Looking at Artifacts, Thinking About History

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Artifact *= an object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest*

Introduction

Artifacts—the objects we make and use—are part of American history. If we know how to look at them, they can be sources for better understanding our history. While textbooks focus on the great documents of the American past, or the important events, artifacts can show us another kind of history, another way of approaching the past. This article will tell you how to look closely at artifacts and how to think about the ways they shape and reflect our history.

Why bother looking at artifacts, which can be hard to understand, when there are so many documents around, and when documents seem so much more straightforward? Why do museums save artifacts at all, when it would be so much easier just to save pictures of them?

There are two ways to answer this question. Artifacts, we believe, are, and were, important. According to anthropologist Daniel Miller, objects "continually assert their presence as simultaneously material force and symbol. They frame the way we act in the world, as well as the way we think about the world." To understand the past, we have to understand the artifacts of the past.

However, they are also important to us as a way to approach the past. Museum Director Elaine Gurian suggests that artifacts provide us a way into history. "Objects, in their tangibility," she writes, "provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories." Artifacts are the touchstones that bring memories and meanings to life. They make history real. Moreover, it is a reality that can and should be viewed from different perspectives. When museums choose not to enshrine and isolate an artifact but instead open it up to new interpretations and different points of view, they provide opportunities to challenge and enhance our understanding of the past. Look at the artifacts around you as reminders of the complexity of the past. To fully appreciate the complexity of artifacts—and of history—we must not only acknowledge their multiple and conflicting meanings, but also embrace them.

As you look at an artifact, think about it not as a simple, unproblematic thing—a things with one story, one role to play in history. Rather, consider each artifact with its many stories as holding diverse meanings for different people, past and present. Think of them as bits of contested history. It is because of the contest and conflict they embody, and the way they combine use and meaning, that artifacts are such valuable tools for exploring the past.

Looking closely at artifacts, putting them into historical context, and using them to understand the past, is exactly the kind of work that goes on in a museum. Curators make it their mission to discover and tell these stories, to put objects back into history. Therefore, as you look at artifacts, and the documents with them, imagine that you're curating your own exhibit. What stories do the objects tell? What documents, and what stories from you history books, help you to understand what the objects meant to the people of the past? What can you say about the past by using objects? How can you tell visitors to your exhibit what you've learned?

We suggest five ways to think about artifacts in history:

- **Artifacts tell their own stories.**
- **Artifacts connect people.**
- **Artifacts mean many things.**
- **Artifacts capture moments.**
- **Artifacts reflect changes.**

You can look at any object in any or all of these ways. Here, we suggest some questions to ask, and give some examples. As you consider the artifacts—any artifact in museums or in your daily life—you can ask similar questions. Think like a curator: use the artifacts to understand, explain, and present history.

Part A: Artifacts tell their own stories.

Looking at the artifact helps answer questions about its own history. What is it? When was it made? Where is it from? What is it made of? Who made it? How was it used? These kinds of questions establish basic information about the object; they help to identify and locate it in time and place.

This way of looking at an object can be thought of as looking inward. We put an object under a microscope–literally or figuratively–and discover the object's own history. Often, these are the first questions to ask of an artifact. (On this Web site, we've provided much of this information.)

However, this is only the beginning–a way to establish basic facts. (For a document, the similar questions would be: Who wrote it? When? Why?) The next step, for an artifact as for a document, is to take the object as a point of departure, opening up the world beyond the artifact. When we do that, we learn a different kind of history. Imagine the artifact not in a spotlight by itself, but rather against a variegated backdrop of people, places, and events. Now, many stories emerge. Here, we begin to ask questions about the people who used the artifact, the events that surrounded it. If we ask the right questions, and do the right research, we begin to understand the role an object played in people's lives, the meanings it held to different individuals and communities, the way it reflected the knowledge, values, and tastes of a particular era. In short, we see the object as part of American history.

When placed in context like this, museum artifacts become passageways into history. Through a single object, we can connect to a moment in time, a person's life, a set of values and beliefs.

Part B: Artifacts connect people.

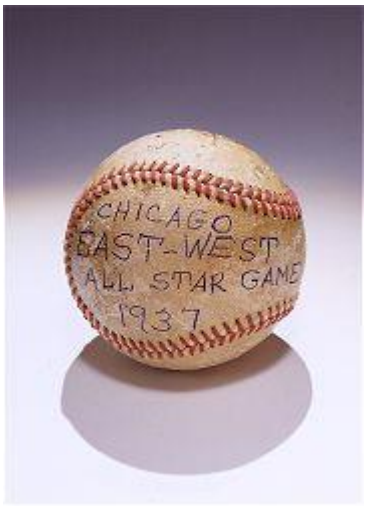
A second way of using artifacts is to look beyond the artifact to see how it tells us about people. To look beyond the artifact is to find stories about the object's role in people's lives: not just who made it and who it belonged to, but also the meanings it held to different individuals and the relationships it was part of. If we look at an artifact as something that people owned and used, we can find out interesting things about people by looking at things as they are made, used, and passed on, artifacts create a web of relationships.

Consider the different relationships that evolved around this eighteenth-century silver teapot:

- **Tea Parties.** In eighteenth-century America, the teapot was at the center of a social ritual that brought strangers, families, and friends closer together. Imported from Britain, the ritual of taking tea—sharing food, drink, and conversation—served to strengthen social bonds among people of all classes.
- **Master and Apprentices.** This teapot was made by the silversmith Samuel Casey; his mark is stamped on the bottom. Like other artisans in pre-industrial America, Casey trained young apprentices in his shop. As they worked together to make this teapot, Casey and his apprentices formed a relationship based on the transfer of knowledge and skill from one generation to the next.
- **Craftsman and Patron.** This teapot was made by Samuel Casey for Abigail Robinson, the daughter of a wealthy Rhode Island planter. The person who commissioned the teapot—probably a relative of Abigail's—may have already known Casey, or perhaps they were referred to Casey by another customer who vouched for his skills. Colonial craftsmen like Casey relied on their personal relationships with patrons to gain a trusted position in the community and achieve economic success.
- **Family Ties.** The initials and coat of arms on this teapot relate to Abigail Robinson, the young woman for whom it was made. The teapot dates from 1752, the year Abigail married John Wanton, the son of the governor of Rhode Island. As she prepared to take a new name and begin a family of her own, this teapot provided her with a connection to her roots. Abigail died only seventeen months after her wedding, at age 22. But her teapot continued to promote family ties. Her husband remarried and in 1782 he gave the teapot to his daughter as a wedding gift. The teapot was passed down in the family until 1979, when the Smithsonian acquired it.

Part C: Artifacts mean many things.

Artifacts are more than just material things. They communicate ideas, symbolize values, and convey emotions. When we consider meaning, value, and significance, we are in the domain of cultural history. Different artifacts mean different things to different people, and those meanings change over time.



Consider a baseball from the Negro League's 1937 East-West All-Star game. It tells a story of changing value in use, as a memento, as a collectible:

- **A Personal Triumph.** For first baseman Buck Leonard, this baseball was a souvenir of a winning game, a symbol of his skill and success, and a reminder of how far he had come. Leonard saved this ball for nearly 45 years before finally donating it to the Smithsonian in 1981.
- **An Unequal Playing Field.** Although the Negro Leagues easily matched the majors in skill and talent, racial and economic barriers kept black and white ballplayers on separate and unequal playing fields. For black teams, baseballs like this one represented the professional equipment they deserved, but did not always get. To save money during the lean Depression years, the Negro League often bought inferior Wilson 150cc balls, which cost fifty cents less per dozen

than major-league balls. Only on special occasions, such as All-Star games, could players expect to use official league baseballs like this one.

- **The Fans' Favorite Game.** This baseball is from the 1937 East-West All-Star game, when the East beat the West, 7 to 2. For Negro League fans, this baseball represented the most important game of the year. The East-West All-Star Classic, held annually from 1933 to 1950, attracted thousands to Comiskey Park in Chicago to see the best play the best. Fans especially loved the East-West games because they picked the players. By casting their votes in black newspapers, baseball fans sent their favorite stars–including Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Oscar Charleston, Josh Gibson, Willie Wells, and Buck Leonard–to Comiskey Park.
- **"For the Loyalty of the Race."** For the African American community, this baseball was a weapon against the injustices of Jim Crow (racist laws that segregated black people). At the turn of the twentieth century, the "unwritten rule" that barred black men from playing major league baseball was part of a system of racial segregation that kept white and black Americans in separate and unequal worlds. Founded in 1920 by Andrew "Rube" Foster, the Negro Leagues was one of many African American institutions built behind this color barrier. It became one of the most successful black-owned businesses of its time. Foster hoped his Negro Leagues would promote self-respect and self-help among African Americans and "do something concrete for the loyalty of the race."
- **A Collector's Item.** In 1972, this baseball became a collector's item when its owner, Buck Leonard, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Not until 1969 did the major-league establishment begin to recognize the achievements of Leonard, Satchel Paige, Oscar Charleston, and other Negro League stars who, in the words of white Hall of Famer Ted Williams, did not make it into the majors "only because they weren't given the chance." Since the 1970s, sports fans and museums have actively collected memorabilia of the Negro Leagues.

Part D: Artifacts capture a moment.

A fourth way of looking at an artifact is to think about its place in history. Artifacts are time capsules. They embody the tastes and values of an era. They mark a stage of technological evolution. They evoke memories of a specific time and place. Different objects, from different times, look different, and were used differently. Objects can tell us something of their times.

This Kodak Brownie camera was used by Bernice Palmer to photograph survivors of the *Titanic* disaster in 1912. Think about the ways this Kodak camera captured a moment—not just by taking a photograph, but by preserving the history of an event, an era, an invention, a cultural phenomenon, and a woman's life.

- **A Tragic Event.** The "Unsinkable" *Titanic*, a British steamship—the largest and most luxurious passenger liner ever built—sank on April 15, 1912, during its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City. Over 1,500 lives were lost after the ship struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic Ocean, about 400 miles south of Newfoundland. The *Carpathia*, a passenger liner bound for the Mediterranean, received the *Titanic*'s distress call and arrived within hours to rescue the 705 survivors. Using this camera, *Carpathia* passenger Bernice Palmer took photographs of the *Titanic* survivors and the iceberg that sank the great ship. After the *Carpathia* returned to New York, a reporter paid $10 to publish Palmer's pictures.

- **A Visual Age.** The beginning of the twentieth century marked a new era in American history: the age of images. A 1911 editorial in *Harpers Weekly* proclaimed, "We can't see the ideas for the illustrations. Our world is simply flooded with them." Henry R. Luce, founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines, wrote in 1937 that "The photograph is…the most important instrument of journalism which has been developed since the printing press." This Kodak camera was just one of many instruments that helped people visualize moments like the *Titanic* disaster. Newspapers, magazines, newsreels, stereographs, and other media transformed current events into a series of images. Many of these images have become part of our nation's collective memory.
- **A Technological Moment**. How was it that eighteen-year-old Bernice Palmer had a camera with her aboard a passenger ship in 1912? The Kodak Brownie camera, introduced in 1900, represented a series of technological innovations that made it possible for millions of people to own cameras by the early twentieth century. With its simple features and affordable price tag, this Kodak Brownie camera captured a moment when, for the first time, almost anybody could be a photographer.
- **A Moment in a Life.** In April of 1912, Bernice Palmer, an eighteen-year-old from Ontario, Canada, had just graduated from finishing school. To celebrate, she and her mother boarded the *Carpathia* for a cruise to the sunny Mediterranean. Four days out from New York, their ship suddenly changed course to rescue survivors from the *Titanic*. This Kodak Brownie camera, which Palmer expected would capture memories of her Mediterranean adventure, became instead a poignant souvenir of her close encounter with tragedy. In 1986, Palmer donated her camera and photographs to the Smithsonian.

Part E: Artifacts reflect changes.

Times change; history is the story of those changes. An artifact, or a collection of artifacts, can reflect change over time. Artifacts change as our society and culture change; artifacts nudge these changes along; and artifacts themselves change over time. Artifacts reflect changes, and sometimes cause change. They allow us opportunities to consider how and why society and culture change over time.

Think about some of the changes reflected by this typewriter, manufactured by E. Remington & Sons around 1875. It tells a story of innovations in technology and manufacturing. The adoption of the typewriter, at just the same time that women began to work in offices, reflected changes in women's roles, new ideas about the organization of work, and the rapidly growing corporations of the day. In turn, the typewriter brought about and helped to accelerate social change, opening up new jobs for women in the office.

- **Changes in Business and the Workplace.** The typewriter, by reducing the time and expense involved in creating documents, encouraged the spread of systematic management. It allowed a system of communications that shaped the business world. While the typewriter wasn't responsible for opening the office world to women—the shortage of men during the Civil War and the increasing division of labor and specialization of office work played a bigger role—it did encourage the feminization of office work. In 1870, there were very few women office workers. In 1890, there were nearly 45,000, and 64 percent of stenographers and typists were women.
- **Social Changes.** In the 1880s, when the typewriter was first adopted in many offices, America was a country in the throes of rapid change. The way in which the typewriter was adopted

reflected changes in women's roles, new ideas about the organization of work, and the rapidly growing corporations of the day. In turn, the typewriter opened up many new jobs for women in the office.

- **Changes in People's Lives.** Though it took a while for the typewriter to catch on, it quickly changed the lives of those who used it. Many working-class women saw office jobs as an escape from the drudgery of factory jobs. Office work was a step up in the class structure, a cleaner, higher-paying job. One novel described the changes in the life of a young woman when she got her first job as a typist.
- **Invention, Innovation and Obsolescence**. Dozens of inventors had tried to invent a workable writing machine, but it wasn't until 1872 that the right combination of a clever mechanism, manufacturing expertise, and a growing market allowed the typewriter to become a commercial success. Christopher Latham Sholes, a Milwaukee printer, editor, and government bureaucrat, received his first typewriter patent in 1868, and two more in the next few years. Many inventors devised improvements for the typewriter, from the shift key in 1878 to the electric typewriter in 1920. In all, several thousand typewriter patents were granted. But by the 1980s, the typewriter had begun to disappear, overcome at first by the word processor and then by the personal computer, which could do everything the typewriter could do and much more.
- **Changes in Manufacturing**. Christopher Sholes was unable to raise the money, successfully organize a factory, or find the skilled labor to produce his typewriter invention cheaply and in volume. In 1873 he sold his patent rights to E. Remington and Sons, manufacturers of guns and sewing machines, who had the technological skills to develop and manufacture the machines. The typewriter has numerous small precision parts. To make the machine cheaply enough to reach a large market, it had to be mass-produced. Remington and others soon developed ways to apply existing technology and techniques, including the "interchangeable parts" system, to the manufacture of the typewriter.

Telling many stories

These ways of looking at artifacts can tell you not just about the artifact, but also about history. They put the artifacts back into history. To do this, we have to find the story of the artifact, the people who used it, and the society and culture it was part of. We need to understand its story. In fact, you can think of the artifact as another kind of document—one that is sometimes hard to read, but which can tell you a new, deeper, more interesting kind of story. Read the artifacts and the other documents about them together, and you'll come closer to understanding how people of the past lived and thought and felt about things.

So as you consider examine artifacts, use them not only to understand the past, but also as a way to discuss the present. Discuss what they meant to the people who made and used them, but also what they mean to you. Your understanding of the artifacts, like the museum exhibit a curator designs around them, is only the beginning, for artifacts tell many stories.

Checking What You Read

Introduction

1. Why do artifacts give us a better understanding of history and the past than just words in a book or a photo?
2. True or False? Artifacts help us understand the one true story of an event from the past.

Jisgsaw (answer in groups)

Part A: Artifacts tell their own stories.

1. What are the first questions we should ask about an artefact?
2. What are the next questions we ask?
3. We ask these questions to see the object as part of American _____.

Part B: Artifacts connect people.

We use artifacts to find stories about the object's role in _____ _____.

What is the artifact that is given as an example in this section?

What are the four different relationships in history that concern this artifact?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Part C: Artifacts mean many things.

Artifacts also communicate _____, _____ values, and convey _____. This is part of _____ history. Different artifacts mean different things to different people.

What is the artifact that is given as an example in this section?

What are the four ways this artifact meant different things to different people?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Part D: Artifacts capture a moment.

Artifacts are time _____. They embody the _____ and _____ of an era.

They mark the stage of a _____ revolution.

What is the artifact that is given as an example in this section?

What are the four moments in time this artifact captured?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Part E: Artifacts reflect changes.

Artifacts reflect changes as _____ and _____ change. Artifacts nudge changes along. Artifacts themselves change over time.

What is the artifact that is given as an example in this section?

What are the four changes this artifact made?

1.

2.

3.

4.

3. What is the main idea of this article?