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CHAPTER FIVE

ONE LONG ADVENTURE: COLLECTING SCOTTISH-YEMENI HISTORY AT NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

Friederike Voigt and Victoria Adams
“ONE LONG ADVENTURE” is a quotation from a book written and published by Jim Wilson on his time in the Yemen Arab Republic from 1976 to 1982, where he worked first as a Dispensing Technician and Administrator for the Church of Scotland medical team in Rada’a, and later as Field Director for the Save the Children Fund in al-Rowtha (Wilson, 2011a: 5). In writing down his memories, he drew inspiration from the photographs he had taken, gifts from friends and grateful patients as well as the clothes, body oils and perfumes, basketry, coffee sets, smoking pipes and ceramic bowls he had brought back to Scotland as personal souvenirs. Together they evoked memories of his life in the country, reminding him of particular people, places and events such as his curiosity when he started to explore the town, the Yemenis who taught him culture and language, and the work in the hospital that he found both rewarding and challenging. He had made a decision to spend his life in Yemen when he left Scotland as a young missionary and although his circumstances and career changed, it was an experience that forged him and had a lasting effect. For over 30 years, when he was back in Scotland, these artefacts had created a continuous link to this early chapter of his life and in his retirement he returned to it, capturing his recollections.
in a book of short stories. With its completion, the artefacts became available to serve a different purpose and it was at this point Wilson offered his collection to National Museums Scotland (NMS) for acquisition (Wilson, 2011b).

The museum decided not only to accept the artefacts but also additional documentation Wilson had kindly suggested to donate. This supplementary material was related to his life in Yemen and included books about the region and Arabic dictionaries, more than 700 slides, maps and other visual aids used for presentations, personal notes, letters and even spare stamps. The 104 artefacts encompass household equipment, religious paraphernalia, clothing including samples of the different covers worn by women in Sana’a and Rada’a, and personal articles such as amulet containers, kohl applicators or a toothbrush. These items are all functional objects and were used in everyday life at the time he lived in Yemen. Wilson chose to acquire what he thought would illustrate a certain aspect of Yemeni culture that was either different from, or similar to, life in Scotland. This collecting rationale was motivated by his duty to report back on his work in Yemen to the sponsoring parishes when on furlough in Scotland. There are a few groups of objects that represent a distinct craft,
such as the basketry he commissioned from a village in the neighbourhood of Rada’a, or a range of ochre and green glazed pottery that was available from the local suq; others, however, were collected as souvenirs or for their decorative features, and seem to be connected to each other only through their place of acquisition and the collector.

The museum was given the choice to select from the whole collection. Due to its variety, some objects could have been singled out on the basis of their market value, others because they were good examples of workmanship or representative of a certain aspect of Yemeni culture. Groups of objects could have been isolated as they matched parts of the existing museum collection. Each of these criteria would have been justifiable in the context of the collecting history of the museum.

NMS was initially an industrial museum assigned to acquire raw and processed materials, as well as finished products as a source of knowledge for the benefit of Scottish industry. But in the course of the nineteenth century the understanding of its scope shifted to science and art, extending the area of collecting to artefacts and samples that would document the history of technological development globally. As the growing collections required specialist curators,
more attention was paid to the individual areas of responsibility and additions to the Middle Eastern holdings in the twentieth century were made across the disciplines of decorative arts, ethnography and archaeology.

These are all academic standards, and applying them to Wilson’s personal collection would have meant a subjective assessment of the artefacts. Curatorial knowledge would have informed the process of selection, and when an association with an object in the existing collection was not immediately obvious it would probably have been rejected. There is yet another implication of such an approach. It does not recognise the fact that value is added to an object through the collector’s intention at the time of its acquisition. Selected for a specific quality, the relationships which are created between individual objects in a collection can give insights beyond the understanding of their creation and use. While evidence of the latter is inherent in an object and can be deduced from its physical appearance, the role the collector attributed to it within a group of artefacts is transient and depends on keeping it in its specific array. A collection as a whole therefore represents knowledge – knowledge about the scholarly approaches of a certain time or the nature and history
of cultural contacts, for example. Reconstructing the shifts in the appreciation of the collections of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Charles D. Waterston raises concerns about the tendency for selective acquisitions and the fact that with the change of an institution’s mission over time specimens are used to serve different targets, irrespective of the original purpose of their collecting:

*The integrity of a collection will be lost if only those parts of it are preserved which can be fitted in to a context of use other than that for which it was made.* (Collections in Context: 138).

This is not to say that the acquisition of a complete collection is an indispensable requirement. However, there can be circumstances where it becomes mandatory. In the case of Wilson’s collection, the museum considered the social context of its formation to be as important as the individual objects. This chapter will therefore discuss the historical significance of a collection as a reason for its unconditional acquisition. The first part will examine the museum’s existing holdings from the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen to demonstrate how the collecting history of an institution can inform the process of decision making, and
justify the acquisition of an entire collection. It will explain the steps undertaken to preserve the context of the collection and how this information will be made available to the public. In the second part of the chapter, the material NMS acquired from Wilson will be assessed in more detail. The ways in which he obtained the artefacts will be analysed to show how his understanding of the missionary work, his view of the country, and his relationship to the people shaped the collection.

When the decision was made to acquire Wilson’s collection, all modern states of the Arabian Peninsula were represented in the museum’s holdings of World Cultures. However, further analysis showed, first, that except for Yemen the museum does not have any historical collections (before 1945) from that region; and, second, that all additions made in the second half of the twentieth century focused on those countries where no objects at all had been acquired in the past. With a professional and personal interest in textiles and the Arabian Gulf, Jennifer Scarce, curator from 1963 to 1998, collected during several field trips in the 1970s and 1980s male and female dresses and nomadic weavings in Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait (Royal Scottish Museum). She travelled twice to Kuwait and the substantial acquisitions she made
there were shown at the museum in the exhibition *Costumes and Textiles from Kuwait* in 1985 (Scarce). This was in compliance with the museum’s acquisition policy which aimed at “a balanced coverage of costume across the range of Middle Eastern countries” and justified the acquisition of three pieces of woman’s dress from Saudi Arabia from an art dealer.  

In 1995, with the purchase of eleven pieces of traditional Omani silver jewellery, Scarce was able to complement the two outfits of an Omani man and woman she had acquired 20 years before. The only artefacts in the Middle Eastern collection from Bahrain and Qatar are fragments of pottery and pieces of worked flint. The acceptance of this excavation material from different sites along the Arabian Gulf coast between Kuwait and Oman in the 1970s seems unmotivated in the retrospective view of a collection of dress and jewellery. It might have been driven, however, by the wish to fill the gap that existed with regard to artefacts from the Arabian Peninsula.  

Currently, collecting has shifted away from a balanced representation across the regions, and large field acquisitions are no longer a prime method of collection development. The descriptive qualities of an object have become secondary in terms of illustrating a certain aspect of a culture, and have been
supplanted by an analytical approach that is supported by smaller but strongly-linked groups of artefacts. In other words, the emphasis is on the depth of a collection in a specific area or type of object, rather than attempting to cover cultures in their breadth. This also means that adding to the existing collections is preferred to opening up a new area of collecting, and consequently knowledge of the collections’ history within the institution becomes crucial with regard to an informed decision on a new acquisition.

The fact that the holdings from Yemen were not equally systematically developed might not have been a deliberate curatorial decision but a question of travel opportunities or the availability of artefacts on the art market. Apart from two armlets, possibly from Aden that were acquired shortly after the museum’s foundation in 1854, the first group of Yemeni artefacts arrived in the 1930s. These nineteen objects were everyday items: a cradle, pots, bowls and jugs, pipes and snuffboxes, locks, lamps and basketry; only one piece, a carved figure, was an antique. Another nineteen utilitarian objects and men’s clothing, dating from the 1940s, as well as two pieces of female dress came as gifts and internal transfers into the collection in the second half of the twentieth century. Why did artefacts specifically from Yemen enter the collection,
but not from other parts of the Peninsula? The city of Aden and its hinterland were under British rule from 1839 until 1967 when the People’s Republic of South Yemen was founded. The items collected came through British people who lived and worked there. For example, Andrew Rodger Waterston (1912-1996), who collected Yemeni artefacts between 1943 and 1947, was an entomologist and Assistant Keeper of Natural History at the Royal Scottish Museum at the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1943 he joined the Colonial Office’s Middle East Supply Centre in Cairo as Locust Officer in the Middle East Anti-Locust Unit, and subsequently took charge of the Palestine Anti-Locust Unit in Saudi Arabia. He stayed on in this capacity until 1947, when he became Entomological Adviser and Attaché for Scientific Affairs at the British Embassies throughout the Middle East (Shaw & Gibson).²

An institution with a long-standing presence in Yemen was the Church of Scotland South Arabia Mission which was established in 1885 by Ion Keith Falconer (1856-1887) in Shaykh Uthman, a village near Aden to provide medical services and education (McLaren Ritchie). The first museum donors of Yemeni artefacts were two missionaries with the South Arabia Mission. Dr P. W. R. Petrie (1903-1986),
the son of a minister in Loanhead, near Edinburgh was appointed to the Mission in 1926, and Reverend William Idris Jones (n.d.), who gave the carved figure mentioned above, joined a year later (McLaren Ritchie). The different items which Dr Petrie donated to the museum throughout the 1930s correlate to the stages of his life in South Arabia. A Bedouin cradle from Shaykh Uthman highlights the fact that the founder, Keith Falconer, had deliberately chosen the village as a place where the missionaries would be able to come in contact with Bedouins from the interior. In late 1931 and early 1932 Dr Petrie travelled through parts of Yemen and also visited Ta’izz at the invitation of the Amir (McLaren Ritchie). Within the collection, a wooden lock and a tobacco pipe are said to come from the Amir’s palace. Sana’a, Hais and Dhala are mentioned as the provenance of other pieces. From 1937 to 1943 Dr Petrie and his wife were on secondment in Sana’a. Items he had acquired there were given to the museum in 1939 when he visited Scotland with his family. Dr Petrie finally left Aden for Scotland in 1946 and lived until his death in Loanhead.

With the end of British rule in South Arabia in 1967 the missionaries had to withdraw temporarily from Shaykh Uthman. They were permitted by the
new government to return some few months later; however, their medical work in Shaykh Uthman ultimately came to an end in March 1972 when the hospital was taken over by the Ministry of Health of the then People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (McLaren Ritchie). A new and final opportunity to continue work in Yemen arose when the Church of Scotland Overseas Council agreed to run, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health of the Yemen Arab Republic and in accordance with their policy, the government hospital in Rada’a (McLaren Ritchie). One member of the medical team who started work in Rada’a in 1972 was Jim Wilson. When it became clear in 1978 that the missionaries’ services were no longer required since a sufficient number of Yemenis had qualified as doctors, it was Wilson who concluded that the team should withdraw (Wilson, 2013).

Collections are documents of history; they are evidence of cultural encounters or political interactions, setting the conditions under which they were assembled. Museums preserve this history as part of their collecting activity. The collection from Yemen at NMS was started with artefacts donated by missionaries of the Church of Scotland South Arabia Mission. With the acquisition of Wilson’s objects from Yemen it was possible to preserve a specific moment of
Scottish history in relation to another country. His collection has a value because of the significance of the individual objects and beyond this as a historical document. It will allow us today and in the future to narrate the history of the Church of Scotland South Arabia Mission from its beginning to its end.

The significance of Wilson’s collection required the museum to think about a methodology to gather supplementary material as comprehensively as possible. From the beginning, when Wilson contacted the museum, he related in conversations a wealth of facts about every object. This information was not only about the place and time of their acquisition, but about the reasons for his interest in obtaining them, a particular situation, or the people associated with them. How would it be possible to ensure that the character of the collection, the purpose and methods of its assemblage, as well as the stories that connected the collector’s life and work in Yemen with these artefacts, would still be understood in the future and recognised as an inseparable part of each of the items in question? Collecting in this way means to collect people. The museum holds a copy of Wilson’s book of memoirs which is a source of information about the daily work of the medical team in Rada’a and also some of the objects in his
collection. Additionally, an interview was conducted with the donor on 9 October 2013 that will form part of an archive, comprising further material such as his biography, personal documents, and a record of the honours he received. An important part of the documentation work is to make the material accessible altogether. The collection of slides which are a visual record of his experiences will be digitised and made accessible online. The artefacts have been registered and can be searched on the museum’s collection database. Without doubt, virtual access to the collection offers a great advantage; however Wilson’s strongest message was the persuasive power of the artefact. These can be accessed for study and research in the National Museums Collection Centre. The documentation of his collection is a work in progress and the information provided will be updated accordingly.

Methodology and motivations
The focus of this chapter now shifts to consider the specific methodology and motivations for acquisition of the collection by the museum. Drawing on Wilson’s publication and interview to provide background information and acquisition context, it will explore the close relationship between Wilson’s personal experiences and his collection.
FIG 5.1: Small basket containing samples of frankincense and myrrh, used by Wilson to inspire audiences on missionary deputations, and to prompt his own recollections. [Diameter 10.7cm. Acc. no. V.2012.126.1+2. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]
Wilson’s donation includes 104 artefacts, 763 colour slides, and an associated personal archive. Almost half the objects in the collection are textiles, mainly acquired by Wilson through purchase. There are several examples of male and female clothing, accompanied by furnishings and domestic items. Male garments include: long robes (thobes); wrapped skirt (futah); sash; headdress and cord (mashida); and prayer caps. Women’s clothing includes: covering cloths with stylistic designs typical of fabrics imported from Africa and India; smaller face veils with embroidery; a red, white and black tie-dyed veil from Sana’a (maghmuq); a synthetic black skirt, cloak and double veil (sharshaf); two dresses; prayer scarves; and bonnets for girls and babies. Two large covering cloths (sitaras) demonstrate the colour preferences of women from Rada’a (cream with red and black floral decoration) and Sana’a (dark reds and blues). Non-clothing textiles include: two prayer rugs; woven mats with small hookah scorches; a large pictorial wall hanging from a Yemeni sitting room (muffrage); a crocheted soap bag, a small Yemeni flag; and unfinished embroidery pieces.

Whilst textiles are one of the strengths of the collection there are also excellent examples of woven organic material including a basketry table; large and
small baskets with lids (Figure 5.1); a camel muzzle; stone-throwing sling; reed brush; bread-making implement (*makhbaza*); and a hat typical of southwestern Yemen.

Finally a wide range of domestic and utilitarian objects includes: vessels made of ceramic, stone, copper and other metals; an alabaster lamp; an aluminium *qat* spittoon; a pair of large metal vases; a coffee set; two hookah; Wilson’s Yemeni driving license; a dagger (*djambia*), sheath and belt; two cassette tapes; small bottles of kohl with applicators; funerary perfume oils; and various souvenirs such as key-rings, bangles, and plastic trays. The whole collection was stored and transported within a colourfully-painted Indian metal chest.

Of particular interest when contextualising the collection is the associated slide library. Catalogued by Wilson, it provides valuable insights into the landscape, Yemeni architecture, and in particular the locations which featured in Wilson’s life, such as the hospital. It is also significant that just under half the listed slides depict people identified either by name, occupation or location. Objects either from the collection or directly comparable can also be identified, such as similar basketry tables, the camel muzzle, and some items of clothing.
The collection is enhanced by Wilson’s personal archive, which is largely paper and was accumulated both before and after his time in Yemen. It includes professional and personal notes, such as his handwritten notebook of drug preparations, and sketches of architectural details. Other publications include Arabic-English dictionaries, passports and leaflets relating to both Christian missions and Islamic faith. The final component of the archive comprises a selection of large-format prints of landscapes, architecture or agricultural scenes, several printed from Wilson’s slides, which he used to illustrate his public talks.

**Collecting strategies**

Personal collections such as Wilson’s are the result of many influences, encounters and experiences. In the following section a number of collecting strategies will be identified, drawing on Wilson’s own written and verbal testament, and highlighting specific encounters and experiences that helped shape the collection. As a methodology, it proposes an analytical framework of defined methods of acquisition. Broadly summarised as a binary division of active acquisition and passive receiving of gifts, this identifies two simultaneous events: Wilson collecting in Yemen, and Yemeni people giving back to Wilson. This two-way
FIG 5.2: *Djambia* dagger, a significant gift from a close Yemeni friend, symbolic of Wilson’s acceptance into the local community. [Dagger length 36.5cm, belt length 123.5cm. Acc. no. V.2012.105. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]
relationship and the individual nuances of the actual or associated circumstances of each object’s acquisition give a particular depth and richness to the collection. This methodology will collate some of these intangible personal stories, meanings and associations which bring the collection to life, and add to its value.

When asked which objects from his collection he valued most highly, Wilson did not hesitate in naming two objects given as gifts, a *djambia* dagger and an amulet. Regardless of their material value, they are treasured by Wilson because of the circumstances and the givers’ intentions with which they were given, and because they symbolise two personal relationships of very different kinds.

Wilson, in print and in conversation, has repeatedly emphasised the importance of people and personal relationships in experiencing and understanding a country, and indeed in progressing through life. One of his closest Yemeni friends was Ali, with whom he is still in touch today. Ali invited Wilson to his wedding, and presented him with a *djambia* to wear to the ceremony (Figure 5.2). Wilson completed the cross-cultural exchange by following an old Scottish apotropaic superstition, and gave Ali a silver *rial* coin to prevent the blade from cutting their
**FIG 5.3:** Silver-metal amulet containing a passage from the Qur’an, a gift from a grateful patient. [Height 9.2cm, width 11cm. Acc. no. V.2012.101. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]

A potent symbol of Yemeni masculinity, the *djambia* is not primarily worn as a weapon but as a symbol of social, legal and economic status. Antique examples may be ornamented with rhinoceros horn, ivory, silver and precious stones, and are handed down through generations. In contrast Wilson’s *djambia* is modern and comparatively plain, with minimal inlay and decoration on the hilt. The wooden scabbard is bound with inscribed brown leather, and like the faux-leather belt, shows signs of damage through wear. Wilson particularly appreciated the gift because it represented a considerable investment for Ali on his low salary as a nurse. It also reinforced a relationship in which they were “more like brothers than friends”, and where again he felt the warmth of acceptance as “part of the community” (Wilson, 2013).

Great emotional associations are also attached to a gift received from a grateful patient in the hospital. A flat silver amulet box decorated with three inlaid red stones, pendant bells and glass beading, it reputedly contains a passage from the Qur’an with apotropaic, protective or generative qualities (Figure 5.3). Wilson explained that the amulet was far more “precious” than its material value because it was “given from the heart” (Wilson, 2013). Previously it would have
FIG 5.4: Circular basketry table, a reminder of numerous social celebrations. [Height 19.2cm, diameter 59.5cm. Acc. no. V.2012.147. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]
been used to protect either the patient or her family member. Wilson wrote that he was “honoured to have been given it and it was something he would treasure and give back” (Wilson, 2011a: 144).

This “giving back” is a reference to Wilson’s accordance with the Yemeni attitude to ownership that “you were given it but you didn’t hold on to it, because God if willed it, it would still be there” (Wilson, 2013). Wilson believed that he was only a custodian of the objects temporarily, on trust, and felt he should donate them to a museum either in Yemen or back in the UK, “as a way of preserving Yemen’s past” (Wilson, 2011a: 144) “for the benefit of society as a whole” (Wilson, 2013).

Objects were also acquired by Wilson as reminders of events in which he took part, which are given context and meaning through his recollections. Within the collection, the aluminium qat spittoon represents the Yemeni national pastime of chewing the mild narcotic qat. Every afternoon friends, colleagues, and relatives would gather together in the sitting room or mufrrage to chew these leaves, smoke the hookah, and chat. On one occasion, frustrated at being unable to meet the Deputy Minister for Health, Wilson turned up uninvited to a qat gathering. His experience was both culturally educational and politically successful,
FIG 5.5: Camel muzzle, the instigator of a painful bite by a young camel. [Height 27.5cm, width 31.5 cm. Acc. no. V.2012.96. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]
as he was granted an audience with the Minister the next morning (Wilson, 2011a: 198-201).

Another particular object in Wilson’s collection is a basketry table which he commissioned through the contacts of his Scottish colleague Janice (Figure 5.4). The table was woven by a family from a remote village outside the city. It took months to arrive, as the makers waited for someone from the area to need hospital treatment, and then transported it with them (Wilson, 2013).

Wilson enjoyed several memorable meals around similar circular tables, eating from shared dishes of food in the centre. Captured in slides is a celebratory meal with the newly married Ali and his wife Amatilillah, and other relations in Rada’a. Basketry tables also feature in one of the more amusing stories of his memoir. With typical self-deprecating humour, Wilson recounts a tale of social discomfort and misunderstanding at another wedding. The male guests sat closely-packed and cross-legged around such tables, eating with their right hand as is customary. Left-handed Wilson felt awkward as he struggled to use his right hand, whilst sitting on his left hand to prevent accidental offence. Later a mispronunciation of hamam (toilet/bathroom) as hama’am (pigeon) caused confusion and great hilarity at his expense.
FIG 5.6: Wilson's slide of a camel and its owner on Ta’izz Road just above Yerim, west of Rada’a. The camel wears the muzzle (Acc. no. V.2012.96) that caused it to bite its owner. [Slide no. 164, photograph © Jim Wilson.]
Like many of Wilson’s acquisitions the camel muzzle was collected as a result of a local encounter documented in his memoir (Fig. 5.5). The muzzle appears to be a small, loosely woven rope basket with a long handle. However this simple object is the main protagonist of a very graphic hospital story. As Wilson recalls, a young Yemeni man called Hussein was the unfortunate victim not only of a very nasty camel bite, but also the attentions of his well-meaning friend Mansoor who stretched Hussein’s skin: …rolled up like a bandage, and pinned neatly at regular intervals around the wound with large safety pins. “See!” said Hussein’s friend, “We fixed his arm like the foreigners do!” From his hospital bed Hussein explained: “I hope they have not beaten my camel. I love her really. She didn’t mean to do it. Her muzzle is new so she probably doesn’t like the smell of it yet. She will learn.” (Wilson, 2011a: 19-22.)

The story serendipitously continued when Wilson later recognised Hussein and Mansoor leading their camels along the road. Stopping to ask about Hussein’s recovery, he also took photographs of the muzzle in use (Figure 5.6). Such was his interest and the excellent relationship built in such a short time, that he was immediately offered the muzzle.
for his collection. Wilson quickly learnt to hide his interest in potential objects because people would unquestioningly offer them as a gift to gain blessings (*baraka*) whilst refusing all payment, despite being unable to afford a replacement (Wilson, 2013).

At the beginning of his memoir Wilson advocates taking photographs straight away, before things became too familiar; similarly he commented in the interview on the need for “ordinary” objects in his collection. The hand-held brush made of reeds is an example of a utilitarian, almost disposable utensil purchased very cheaply at the *suq*. Despite its humble origins and function, it signifies Wilson’s insistence that just as ordinary domestic objects are essential to daily life, so every person matters, regardless of their social status. This philosophy is illustrated by a slide, which depicts Fatima, one of the hospital cleaners using her reed brush.

Wilson’s domestic, utilitarian collection contrasted with the expensive items acquired by his compatriots, who generally bought jewellery and antiques; as Wilson noted in the interview “those jeweller’s shops were sold out by the time we left!” (Wilson, 2013). However, he did buy two valuable objects, a silver kohl box (*coccyl*) with a large inlaid red stone, and a silver coffee pot which attracted him
aesthetically as it reminded him of Scottish silverware (Wilson, 2011a: 142-145). His colleague Janice admired its age and quality as well as his bargaining skills, as Wilson’s engagement in barter in the suq presented a welcome opportunity for local social interaction.

Objects were also purchased by Wilson for curiosity value, as examples of ingenuity and resourcefulness as the following examples reveal. The makhbaza is a mushroom-shaped implement used to press dough against the hot wall of the bread oven (tanur). As Wilson explained in the interview, he recognised this example as being partly made from a recycled US food-aid flour sack, as the reversed fabric depicts a printed design featuring a stylised king from western playing cards.

It was the unusual containers rather than the contents within that first attracted Wilson’s attention to the following acquisition. Both kohl powders and perfumed oils used during funerary preparations were sold in re-used ampules: small glass bottles originally containing drugs for vaccinations, some still retaining their resealable rubber stoppers. With his pharmaceutical background Wilson recognised them immediately. He was also amused by a brand of perfume called Bint al Yemen (Daughter of Yemen), which was actually manufactured in Switzerland. For
FIG 5.7: Male robe (thobe) made for the collector to wear at a close Yemeni friend’s wedding. [Length 155.0cm. Acc. no. V.2012.154. Photograph © National Museums Scotland.]
Wilson, these contemporary items demonstrated how Yemenis were adapting imported goods and resources from more developed countries for their own needs (Wilson, 2013).

Travel around Yemen provided opportunities for collecting objects of local crafts and regional traditions. On a trip to the coastal plains of Tihama bordering the Red Sea for example, Wilson purchased one of the distinctive hats with tall crowns being made and worn by the locals as an example of indigenous craftsmanship (Wilson, 2011a: 181).

To enable the collection of material in the female cultural sphere, which would have been off limits to men, Wilson delegated the task to the female nurses, his Yemeni friend Ali’s wife Amitalillah, and the Scottish doctor’s wife Una Laidlay (Wilson, 2013). The collection of female clothing includes a purple and silver dress belonging to Amitalillah, which she can be seen wearing in a slide. Other female attire includes a black skirt, cloak and double veil (shar-shaf), handmade for a petite woman whose identity has been lost.

As well as the objects received by the museum, a few lost objects retain for Wilson a special place in his memory. The silver coffee pot mentioned above was stolen from his house, and whilst he missed
opportunities to acquire wooden “toothbrush” locks and metal padlocks, they are already represented in the Museum’s collection as collected by Dr Petrie.

Whilst many of the objects discussed are the outcome of particular encounters, a significant number of objects were not deliberately acquired as part of the collection nor received as gifts, but used by Wilson in his daily life. Again, they often link directly to events recorded both in his memoir and photographs, and provide more evidence of his unique experiences and assimilation into the local community. These include his Yemeni driving license (Wilson: 2011a:44-48), cassette tapes of Arabian music, and his personal clothing.

Clothing is a distinctive element of material culture which is a marker of both similarity and difference. The collection contains a traditional male robe (thobe) which was made for Wilson to wear at his friend Mohammed’s wedding (Figure 5.7). Tailored from the same grey-brown fabric and identical in style to the groom’s own thobe, it combines a western-style pointed collar and pleated pocket with the traditional flowing Yemeni skirt. The outfit was completed with the addition of his djambia dagger as mentioned above. Mohammad’s wedding occurred towards the end of Wilson’s time in Yemen, and their friendship
had developed to the extent that he was treated as the groom’s brother, and “taken into the inner family” (Wilson, 2013). He attended all Mohammed’s wedding celebrations, including the male pre-wedding qat session; djambia “dance”; the bride’s henna party; the slaughter of a sheep for the wedding feast; and he was amongst the crowd awaiting evidence of consummation of the virgin bride. His many photographs of the couple and their relations include unveiled women and girls, indicating the great degree of trust and familiarity with which he was regarded.

Objects can be evidence of interaction; in the case of Wilson’s collection it is their main feature. Throughout their existence objects acquire, in addition to their original purpose of use, a secondary meaning. Documenting the context of a collection means to preserve the intangible information which was accumulated in the process of its assemblage, becoming an inseparable part of the narrative of each object in it. While the approach taken here was prompted specifically by the historical significance of Wilson’s collection, it is advisable to enquire generally why a specific artefact was chosen and kept by a collector, whether it concerns one item or a large group. Thorough recording of the context of a collection conversely means that objects can be removed to
be used for different purposes as their original relations can be reconstructed.

Collecting imposes abstract concepts on artefacts whose creation, use or value become the focus of our appreciation of them. Jim Wilson’s collection not only gives insight into the material culture but also the people of Yemen. It is this aspect we want to preserve.

NOTES

1 From the acquisition justification for a group of textiles from Tunisia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, acc. no. A.1992.61 - A.1992.67, recorded in the NMS collection database.

2 We are grateful to Dr Geoff Swinney, Edinburgh, for providing us with the reference of Waterston’s obituary.

3 Accession number A.1930.658.

4 Accession number A.1932.415 + A-B.

5 Accession number A.1932.417.

6 National Museums Scotland. National Museums Collection Centre: http://www.nms.ac.uk/

7 The authors are indebted to Dr Sarah Worden for her help with the editing of this part of the chapter.
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