art' of the collector's work and get to know the collectors in question better. The quotes and images never feel intrusive, or merely decorative; they are a main focus of the text. Irmscher includes bridges between chapters, linking the works or obsessions of one collector to that of another, though the chapters are also interesting to read on their own. There is no real conclusion to the book; instead, the author ends the final chapter, on Agassiz, with a quote about the naturalist that he suggests encompasses the premise of this book: he 'looked on the world as if it and he were made for each other, and on the vast diversity of living things as if he were there with authority to take mental possession of them all' (p. 192).

For this second edition, Irmscher has teamed up with photographer Rosamond Purcell. Purcell has been intrigued by natural-history collections for some time and has visited museums to photograph specimens behind the scenes. This edition has five full-page photographs of specimens added to the title page, foreword, introduction and the titles of the two parts of the book. In addition, she has written the foreword and some short notes on the background of the photographs and why she has chosen them. Purcell's work is a great symbiosis of natural history and art and shows these specimens as man-made objects. I would have loved to see more of her work incorporated and to have the photographs linked to the main text. As it stands, it feels more like a preview of her work than an addition to the book itself. This second edition also has a new preface with updated reference works.

The content of the book (regardless of the edition) makes for an interesting read. Its goal is to show familiar names and works from pre-Darwinian American natural history from a new (artistic) perspective. It presents readers with this perspective at the start and then lets them explore it themselves through the different case studies. If you are looking for an exhaustive history or a thorough exploration of the psychology behind collecting and the social dimensions associated with it, this is not the right book. If you'd like to explore a world of natural history as curated by the author, or simply would like to know more about the persons discussed, I would highly recommend this edition. If you already own this book and are wondering if you should get the new edition, perhaps just dive into the world of Rosamond Purcell on your own.

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