A PASSION FOR EPHEMERA

The remarkable legacy of Jonathan Gili, documentary-maker and collecter par excellence.

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Even before they are opened, the thousand-odd boxes stacked for sale in a converted Hampstead stable tell a story. 'Aliens'; 'Lumpy Pop'; 'Pocahontas Toys 2'; 'Other Fish'; 'Pilgrim Souvenirs'; 'Bigger Salt and Pepper'; 'Pencil Sharpeners 7' – these are just a few of the descriptions neatly appended to their cardboard sides. Bizarre yet meticulous, they represent the private passion of the late Jonathan Gili – film-maker, publisher, and (according to the former head of conservation at the British Library, Nicolas Barker) 'one of the most individual collectors of anything anywhere'.

Lift the lids of the boxes, and you can scarcely believe your eyes. There are bottles of Star Wars bubble bath and packets of Beatles bubblegum; fridge magnets shaped like kettles and Danish pastries; hair clips commemorating the Queen's coronation; Camembert boxes and plastic lizards and packets of tortilla chips. It is as if all the flotsam and jetsam of post-war consumer society had been washed up on a concrete shore and painstakingly catalogued by an tireless, obsessive beachcomber.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that there is anything random about the collection. Amassed over a period of 40 years, it is informed throughout by Gili's quirky, poetic vision of the world. 'Some people thought he just liked yucky kitsch, but he was very discriminating,' says his wife Phillida. 'It came down to whether he thought something was

interestingly designed, and he knew it wasn't going to be preserved by anyone else.' The biographer Hilary Spurling, a long-standing friend, speaks of his 'absolutely impeccable eye. It was like being with a musician with perfect pitch.'

Gili, who died in 2004 at the age of 61, was responsible for television documentaries such as *The Evacuees* (the poignant story of four East End boys evacuated to a magnificent country estate) and *To the World's End*, which brilliantly evoked multi-ethnic London by interviewing people along the number 31 bus route. His BAFTA-winning *Public School – Westminster* drew an audience of twelve million, and his trio of films with Lucinda Lambton – *Animal Crackers*, *A Cabinet of Curiosities* and *The Great North Road* – helped establish her as a national figure. Shortly before his death he was awarded the OBE; among those who spoke at his memorial gathering at the Royal Geographical Society were Alan Bennett, John Birt and Simon Schama.

Lucinda Lambton tells a story which epitomises Gili's passion for acquisition. 'We were driving through the outskirts of Guildford,' she says, 'and he suddenly shouted "Stop!" Then he jumped out of the car while it was still moving and ran across this huge, horrible garage forecourt. When he came back, he was triumphantly waving a gold-lamé-clad Michael Jackson doll.

'The joy of being with him was that he was enthusiastic about *everything*. He was utterly delightful, clever and erudite, and there was this atmosphere of side-hurting hilarity. Once we were staying in adjoining rooms on the Great North Road, and I banged my door so hard that the wardrobe fell on top of me, and by the time Jonathan got me out we were both laughing so much we couldn't stand up.'

What made his good humour – and his achievements – all the more remarkable was that the last twenty years of his life were spent under the shadow of the leukaemia which eventually killed him. 'He never complained,' says his daughter Daisy. 'We weren't allowed to tell anybody for the first three years, though when his hair fell out it became fairly obvious. He didn't want the sympathy vote.'

During Gili's lifetime, his collection was kept in the terraced house in Fulham which he inhabited with his wife and three children. 'We first met in 1974,' says Hilary Spurling, 'and the house was already crammed frame-to-frame. If the bikes in the hall hadn't been hung from the wall, you wouldn't have been able to get in at all.'

'It was a bit excessive,' admits Phillida Gili. 'We could hardly get out of bed at one point. But when it finally came to removing the boxes, it was terribly, strangely upsetting: it was as if every aspect of his character was in them.'

And yet, if you visit the house today, it is hard to believe that anything has gone from it: the basement and upstairs study in particular are so full as to be almost unnavigable. The staggering fact is that the collection being sold is only part of what Jonathan Gili amassed: it does not include his thousands of books, CDs and seven-inch singles, over which an enthusiast could happily pore for days.

'The only thing he didn't like was jazz,' says his wife. 'He did once tell me I was lucky he wasn't interested in china – but then he discovered lustre.'

How, then, did the collecting begin? According to Phillida Gili, it took hold at around the age of seven. 'His father Juan was Catalan, and every summer he used to take the family to the Costa Brava, and Jonathan and his brother started to collect these tin bottle tops. One day his father said, "No

more – they weigh a ton." So they lifted up the carpet on the bottom of the car and lined the floor with them. Their father never knew.'

Another childhood story suggests an even earlier instinct. Jonathan Gili started life in an Oxford bookshop owned by his father, where his pram used to be parked in the poetry section. 'One day,' says Daisy Gili, 'he brought a snowball in and said to his mother, "Can I keep it?" She carefully explained to him that it would melt – but the next day it was still there, because the temperature was as low inside the shop as out. I think he would have collected clouds if he could.'

(It is perhaps no coincidence that snowstorm globes constitute an important part of his collection – though not just any globes. 'He didn't like the ugly ones with thick paint,' says Daisy Gili. 'And they had to be slightly absurd, like snow on the Pyramids.')

His wife speculates that the urge to collect may have been strengthened by a sense of deprivation. 'He went into hospital when he was a little boy,' she explains, 'and the few toys he had there were removed and not given back, and it upset him terribly.'

Toys – from Disney to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles – certainly figure prominently in the collection. 'He let us play with some of them,' says Daisy Gili, 'but then my brother lost a Star Wars character's gun, and we were never allowed them again.' What her father cared about most, however, was the packaging: 'He was magpie-like in the way he was attracted by the look of things, such as beautiful, silvery sardine tins.'

So intense was Gili's love of these tins that he commissioned a book of lithographs of them by his friend Glynn Boyd Harte for Warren Editions, the small publishing house he started shortly after leaving Oxford. (The two-word contents page – 'Contents: Sardines' – typifies his humour.) Books by

John Betjeman, Iris Murdoch and Jane Grigson also appeared on his list: exquisitely designed by Gili himself, they in turn have become collector's items.

Shaped picture discs are another cornerstone of the collection. Gili had a huge and wide-ranging knowledge of music, but these records were bought purely for their visual qualities. 'They have poor sound and often can't be made to play at all because of their tendency to warp,' he wrote in an article for *Harpers & Queen*. 'But as art objects they're unbeatable. Who could resist records shaped like Elton John's hat or Barry Manilow's nose?'

'He always liked things that looked like something else,' explains Daisy Gili: 'tins that looked like books, a salt-and-pepper set in the shape of the sinking *Titanic*. And I guess that's what film-making's about: it plays on what you think things should be, only to give you something different.'

Daisy, who runs the London Film Academy in Fulham, believes the collection echoes her father's documentaries in other ways. 'I think he became a film-maker because of his utter curiosity and his precise eye and his ability to make connections. For instance, when he interviewed the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, he noticed that they had Elvis's number plate – not that it *said* "Elvis", but if you knew about Elvis, you'd recognise it. So he got them to talk about charisma, ending up with Elvis. Without his gift for observation and his desire to gather things together, he wouldn't have been able to do that.'

At times his instinct was uncanny. His wife tells of him visiting a market in Spain and happening upon a book whose jacket turned out to have been designed by his father. As his son Oliver remarks, 'When you're a collector, things find you as much as you find them.'

The collection has now been sold to a private individual who wishes to remain anonymous. Ed Maggs, the book dealer who handled the sale, is not at liberty to reveal the price paid, but says he is delighted that it has gone to someone ‘who has completely understood it and the creative element involved in making it’. Whether it will be put on show to the public remains to be seen; but if it does, it will be a happy tribute to a man who, in the words of Hilary Spurling, had the ability to appreciate anything: ‘A discarded sweet wrapper, a plastic pencil sharpener, an old tin can, all became treasures in his hands.’