The British Museum’s Trustee’s Report from February 12, 1819, notes that John Thomas Smith, the Keeper of Prints and Drawings, was preparing a “catalogue of Miss Banks’s truly interesting collection of visiting cards and Co.”¹ The assemblage to which the report refers is that of Sarah Sophia Banks, sister of the well-known botanist and President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks. Smith’s fascination with the collection is unsurprising. It comprises approximately 9,000 coins, metals, and tokens, and more than 19,000 articles of print culture, including music, playbills, a large library, admission tickets, visitor tickets, shop bills, invitations, ballads, newspaper clippings, fashion plates, political portraits and satirical prints, pamphlets, lottery tickets, watch plates, book tickets, and depictions of public ceremonies, among other items.² Sarah Sophia’s sister-in-law, Lady Dorothea Banks, had donated the collection to the museum in November 1818, shortly after Sarah Sophia’s death. Divided between the Departments of Coins and Metals and Prints and Drawings, it now forms part of the museum’s foundational collections.³ Nine albums of

assorted ephemera, along with her collections of books and playbills were later transferred to the British Library.\(^4\) The librarian and antiquarian Sir Henry Ellis estimated the value of the collection to be just £150 at the time of acquisition.\(^5\) However, Smith declared that the collection provided many examples of “the first efforts of our Celebrated Engravers.”\(^6\) Despite its modest approximation of the collection’s financial value, the museum recognized the artistic value of the collection.

Today much of Bank’s print collection has been disassembled, re-catalogued, and combined with other collections. However, certain key elements remain intact. First, there survives in the British Museum a number of the mounts she created for systematizing and displaying her items. Second, in the British Library there is a catalogue naming the “books, etc.” that were situated in the family accommodation of the Banks residence at 32 Soho Square, in which Banks listed all her printed collections.\(^7\) Together, the mounts and catalogue provide valuable material evidence regarding her collecting practices. As this essay will demonstrate, Sarah Sophia Banks used the practice of collecting and the display of her collections as a way of participating in dynamic intellectual and social circles.


The Collection at 32 Soho Square

Sarah Sophia Banks seems to have strategically created a supporting role for herself in her brother’s career. In 1777, Sir Joseph purchased a residence at 32 Soho Square, London. Sarah Sophia seized the chance of moving out of her mother’s house in Chelsea and wrote to Sir Joseph, offering her own money to help him purchase the house or at least buy the furniture. Over the years, he transformed the property, renovating some of the rooms and adding an extensive library, printing room, and herbarium to the back of the building, a project most likely headed by the architect George Dance Jr. This section of the house was transformed into a type of scientific laboratory, and 32 Soho became a well-known center for scientific activities. Sir Joseph hired a principal curator, the Swedish botanist Dr. Daniel Solander, as well as numerous other colleagues to supervise his wide-ranging collections of natural specimens. One year later Sir Joseph wed the twenty-year-old heiress Dorothea Hugessen, daughter of William Hugessen of Provender, Kent. In 1780, Sarah Sophia was invited to reside with her brother and wife at their home; she remained there permanently. The three were inseparable and participated in a busy social calendar, which is evident through many of the admission tickets, invitation tickets, and visitor tickets that Sarah Sophia collected. The invitation to live with Sir Joseph and Lady Banks presented her with the opportunity she desired to carve her own niche in elite society by becoming a well-known collector of coins and printed materials.

When examining Sarah Sophia and Sir Joseph’s collecting practices, one recognizes numerous overlapping interests and influences. In its materiality, methodology, organization, and storage, Sarah Sophia’s collections complimented those of her brother. Both collections were stored in boxes,

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9 Ibid., 330–37.
10 After Solander’s death in 1782, Jonas Carlsson Dryander became Sir Joseph’s principal curator.
cabinets and Solander cases. Her printed material was compatible with her brother’s library, collections of dried plants and printing press, with items pinned, pressed, and pasted on large paper mounts and bound into portfolios. The collection of ephemera conveys her interest and engagement with the text and aesthetics of a wider print culture. The OED defines “ephemera” as referring to organisms found in nature that live for only a day. In this sense, Sarah Sophia’s collection of printed materials and her brother’s collections of insects and plants may both be understood as “ephemera.” The intention that their collections be preserved for future generations challenges the notion of impermanence that the term “ephemera” suggests.

Sarah Sophia’s collection was an instrument for polite sociability, and social events quickly became central to the house’s public identity. Sir Joseph’s first biographer, Edward Smith, describes 32 Soho Square as “a vast museum”; while the Swedish naturalist Dr. Daniel Solander acted as Sir Joseph’s curator and librarian, Sarah Sophia was “mistress of the house.”

According to Harold B. Carter’s floor plan of 32 Soho Square, “Miss Banks’s bedroom” and “dressing room” were located on the first floor, directly across from the drawing room and the south room, or great room. This means that Sarah Sophia occupied the area of the house used for hosting many social events, including regular Sunday soirees in the south room that were attended by both men and women. The gatherings taking place there do not seem to have been rigidly planned events with any fixed limit to the number of participants, set guest list or any particular rules.

Visitors to the Banks home commented positively on their time there. The orientalist and vice president of the Royal Society, William Marsden,
wrote that at the Banks residence “one met a variety of persons and acquired information of what was going forward in the world of literature and science.” The Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper wrote enthusiastically about his time visiting 32 Soho Square: “Nowhere is there to be found a house, a library and company as that of Sir Joseph!” While many visitors came to examine Sir Joseph’s natural history collections, others with an interest in the advancement of the commercial arts seized the opportunity to view Sarah Sophia’s collections, which convey her interest in coinage and her engagement with the text and aesthetics of a wider print culture. Viewers of Sarah Sophia’s collection could flip through the albums, examining and touching the objects. In semi-public domestic spaces like the south room, Sarah Sophia could showcase her collections, encouraging visitors to actively partake in a type of sociability that merged science and art.

In its display and storage, Sarah Sophia’s collection of artificialia provided an emblematic counterpart to her brother’s naturalia. For example, her much cherished collections of music, heraldry, and some of her visiting cards were kept in the anteroom, which was located next to her brother’s study and just between the foyer of the domestic space and Sir Joseph’s scientific headquarters at the back of the building; thus her collection of artificialia served as a portico to Sir Joseph’s naturalia. The display of natural and artificial collections draws on the same methodology used for many private cabinets and public institutional collections, such as the British Museum and the Royal Society. Unsurprisingly, the Banks home at 32 Soho was located near the British Museum, of which Sir Joseph was trustee, and near Somerset House, home to the Royal Society. A further association between the Banks home at 32 Soho Square and the Royal Society is evident in the large communal park situated in the middle of the square where a statue of Charles II, who signed the first Royal Charter to the Royal Society in 1662, was installed in 1681. Collections like those of the Banks, the Royal Society’s, and the British Museum’s, universal in


scope and organized in a taxonomic manner, reflected an eighteenth-century curiosity toward the world and a desire of knowledge for the improvement of mankind, values the Banks family espoused.

Cutting, Arranging, and Pasting

In their display and arrangement, Sarah Sophia’s collecting practices resonate with broader trends in eighteenth-century collecting and graphic culture. First of all, her collection is divided according to category of object and the practical dictates of scale. Prints and broadsheets—which tend to be quite substantial in size—were usually catalogued and bound into portfolios of various dimensions.\(^\text{18}\) To fill her portfolios, she regularly purchased prints. The inventory reveals that she also extracted engravings and frontispieces from a variety of books, re-contextualizing them within her collections.\(^\text{19}\) Next to the prints, she writes useful annotations, including the names of persons depicted. The smaller objects she selected—trade cards, admission tickets, book tickets, visitor tickets, newspaper snippets, watch plates, and book tickets, among other items—were mostly glued with wet adhesive to sheets of paper measuring 18¼ × 23½ inches (Fig. 1). These large sheets of paper were folded vertically to create folders, the contents of which were recorded in pen on the outside. Banks most likely intended to bind these mounts together into a volume at a later date.

The practice of collecting enabled Sarah Sophia to create a range of classifications and arrangements. When organizing her admission tickets on mounts, she did not gather and arrange all of the tickets on a given page prior to pasting; rather, she pasted as she went, as evident in the

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Figure 1: Mount of visitor tickets belonging to “English Earls,” Collection of Sarah Sophia Banks, Prints and Drawings, British Museum, C.1-112–132.
mount displaying admission tickets for “Balls” (Fig. 2). This method created an asymmetrical layout with different-sized works and varied pictures. Sometimes multiples of the same tickets are glued on one mount with the seals intact, symbols of authenticity. Occasionally, the perspective on some tickets suggests depth of field, disrupting the two-dimensional surface of the page, such as the staircase seen on the lower left side (Fig. 2). These mounts appear to imitate exhibition displays like those of the Royal Academy of the Arts in that they create an overall mosaic effect, centered around key pieces and inviting comparisons between featured items. Her arrangements often alternate between a rigorous visual order and crowded bricolage, inviting new assessments and interpretations. They are an expression, not only of her own tastes and aesthetic sensibilities, but of the tastes of the era of which she was a part. Cutting, arranging, and pasting a broad range of graphic material between sheets of paper provided Sarah Sophia with a means to construct, record, and circulate a wide range of aesthetic values and visual standards of taste.

Banks’s collection of visitor cards exemplifies the diverse organizational methods she explored. Influenced by the Linnaean methodology her brother utilized for organizing his natural history specimens, she devised her own classificatory systems. While this may have closely aligned her collections with her brother’s practices, she consciously created taxonomies that best suited the material she collected. According to her hand-labelled mounts, she simultaneously categorizes cards based on social hierarchy, aesthetic features, and geographical origins. Each method of systematization invites a different way of viewing the same type of object. Her volumes on “nobility” are organized by rank, from “English earls” to “English persons,” in columns and groupings reminiscent of a family tree (Fig. 1). Her “blanks” (visitor cards taken mostly from engraver’s books) are grouped together according to their style or subject, highlighting their use of “squares,” “figures,” “architecture,” etc. (Fig. 3). In these volumes, the designs and engravers of the cards take precedence over their holders or their country of origin. Cards classified under her “foreign” designation, however, deriving from the continent and beyond, are organized by the country in which they were produced and circulated, encouraging international comparison. It is worth noting by way of contrast that her admission tickets
Figure 2: Mount of admission tickets for "Balls," Collection of Sarah Sophia Banks, Prints and Drawings, British Museum, C.2-65–86.
Figure 3: Mount of visitor tickets depicting “Figures,” Collection of Sarah Sophia Banks, Prints and Drawings, British Museum, C.1-2696–2724
Cutting, Arranging, and Pasting

and shop bills are organized alphabetically according to themes, events, or occupations. Other items, such as her collection of bookplates, are organized according to category of object. Often different forms of ephemera are pasted on a single mount to contextualize a particular event (Fig. 4); Banks always allowed the material to inform her methodological choices. The mounts thus reveal her preoccupation with systematizing the world.

Most of the items Banks gathered were public and purchasable, but some of the material was personal; many of the items belonged to her and to family members. Others were gifted to her by friends and acquaintances. Written in pen, next to the articles is the year she acquired them. These dates disregard the chronological sequence of when the item was actually used; instead she documents the year she obtained the item. The history of the collection appears to take priority over other kinds of history. Furthermore, she frequently makes annotations next to items, which provide more information about a person, an event, a particular design, or the object’s provenance. Her annotations add to this sense of an individual hand and sensibility at work, one that counters the repetitive, mechanical, and reproductive nature of the collected materials.

The Manuscript Catalogue of Books

Banks prepared a manuscript catalogue of books, which contains close to 300 pages and measures 31.4 cm x 19.8 cm. Not only does it list the books kept in the house, but also provides a general inventory of her print collections. Today it is an essential complement to another library inventory produced by H. H. Baber and Walter and H. F. Cary in 1820–23, which records the contents and location of items in Sir Joseph’s library in the back of the residence. The publication dates of the books and prints recorded in this volume reveal that she produced the inventory around 1814 and

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Figure 4: Mount displaying admission tickets to “Balloons,” Collection of Sarah Sophia Banks, Prints and Drawings, British Museum, C.2-11–28.
continued adding to it thereafter. The manuscript reveals that she kept some items at Reevesby Abbey, the Banks family seat in Lincolnshire, but most were housed in the domestic area at 32 Soho Square. Unlike auction catalogues, which list items in lots, the inventory provides detailed information about the arrangement and methodology of the collection.

The catalogue is a precise guide to the six rooms where Sarah Sophia’s printed material was stored in the domestic quarters: the L(ittle) or Anteroom, Room, Front Drawing Room, South Room, Mrs. Banks’s Room, Room up 3 pr. [pairs] stairs and the Dressing Room.²² On the top of the first page, she created a letter-code that conveniently maps the exact places where items were stored around the house. In these rooms select pieces of furniture—wardrobes, bookcases, and a pianoforte case—housed items from her collections. Some of the furniture may have been especially built for storing her collections. The key further describes how items were kept: on the ground; in drawers; behind wire doors; in oak, mahogany and deal boxes; on shelves; in cubes (possibly the same type of Chippendale cubes Sir Joseph had made especially for his specimens), in drawers and Solander cases, a botanical storage device invented by Sir Joseph’s aforementioned curator. The manuscript reveals that Sarah Sophia employed numerous techniques for closeting, stacking, and shelving her collections.

The catalogue makes evident that materiality was an important factor for Banks as she organized her collections. The manuscript does not record any of her coins, medals, or tokens, even though these were also kept at 32 Soho. (Those are documented in separate volumes.)²³ This manuscript was strictly for books and printed materials, including an impressive collection of “musick” (now lost), and well over 1,000 books covering a broad range of subjects, including religion, antiquities, numismatics, archery, and heraldry. The manuscript also lists an extensive collection of print materials pertaining to comedy, tragedy, comic, opera, and farce, which were housed at Reevesby Abbey.

Like Banks’s hand-labelled visiting card mounts, her inventory of books and printed materials shows experimentation with diverse systems

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²² BL, 460.d.13.
of classification. The first part of the inventory logs the printed material she collected alphabetically, according to author, title, or item type, rather than by genre. “High” forms of print culture, poetry, and classical literature, intermingle with “low” forms, magazines, and ballads. In subsequent sections of the document, however, she draws upon thematic and other methods of organization. The apparent inconsistencies of the inventory are as fascinating as its obvious efficiencies. For example, under “Visiting Tickets,” which is listed among other categories of items beginning with “V” in her alphabetical list, Banks includes complex and at times confusing sub-listings. In block entries with little information, she records under “Visiting Tickets” the existence of four volumes of “admission tickets” and two volumes of “shop bills,” as well as a wide range of other ephemera from all over the house. She lists, for instance, numerous portfolios featuring a variety of prints. Why did Sarah Sophia choose to classify a wide range of items as “Visiting Tickets”? Was she aggregating these items under this category because of undocumented material or aesthetic similarities? The inventory reveals Banks’s obsessive need to organize and arrange, but it also conveys the occasional inadequacy of classificatory systems when seeking to organize a vast array of objects.

As this essay demonstrates, Sarah Sophia Banks used her collection to create a communicative bond among viewers, a connection based on conversation and cultural awareness. She may have been inspired by contemporaneous scientific taxonomies and the work of her brother, but her complex methods of systematization suggest she also created a collection that was truly her own. Her achievements as a collector attest to the ability of eighteenth-century women to exploit creative opportunities for participation in cultural and intellectual spheres.24

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