

Seven Keys To Building a Great Mineral Collection – Part 1 of 2

Building a great collection of fine minerals involves a few fundamentals. Excellent articles have been written on the subject of what makes a connoisseur, what connoisseurs consider, what makes mineral specimens desirable, and what it takes to build a world-class collection of minerals. I list selected ones at the end of this post and I highly recommend every one. These authors are connoisseurs with decades of experience, and it's our privilege to be able to learn from them.

My own perspective here is just a little different. It is of paramount importance to know what is involved in connoisseurship, and in fact many of us happily strive until we get there – it's a great challenge. However, for me, the fun and the amazing experience is in the journey itself. Enjoying mineral collecting doesn't require anyone to start with world-class specimens, or even have a world-class collection or specimen, although we may all aim for that and we may be lucky enough to arrive there some day. You can be anywhere along the road and enjoying the experience, having a great mineral collection that makes you happy every day, and you have a significant role in refining what "great mineral collection" means for you personally.

So here are what I think of as seven keys to building a great mineral collection – master these, and you will be there.

1. First, Think Through What You Really Want

Most of us only really think of this much later on, once we're way into it, even if in hindsight it would have been so great to have started here. Of all of the fundamentals, this one is probably the hardest to get a handle on, in part because real experience helps you answer it for yourself (and so to start with it can be a bit of a chicken and egg problem, but anyway...). I would strongly encourage you to think about this early, and often, as you invest years and a lot of money in a collection. It is something you will keep thinking about as you progress.

What do you want from mineral collecting and your mineral collection? You might consider this by referring to the points I set out in **Mineral Collecting: Is it For Me?** where I describe the things I personally get out of mineral collecting. I would also recommend Rock Currier's writings in this context (see reference below). Which ones are important for you? If mineral collecting for you is more about personal connection to nature, for example, than other factors, you will build a different collection than you would if significance and competition was most important to you.

Regardless of how you answer this question, mineral collecting is for your enjoyment, and the best part of this gig is that you get to set many of your own rules, so set yourself up to enjoy it and succeed by understanding from the outset what you will enjoy, and what you will define success to be. Define what a great mineral collection means to you, so that you can achieve it!

It's really worth thinking this through. Once you have some concrete ideas about it, I would even suggest writing notes in your smartphone (or somewhere) so you can remind yourself at important moments – for example, when you are at a mineral show or a great website and want to buy everything in sight because they are all just so cool – it's really good to be able to remember your own goals.

It would be really easy to say “my goal is to have the best” – and that's a critically important thought every collector should include in a particular way, so I'll come back to it under Key #6 below. But if you set out with nothing more in your mind about your collection than simply that you want really only “the best” – by which I mean a collection of mineral specimens that are truly world-class by the standards of the mineral collecting elite – you are setting yourself up for some really hard moments unless you have unlimited funds, unlimited time, unlimited space and resources, and are uncommonly able to be in the right place at the right time. You may well have world-class specimens in your collection, now or in future, but if the only thing you have in mind is “the best”, you'll miss out on a lot of amazing things in the world of minerals!

Once you've thought about this a bit, just take the bull by the horns. (You can refine and change later – most of us do, in some way.) What kind of collection do you think you'd like to build? What drives you? What fascinates you? And what practical considerations like financial and space resources come into the equation? Do you want a wide-open, no-limits kind of collection? Would you prefer a collection that has focus? Would you limit yourself to higher-end specimens only? Does the challenge of collecting as many species as possible beckon to you?

If you are not new to mineral collecting, you will know about the kinds of collections people build, and you may already have a focus or a specialty (or none at all). But in case this is a new topic for you, there are various ways to approach this and here are some examples:

Wide Open – No Limits

You can choose to be unlimited in what you collect. I personally chose this route. The great part about it is that you can add anything you like to your collection.

Ultimate freedom to love the mineral specimens that grab you. Nothing suggesting what you “should” add to your collection. The challenge is endless. And it's a great way to go. You do need thorough knowledge of the factors that are considered to characterize fine mineral specimens and connoisseurship, and after that, it's all open. But this does have some potential drawbacks for some people, so you might want to think about whether these matter to you personally: it is hard to achieve significance (if having a collect that

stands out in comparison to others matters to you), it is hard to become a true expert, it could easily be more expensive than any of us can afford or reasonably justify spending on minerals and so it (if this last one doesn't apply to you, that's awesome), it can take more space than you have, and your collection will likely always be very "incomplete". I personally had no problem facing up to any of those – in fact, for example, I always loved it that the collection could never be called "complete". If your collection is very far from "complete", that means a new challenge is always out there – who the heck cares if you're missing representatives of key minerals? You can always see those in other ways. You have mineral specimens you enjoy, and a challenge that never runs out, and so what could be better? However that was just my choice. Many people specialize – in part, because they can achieve greater significance with their collection, in less time, and in part because it may seem like it will allow them to get closer to "the best", although... turns out it's not that simple...

Specialization by Mineral Type or Geography

The great thing about specializing is that you can scale your mineral collection to suit you. You can choose a single mineral species, or a group of species. You can choose geography or locality – a very common way to specialize – and your choice can be something broad like the minerals of the United States or the minerals of Canada, something more limited like the minerals of a particular region, province or state, or you can even specialize in a single locality. The advantages are obvious – you can collect a mineral specimens within a much more limited scope, you can become an expert, and you can stand out from many others. You can also devote your time and money within one specific field and so you may develop a higher calibre collection (taken as a whole, if that matters to you) than you might have done otherwise. But of course nothing in life is perfect, and there is a disadvantage, which you may or may not care about and may or may not be relevant to the specialization you choose: depending on what you choose, you may well not be the only one with that specialty, and in fact there may be many people with that specialty, so there can be serious competition for specimens within a specialty. It's no issue at all if you don't care about such things, or if an area of specialization is any of a large number of broader ones, but it does mean that it can be just as hard, or sometimes harder, to be as close to the level of "the best" or "complete" as you might like.

In contrast to the ultimate freedom of the wide open collection, having a specialty will drive your collection in a particular direction. For example, if you specialize in one mineral, and there is a significant new find of that mineral, you should add a specimen from that find. Or if your geographic region produces something new of significance, you will feel that you should add it. The good news is, obviously, if you've chosen your area of specialization well, you'd be naturally inclined to add those specimens anyway even if you had not chosen an area of specialization!

Other Specializations

There are of course many other ways to specialize. Explore whatever inspires you. For example, it could be something like “gem minerals”, or minerals from a particular type of deposit (such as pegmatite minerals or ore minerals), or maybe fluorescent minerals. Or it could be a specialization related to the kind of specimen – a collection of single crystals, for example (crystals with no matrix).

Limiting your Collection by Size

For so many reasons, size is an important thing to think about, regardless of whether you use it to limit your collection. In fact, I feel so strongly about this one that I have written a separate post about it – **Size Matters!**. I favour at least a little bit of flexibility when it comes to size – personally I think of size considerations more as guidelines than actual rules – (Captain Barbossa’s view of the Pirate’s Code... but I digress...). Some collectors are very strict about this, and impose size restrictions to dictate the development of their collection, which can be as good a way as any to define your collection. And certainly if formal competition matters to you, size specifications are often strict. Size restriction does relate to other aspects of what you appreciate about minerals – the smaller you are willing to go, the more likely you are to achieve incredibly high quality, and of course many of the mineral species simply don’t occur in larger sizes, so if you are interested in a large number of species, small specimens will work well anyway.

2. Quality, Quality, Quality

“There are three things that matter in property: location, location, location.” Often attributed to British real estate tycoon Lord Harold Samuel, this has become a timeless statement of a principle in the real estate industry. Of course there are more things that matter in real estate, but we get the idea. When it comes to collecting fine minerals, the three things that matter are quality, quality, quality.

Like real estate, sure, this is a major over-simplification of a complex subject. There are many factors to consider and you will want to know them all cold, and you should have your own view on every one of them. They are discussed more in Key # 3, next.

But to me, quality rules the day.

Of course, insisting on “perfect” quality can also be taken to extremes and will leave you in an absolutely impossible place – if you inspect perfect-looking cabinet or even miniature specimens with magnification, you will almost always find a nick or a chip not immediately visible to the eye, particularly once you get to magnification. True perfection is most often unattainable (micros excepted). At some point, an insistence on high quality can verge on obsessive and unhelpful, and yes, I have been there. If you insist on complete true perfection, you could find yourself unable to enjoy the vast majority of mineral specimens, even fine ones. Some level of damage (hopefully

nominal, often only visible with magnification, or peripheral) is going to be part of virtually all mineral collections – it's a matter of what level you choose is acceptable for you. Some minerals, particularly the very rare, are not even available in undamaged specimens – or if it is possible to obtain one, the price may be beyond the reach of any mere mortal. And some specimens you field collected may have perfection in many regards, like a perfect crystal or more, but may not be perfect all the way around – you'll still treasure the specimens you collect yourself.

So what level is “right”, or acceptable? It's personal, but within some guidelines. There should be no visual distraction from damage. Of course that's a subjective statement – what distracts one person may not distract the next – but if you are looking at a specimen, think about whether a reasonable knowledgeable collector would say that there is damage which is visually distracting.

My best advice is set the bar as high as you can, particularly when buying minerals. This will enable you to have a top quality collection and enjoy the minerals all along the way. My own personal level of acceptable damage is none evident visually, or extremely low and not visually distracting from the main viewing angle, and I hope that's obvious from this website.

I insist upon excellent quality from the front, main, optimal viewing angle. I do not typically insist upon 360 degree freedom from damage, and certainly not 360 degrees in all dimensions – because it's almost impossible and I'd be able to enjoy few minerals if I did that. Almost all specimens have points where they were originally attached to the host rock and had to be removed, so there will be points of attachment or rough broken rock evidencing that removal. (On this subject, it is possible to find “floaters” – specimens of crystals that are complete all around and formed suspended in a liquid with no points of attachment – but floaters are relatively limited in occurrence.) There are collectors who do expect every specimen in their collection to have only a point of attachment at the bottom of the specimen, and for the specimen to be otherwise damage and contact-free in 360 degrees. Exclusive club.

Before I move on from this subject, just a note about the terms “damage” and “contacts”. Usually the term damage is used to denote damage caused by human activity, although it can also apply to naturally broken crystals. There is another concept which affects many mineral specimens and that is the notion of a “contact” or that a specimen is “contacted”. A “contact” on a mineral specimen is an area of the specimen where the crystals naturally grew up against something else – sometimes it was another crystal, and others it will simply have been the other side of the vein or pocket, where the crystal cavity did not leave enough space for proper crystal growth. Contacts are obviously viewed as a detraction from specimen perfection, but are not considered to be the same kind of issue for a specimen as damage. Contacts may or may not be visually distracting, which again is a personal consideration. But usually contacts don't cause the same kind of grief for people that damage does – they are a natural aspect of the mineral specimen's history and are judged on the basis of how distracting they are. Many specimens cannot be extracted without some kind of contact at least around the periphery.

I've written about quality and damage elsewhere on our site too, including in **Guidelines for Buying Our Minerals**.

Finally I feel I should note that when it comes to some mineral specimens – pieces that are so significant as to stand out among all minerals for what they are – quality becomes only one of many considerations. Maybe it's like real estate where a unique historic castle on a nondescript out-of-the-way hill will not be considered on a location basis the way a normal house on the same hill would, but in mineral collecting, a world-class specimen for the ages may have been damaged and repaired and/or restored and that fact seems to be overshadowed by the significance of the specimen. If you'd like to read more about mineral specimen treatments and alterations, see **Beware the Hand of Man: Fakes, Treatments, Repairs and Other Alterations**.

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Links to additional articles mentioned in Part 1 of **Seven Keys To Building a Great Mineral Collection**:

Mineral Collecting – Is It For Me? – <http://www.mcdougallminerals.com/blog/mineral-collecting-is-it-for-me/>

Size Matters! – <http://www.mcdougallminerals.com/blog/size-matters/>

Guidelines for Buying Our Minerals – <http://www.mcdougallminerals.com/Guidelines-for-Buying-Our-Minerals.html>

Beware the Hand of Man: Fakes, Treatments, Repair and Other Alterations – <http://www.mcdougallminerals.com/blog/beware-the-hand-of-man-fakes-treatments-repairs-and-other-alterations/>

Editor's Note: Part 2 of **Seven Key To Building a Great Mineral Collection** will appear in the April 2016 issue of the *Rockhounds Herald*.