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How Objects Speak

By Peter N. Miller

The past has been receding from us at a rate of one second every second, 60 minutes an hour, 365 days per (solar) year for thousands upon millions of years. This particular piece of the past has the form of a milk can, or at least that is what we are told—though from its corroded, pitted surface we might not have recognized it. (Also because in our world, milk is not delivered in such cans.) It's the kind of thing that one might have found rooting around in a barn or in some overgrown glen by the side of a disused road. We happen to know, however, that this was one of two such cans dug up in Warsaw on December 1, 1950.

The object could, I suppose, be of interest to those seeking the material culture of everyday life in Poland in the 1940s—the type of urn and metal could point to a specific manufacturer, and the spot it was found, maybe, could tell us something about how milk was distributed. Yet a different kind of archaeology is needed to unlock the meaning of such objects. For this can is one of the receptacles into which the secret Jewish self-archiving operation in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Oneg Shabbat (Sabbath Joy) Archive, sought to leave its documents to posterity.

For almost three years, a group of writers, journalists, scholars, and rabbis, under the direction of the social historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who had trained with a Warsaw disciple of the famous Paris-based Annales school, had gathered materials on daily life in the ghetto, including tram tickets, programs to school plays, restaurant menus, maps of the complex doorbell schemes needed to accommodate the reality of 30 percent of a city's population forced into less than 3 percent of its space. To its collection, the archive also added commissioned essays like Stanislaw Rozycki on the ghetto's streets, Peretz Opoczynski on the ghetto mailman, Leyb Goldin's "Chronicle of a Single Day"—what it was like to wait

for one's daily meal—as well as economic analyses like "Processes of the Adaptation of the Jewish Artisan to Wartime Conditions" and "On Jewish Barbers."

The point was concisely stated by Ringelblum: If the ephemeral objects were not collected, and if the journalistic, social-science reports not commissioned, and if all of it were not preserved, then no one would believe that such a place had existed; not on the moon, but right here, in the center of the earth's most sophisticated continent. And so, amid the death and the deathly fear, the project unfolded over two and a half years, and then with added urgency in a last half year, when the decimated survivors labored on up to the brink of their heroic revolt. And all their work, 35,000 documents, was loaded, in these milk cans and tin boxes, and buried under the ghetto's buildings—foundation deposits from another world to another world.

If we put our ears to the mouths of these cans, we can even hear individual voices. Burying the first cache under the Jewish school at 68 Nowotipki Street, Israel Lichtenstein wrote, "I do not ask for any thanks, for any memorial, for any praise. I only wish to be remembered. ... I wish my wife to be remembered, Gele Sekstein. ... I wish my little daughter to be remembered. Margalit is 20 months old today." Alongside him that day Nahum Grywacz, 18 years old, had written, "I don't know what's going to happen to me. Remember, my name is Nahum Grywacz."

In the midst of hell, two of our six last words are our names; our very last deeds are burying things. Between things and names, there is all.

As with any celebrity, the runaway international success of *The Hare With the Amber Eyes* (2010), a history of a family whose generations are linked by the small Japanese ivory figurines they passed along, is an index of what people are thinking about. It's not only seeing yet another bed that George Washington slept in, or buying some old thing at a flea market. It goes beyond the use of "curating" to describe nearly everything.



Creative Commons

Item. Netsuke

Material: Mammouth Ivory

Size: width: 4.5 cm, height:
8.0 cm , ength: 3.7 cm

Date: Japan 17-1870 (Edo
Period)

Location: Private Collection

There seems to be a latent feeling in our time—an emotion that needs to be recognized and attended to—that objects are somehow the past they narrate, and thus bring both the object and the narrative of the past much closer to the beholder's eye. Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel laureate, planned a recent novel as a museum catalog, with essays and entries serving as the text, so great was his confidence in the speaking power of things. And even after deciding to write a more conventional book in which those utterly banal objects were props, not main characters, he still so strongly believed in the volubility of his things that he created a museum for them in Istanbul.

Objects loom large as other gods seem to fail. The enormous global success of Neil MacGregor's *History of the World in 100 Objects*, which started as a radio program, no less, spinning dramatic tales of love and loss from individual pieces in the British Museum collection, marked a coming of age of what we might call "object lessons." We now have the Smithsonian's history of America

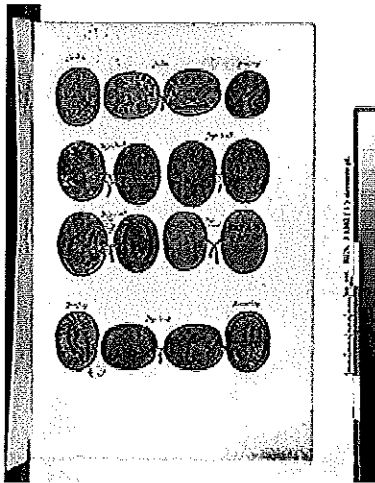
through 101 objects, a recent book on the history of religion in five and a half objects, and even a reduction of biography, in this case Jane Austen's, to "A Life in Small Things." And at Yale University, a beginning survey of the history of art is now being taught as a history of objects and their global interactions—and taught by no less than the head of the department.

It's tempting to attribute the turn in our relationship to things to their imminent demise: The digital, far from killing the material world, seems only to have intensified our attachment to it. But the human interplay with stuff is very, very old. We have not only tools but specially crafted ones, from more than a million years ago. Would those who had seen a hominid patiently knap a stone to make a hand ax, while carefully positioning a fossil in its exact center, not have associated him with the making of this extraordinary creation long after his death? Were not those who stood before the walls of Troy stripping armor from the dead seeking a souvenir, a materialized means of remembering? In a way, the more intimate the attachment to the person, the more the person remains in the object. Anyone who has ever cleared out a dead parent's closet can remember the vivid sharpness of memory that some ordinary thing, entirely unexpectedly, elicits.

Objects speak to us through the memories that belong to them—the more we know of the lives they have lived, the more loudly they speak. That is the "how." But why do objects speak?

Archaeology, which has the likeliest claim of any field to being the master science of stuff, was born as a discipline in the early 19th century out of antiquarianism, which could itself be viewed as the ancestor of many of the modern cultural sciences, or at least so thought Arnaldo Momigliano, the great historian of the ancient world and of the traditions of studying it. In the West, largely beginning in the Middle Ages, antiquaries collected objects, looked closely at them, and described them even more carefully, using words as precisely as they used pens and brushes, and they compared them with surviving texts—all in the hope of making sense of dark corners of the ancient and, as the 17th century passed into the 18th, medieval worlds.

This particular page of this particular book illustrates a series of late antique, Egyptian, gnostic gems that had belonged to one scholar, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), and were sent to a second, Lorenzo Pignoria (1571-1631), to be included in the latter's book of ancient Egyptian imagery. Peiresc had become fascinated by these strange objects and had begun collecting them on his travels in Italy in 1600 (when he first met Pignoria). Peiresc and his friends used their knowledge of obscure texts to help make sense of the iconography and inscriptions on the objects and then, in turn, used the objects to build a discussion about the history of religion in late antiquity.



Pignoriacliché Bibliothèque
Nationale de France

Item. Lorenzo Pignoria,
Vetustissimae tabulae
aeneae sacris Aegyptiorum
simulachris coelatae
accurata explicatio

Date: Padua 1605

Size: quarto (22.4 cm.)

Location: Bibliothèque
Nationale de France

This was not a subject nor an inquiry that pre-existed them: It was from objects that the scholars derived their questions, and they followed them wherever they led, conquering difficult sources of different kinds along the way. The illustrations on this page were produced by woodblock printing in black ink. It was Peiresc, in his own copy of the book, who colored them by hand to match the

color of the actual gems, which he noted in the caption beneath. The hue of the stone was a marker of its material identity and was as important to determining its meaning as its imagery.

The grand narratives of the 18th century of Johann Joachim Winckelmann or Edward Gibbon, two scholars who admired the work of antiquaries, aimed to tell a story that might interest an audience of women as well as men, lovers of books as well as art, readers of modern as well as ancient languages. They represent the beginning of our move away from object-centered work—and our path to our present.

As the 19th century gave rise to modern disciplines like history, art history, archaeology, and anthropology, those fields further distanced themselves from the antiquarianism out of which they had emerged. The older study provided the earliest stratum of references in the footnotes of modern scholarship, but increasingly it tended to occur on the margins of, or between, academic disciplines. Antiquaries had searched in objects for answers to puzzles about the life of the past that crossed status barriers; the new scholarship reflected the ancient focus on the head not the hand—the "liberal" arts were those suitable for free people, while the mechanical ones were to be performed by slaves.

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At the same time, figures as different as Nietzsche and George Eliot were marking out the antiquary for particular abuse. No reader of Eliot's *Middlemarch* is likely to forget the pitiable Mr. Casaubon, who embodied the identification of antiquarianism with a kind of living death. (To really understand what it meant then to be called "antiquarian," one need only reflect on what it feels like today to have one's writing, or one's argument, called "academic.") There had always been an underlying discomfort with the fascination for broken pieces of the past that characterized antiquarianism. Nothing that the South Kensington (later Victoria and Albert) Museum or William Morris could do for the object could overcome the scorn heaped on it by both professors and practical people—in

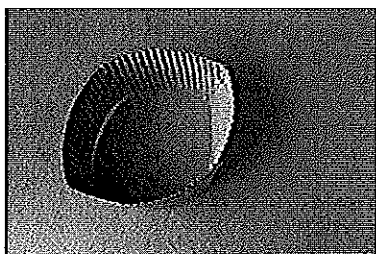
rare agreement.

A century later, with all the attention to materials and their meanings, we may be back to a world where antiquaries matter.

It is one of our persistent myths that the Renaissance marked the revival of antiquity. We know that in many cases, antique monuments remained continuously visible through the Middle Ages, so it was rather the revival of their *study* that defined the "renaissance." All those objects that had been standing there seemed to acquire a new value.

The same thing is happening now. We've been surrounded by objects for a long time, but the idea of celebrating all the little pieces of ordinary life, the kinds of stories preserved in the Oneg Shabbat milk cans, or of seeing the history of religion through its artifacts, is what's new.

In a 2011 book on "La Musée Sentimental de Cologne," an exhibition of everyday objects that opened in 1979, Anke te Heesen, an art historian of scientific bent in Berlin, and her colleague Susanne Padberg argue that the exhibit stands at the beginning of a whole series of displays. Some museums are completely earnest in their attempt to conjure up the lives of those who did not leave written testimony—the Lower East Side Tenement Museum or the Barcelona museum of iron implements, keys, pipes, fans, and other ordinary things that the Catalan sculptor Frederic Marès collected and donated to the city in 1946—which he originally called the "Sentimental Museum." Others tend to the more or less provocative, approaching the best sort of conceptual art, such as the celebrated Museum of Jurassic Technology in Southern California or Fred Wilson's gallery-based interventions.



Item. Cardboard hot drink sleeve

Material: Corrugated paper

Size: 66cm x 135cm

Ordinary things from extraordinary people have long attracted more naïve, perhaps more drenched in aura, attention: objects that bore the imprint of the holy man, like the Shroud of Turin or the sandal of the Prophet. Such relics crisscrossed medieval Europe, and their veneration made art out of very small bits of material.

But it was most likely in the honoring of great creative talents, perhaps as late as the 19th century, that we can locate the foundation of today's "Musée sentimental." Someone like Goethe, whose material remains were preserved—from the most exalted to the most banal, from manuscripts to socks—lies close to this development. A wanderer in Paris's Ninth Arrondissement, stepping into the Musée de la Vie Romantique or the Musée National Gustave Moreau would today encounter firsthand the 19th century's commonplace notion that creativity could be celebrated through the everyday relics of the genius. It is the extension of that idea to the lives of the many, not so much attention to the objects themselves, that crossed the threshold of the 20th century.

This development in the history of curating has coincided with the explosion of microhistory as a practice among historians. Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) is the most famous example, at least to an English-speaking audience, but Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) and Natalie Zemon Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) are not far behind. Beyond them extends the *Alltagsgeschichte* of German historians like Hans Medick in the 1980s. The scholars who studied Italy and France worked from the individual (a 16th-century miller, the peasants of a medieval village, a soldier returned home during the Hundred Years' War, who might be an impostor) to broad-themes social history; the Germans did the reverse, looking for the connections between large historical events like the Thirty Years' War and personal experience.

It is a bitter irony that before the 1970s, the German history of everyday life was preceded by Ringelblum's project in the Warsaw

Ghetto. Indeed, Ringelblum himself was shaped by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, founded in Vilna in 1925 with the brief to collect objects from the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe.

The popularity of what has become known as "history from the bottom up" can be inserted into a still wider context: the collapse of Marxism. So much history was written with Marx as the background justification for attention to the economy and society that, with the crumbling of its structure, some alternatives had to be found. Those who had paid attention to production turned to consumption. Consumption studies, in turn, put more emphasis on the practices of individual people and the meaningfulness of the individual things they used. With the collapse of grand theory in the human sciences, the big narratives of men and things, like Marx's, had to give way to smaller, provisional, local, and even individual visions.



Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York

Item Hands

Material: Plaster

Size: left hand: 5.1 cm;
right hand: 6 cm

Date: Modeled and cast at
an unknown date by
Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)

Location: Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

In the "Epistemo-Critical Preface" to his *Origins of German Tragic Drama*—one of the most famous examples of terrible

academic judgment exercised by a very smart person—Walter Benjamin argued that it wasn't a strong enough rejection of a category's adequacy just to show its limits, one needed to demonstrate that its opposite was true. Following from that, if we want to think about why, after 2,000 years of undervaluing the hand relative to the head, priorities seem now to be shifting, it can't only be by arguing for the limits of the head.

When Rainer Maria Rilke looked at the hands in Rodin's sculpture, he saw an answer to our question. "Hands," he wrote, "are a complicated organism, a delta in which much life from distant sources flows together and is poured into the great stream of action." Unlike William Carlos Williams (a poet whose modernism fixated on images, "No ideas but in things"), Rilke was not reacting dialectically *against* something. He saw in things magnetic poles around which "all movement subsides and becomes contour, and out of past and future time something permanent is formed."

To recover the plenitude of possibilities in things, Rilke urged the journey back to childhood, "to any one of your childhood's possessions, with which you were familiar. Think whether there was ever anything nearer to you, more familiar, more indispensable than such a thing." From the childhood of one person to the childhood of the species, Rilke's next step was even more momentous. "How does it come about at all that things are related to us?" he asked. "What is their history?"

Not only, he wrote, does the history of making coincide with the history of the species, but the making of things helped shape the species. "Some thing came into existence blindly, through the fierce throes of work, bearing upon it the marks of exposed and threatened life, still warm with it," he believed. "This experience was so remarkable and so great that we can understand how things soon came to be made solely for its sake. For the earliest images were possibly nothing but practical applications of this experience, attempts to form out of the visible human and animal world something immortal and permanent, belonging to an order immediately above that world: a thing."

It became clear to him that the history of human beings could be

taught as the history of human things: "Hands have a history of their own, they have, indeed, their own Culture."

To fully appreciate Rilke's argument, we need to return to his great work of poetry, which spanned his experience of the First World War. Rilke was looking for a way to connect things to transcendence without denying their very thingness. If "we are not really at home in our interpreted world," he wrote in the *Duino Elegies*, he held out the hope that a tree, or a street, or a habit, could slip past the border guards of our self-consciousness and establish that missing unmediated connection. He urged close looking as a way to that goal, to gaze at, say, a puppet "so intensely that at last, to balance my gaze, an angel has to come and make the stuffed skins startle into life."

Rilke's quest for healing during the horror of war led him to connect the evidence of the material past—the realm of the antiquaries—with the mental realities we make of them. These "extravagances of the heart" become part of us. From the Sphinx and Chartres Cathedral to the monumentality of the everyday, "Perhaps we are here," he wrote, "in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—at most: column, tower?"

Rilke wanted to awaken our astonishment at seeing things and practices as exquisite bearers of identity, not simply as tools or products; not as "outputs" but as essences. Rilke's sensibility is not archaeological but metaphysical, located deep in the object world, and in ourselves.

The history of the human species through things is a history of the human as creator and self-creator; in our own way, as Rilke would have it, divine.

Peter N. Miller is dean of the Bard Graduate Center. His next books, An Intellectual History of Material Culture (Cornell University Press) and Peiresc's Mediterranean: Excavations in a Seventeenth-Century Archive (Harvard University Press), will be published in 2015.