

ARTIFACTS AS SOURCES FOR MATERIAL HISTORY RESEARCH

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In a small Ontario museum, not many years ago, there were signs reading, "Visitors are kindly requested not to handle the relics." These were not the bones of saints, the threads of an ancient shroud, or fragments of the true cross, but the tools and furniture once used on the farms nearby. The sign-maker had looked upon the hand-me-downs from his grandfather's and his great-grandfather's world and thought them holy, thought them worthy of veneration and respect.

The emotional appeal of historic artifacts cannot be denied. Every museum curator and every collector knows the "pull" of something from the past, something that has stepped out of its original context and allows us for an instant to defy time. Yet herein lies a dilemma. Many of us who work with objects in museums have come to do so through a love of those objects, perhaps through a grandmother who took us by the hand and led us through a room filled with hand-painted china, antimacassars, faded prints, and solid oak chairs. Many of us have come to work with objects this way. We must recognize that, accept it, and be glad of it. Then we must ask, "But what can we learn about grandmother and grandmother's world through a study of the things she left behind? How can we come closer to her by looking at the maker's mark on that china vase she painted, at the design of her antimacassars, at the engraver's signature on the bottom of one of those prints, at the curious brass caster on that big oak chair?" At this moment we become historians as well as anti-quarians. Here the museum curator joins forces with the most innovative historical researchers. Both become students of the "new history" or "history from the bottom up" which takes seriously the world of the common man and places less emphasis on the lives of kings, prime ministers, and newsmakers.

As both the "new" curator and the "new" historian look at objects, they must be aware of several general statements from which all analysis will proceed:

- (1) each artifact has a history whether it was made 2,000 years ago or two minutes ago; it must have had a maker, it must have been made somewhere, and it must have been either left alone or moved from one place to another;
- (2) each artifact was made from something, from some raw or finished material;
- (3) each artifact was made or put together in some specific way;
- (4) each artifact looks the way it does because of some thought process, some plan that determined its shape, colour, and decoration;

- (5) each artifact was intended to be used in some way, to be seen if not to perform a function.

In other words there are five basic qualities or properties that must be studied if an artifact is going to speak to us clearly. E. McClung Fleming, a pioneer in the study of American material culture at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, has listed these five as history, material, construction, design, and function.¹ The Fleming model for artifact analysis is based on careful study of all five properties or qualities. It sounds simple, but in practice can be extremely difficult.

Let us try it here and see what we can learn from two artifacts, a desk and bookcase, and a plate. First, consider the desk and bookcase (fig. 1).

For argument's sake let us say that one day this piece appeared on the doorstep of a Canadian museum. In trying to learn about it we cannot go just yet to the historian's traditional source, written documents. This piece has come to us with no pedigree, no adoption papers. To learn about it we must use our skills as historians of artifacts. Its history will have to remain unknown until we have examined the four other major properties — material, construction, design, and function.



Fig. 1. Private collection.

By opening its doors, pulling out drawers, looking at the artifact from top to bottom, we perform a task too rarely undertaken in Canadian museums. In one major Canadian institution a curator spent nearly an hour looking for a key after a researcher had informed him that a desk in his collection appeared to be locked. By turning the desk around under the watchful eye of a uniformed guard, the researcher found it had not been locked at all but had been screwed shut from the back to prevent visitors from opening the drawers. The curator, who had not thought to look inside before, then abandoned his search for the key and went for a screwdriver instead, heartily embarrassed at having been found out.

To begin to analyze an object, we must first look at it. Careful examination will tell us the materials, both primary and secondary, from which the object was made. In figure 1 the primary wood is maple; the secondary, white pine. This can be determined by sight. In less obvious cases wood samples may have to be examined under a microscope. Other materials must also be looked at; in this piece the hinges and other hardware are made of brass, while the drawer pulls below are of glass with pewter fittings.

The materials used strongly suggest that this piece was made somewhere in northeastern North America where figured maple and white pine were found in abundance.² The fact that the piece has glass knobs and brass and pewter hardware and fittings, however, narrows the possibilities and indicates that it was made within reach of a manufacturing or trading centre. We will leave our consideration of materials there for the time being.

Next comes construction. Drawers have been fitted together with handmade, dovetailed joints. Examination shows that the glass knobs are original to the piece and have been pressed rather than blown, while the brass pulls and hinges and the pewter fittings all appear to have been cast and likely mass-produced. These observations give added strength to our supposition that the piece was made near a manufacturing or trading centre and place the desk and bookcase in a definite time period — that is, after 1828, when pressed glass was first manufactured.³ The absence of circular saw marks also aids in dating, and suggests this piece was probably made before the middle of the century when circular saws came into common use.⁴ Careful examination of materials and construction may prove as useful to the historian in dating an artifact as the layers of soil and debris are to an archaeologist.

In examining construction, care must be taken to identify all repairs, replacements, and alterations as these may have affected appearance as well as design — the property to be considered next.

Successful analysis of design will depend on the researcher's ability to interpret shapes and styles and his experience in looking at other similar artifacts. The combination of carved quarter columns, which

visually lighten the piece at the corners, and carved ogee bracket feet will suggest to the trained eye the case furniture of the Delaware River valley of eastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey. The robust proportions of the piece may bring to mind Pennsylvania-German work; however, the feet, quarter columns, and elaborately worked interior should suggest English design of the mid eighteenth century. Its construction is more in the English manner as well with large, though carefully fitted, dovetails, quite unlike the thin, finely tapered dovetails of the German craftsman. The Delaware River valley, focusing on Philadelphia as its urban centre, was the meeting place of English and German culture in eighteenth-century North America.⁵ Design and construction tell us that the desk and bookcase was made there. Yet thinking back, the materials tell us something different: those original pressed glass knobs demand a date after 1828 and this piece would have been considered rather old-fashioned in the Delaware River valley of that period. Thus we begin to look for another possible place of manufacture, an area influenced by Delaware River valley traditions. In the United States such a place could be western Pennsylvania or, to the south, the hills of western Virginia, North Carolina, or their neighbouring states.⁶

Back we go to materials to test these possibilities. White pine was rarely used alone as a secondary wood in Pennsylvania furniture. A combination of white pine and poplar was preferred. In the south yellow pine would have been used.⁷ Thus the maple-pine combination rules out these two areas as probable places of origin for our desk and bookcase.

Other areas likely to have been influenced by Delaware River valley design are the Niagara Peninsula and York County, both in southern Ontario. These two areas received large numbers of settlers from the counties north of Philadelphia during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁸ A survey of documented furniture from both these areas indicates that indeed Delaware River valley design elements were used there.⁹ But in the Niagara Peninsula native black walnut was almost invariably used. York County, where maple trees far outnumbered black walnut,¹⁰ is more likely the place of origin for our orphan desk and bookcase. Searching the museums, old homes, and antique shops in that area we find similar pieces which help support our assumptions.

We can now draw some logical conclusions about the history of this piece. It was made in York County by a craftsman of Delaware River valley origin or descent. It was made sometime after 1828, but still probably within the period before hand work was replaced by factory and machine work. This is about all this object can tell us by itself and in company with other objects. But armed with these facts, we can now go to documentary sources such as land records, tax and assessment rolls, census returns, directories, newspaper advertisements, and so forth to see if we can find a likely maker and precise point

of origin for this piece. In this case we can. John Doan, from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, a builder and cabinetmaker working in the village of Sharon from ca. 1815 to 1852,¹¹ was almost certainly its maker.

An inscription could have led us to the Doan name earlier: the names of John's sons, Jesse and Charles Doan, are inscribed inside the desk. Any good researcher would have spotted these before and saved himself a lot of trouble. But for the purpose of this exercise we have ignored the written word and let the object itself speak to us.

We have still not approached the fifth basic property of an artifact — function — the most elusive property of all for the function of every object includes both its use and its role. That this desk and bookcase was used for writing and held such things as writing equipment, papers, and books is obvious to us (although probably not to someone coming from an entirely different cultural background). But this object was also used as a thing of beauty, something to be looked at and enjoyed. A far simpler flat surface for writing and a far simpler container could have been devised if this desk and bookcase were intended only for practical use. Objects may fulfill functions of both utility and delight.

The idea of role should also be considered when defining an object's function. Objects may be agents of change. They may communicate values and assumptions or may act as measures of wealth, status, or power. To what extent did the invention of the desk and bookcase, with all its convenient places for storing things, help to spread literacy, the practice of letter-writing, the careful keeping of accounts, the triumph of easily recordable cash transactions over the barter system? Indeed, which came first — the human secretary or the object secretary? To take another approach, what does a desk and bookcase like this communicate about the social standing of its original owner? Its imposing appearance and fine craftsmanship suggest stability and financial means; yet its rather old-fashioned eighteenth-century design suggests cultural conservatism and a preference, conscious or unconscious, for the familiar and the traditional.

One of the major reasons for studying artifacts may be that they can sometimes tell us things about people who have left no written records. Jean Palardy has noted in *The Early Furniture of French Canada* that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses of French Canadian *habitants* contained many more chairs than did the dwellings of their social counterparts in France.¹² At a time when most Frenchmen sat on benches or stools and a chair was a symbol of status and power — hence our word "chairman" — the Canadian *habitants* seem to have been asserting their independence and enjoying a higher standard of living. In research such as this, historians of objects and words must join forces. Studying objects through inventories is not the same as studying the objects themselves, but this does not

mean that the object historian should bow out of the picture. Only a historian with great sensitivity to objects, their evolution, and their use can be successful in using inventories or any other object-related documents.

In the past many historians of objects — the curators and the collectors — have been content to study only the objects in their possession. Having identified them, they have abandoned them to the exhibition hall or the storage area. Their writings have tended to be descriptive rather than analytical and often of little use to historians who have traditionally asked much more probing questions of their written documents than curators and collectors have of their three-dimensional ones. History, material, construction, design, and function all must be probed and examined. In doing so we will build up a body of information which will make further analysis easier.

Leaving the desk and bookcase, we will look now at a ceramic plate (fig. 2). Again let us say that this artifact has arrived mysteriously with no written information accompanying it.



Fig. 2. Private collection.

Judging by the weight of this piece and, to a lesser degree, by its glaze and decoration, we may conclude that the plate is made of ironstone, a type of durable earthenware which was first patented in England in 1813.¹³ Thus we have the first clue to the history of this piece — it was made after 1813. The other material here, the light blue pigment of the

decoration, also aids in dating since it was not in use until several decades after ironstone pottery was first introduced.

Examining the construction of the piece indicates that it was shaped in a mould, that the decoration was applied under the glaze by transfer printing, and that the plate was stacked with others in a kiln. All these conclusions may be drawn from direct observation of the plate and do not require detailed knowledge of ceramic technology.

The design of the plate is certainly its most interesting quality; its multi-sided, almost faceted, rim is typical of 1850s design and is echoed in the shapes of objects as diverse as teapots and chair legs of the same period. The bunches of flowers and trailing vines that ornament the rim are also frequently seen. At the centre is a romantic vista with mountains in the background, a waterfall, a little boat, a group of sightseers enjoying the view and each other's company, and, over on the right, what appear to be tents pitched on forked branches. What was this vista called? We turn the plate over and find "ONTARIO/Lake/Scenery" printed on the back. What does this have to do with Ontario? Could this possibly be intended to represent Niagara Falls?

Immediately we begin to question the function of this plate. Its utility function is obvious — it was used in eating or serving. But who did the eating and serving? Here we leave description and begin analysis.

We know that the plate was made by J. Heath; the name is both printed and impressed near the pattern name. Research in an encyclopedia of pottery marks indicates that the maker's full name was Joseph Heath, that he maintained a pottery on High Street, Tunstall, Staffordshire, and that he used this mark from 1845 to 1853.¹⁴ Other marks, a printed "Z" and a second indistinguishable impressed mark, may refer to individual batches or runs and might in future lead to an even more specific identification date. But the information now before us tells us definitely that this is an English product and that very likely its design expressed an English vision, a very romantic one, of what Ontario looked like. There are allusions to a high falls and to Indian teepees, suggesting superficial knowledge of Niagara and of Canadian Indians. Perhaps to make the scene more comfortably familiar and to suggest long habitation by Europeans, the maker has added a castle — apparently an abandoned, partly ruined one, for light shines through most of its windows. The fountain and the sightseers are also familiar. Until we know to what extent this pattern was marketed and how successful it was in England, we will not know if this was an entirely acceptable or widespread English vision of North America. An even more interesting study would be to determine if this vision was acceptable here. As there was no Province of Ontario until 1867, we would have to consider this pattern's appeal to consumers in the United States as well as in Canada.

Here again an artifact may provide clues to attitudes and beliefs of people who would not likely have put their thoughts in writing. Consumer acceptance of this product in North America would suggest that we too found this vision of Ontario lake scenery acceptable, even if not geographically or historically accurate. It would shed further light on the way we coped with an often difficult and hostile environment. Just as the people of early Ontario accepted the names of York and London for towns that were no more than wilderness outposts, just as Susanna Moodie, Catherine Parr Traill, and others were able to bring English manners and English refinement to a simple cabin, so many North Americans may have accepted and enjoyed this pattern.

In order to study the marketing and popularity of this plate, the historian may find documents such as import records and account books useful. But written documents such as these often do not describe merchandise in detail. Only by studying the objects themselves, including where and how frequently they occur, can historians hope to find final answers. The antique trade and a highly mobile population have already done much to dislodge objects as portable as these from their original surroundings. Occasionally, however, objects are marked with the names of their importers or retailers. On the back of one Ontario Lake Scenery plate is the transfer-printed notation, "Imported by/H.P. MERRILL/Sandusky-Ohio."¹⁵ Sandusky is located on the south shore of Lake Erie, nearly halfway between Cleveland and Toledo. Evidently this vision of Ontario lake scenery was deemed acceptable there.

The study of this plate illustrates some of the problems involved in dealing with mass-produced artifacts. By the time this plate was made, Staffordshire, England, was the chief supplier of ceramic tablewares to the North American market. The local potter, and indeed many other independent craftsmen and small factories that had produced utility wares for local use, found it impossible to compete. Thus, standardization increased and local preferences, styles, and traditions became harder to identify through the use of objects. Since most material history research to date has centred on handmade, one-of-a-kind artifacts, the object historian finds it difficult to obtain reliable information regarding trade practices, methods of retailing, piece work, and patent laws. Yet he must have this information in order to interpret accurately mass-produced artifacts, the common things of the late nineteenth century and of our own times. The object historian and the word historian, never working in isolation, must join forces in order that each may learn from the other.

Objects themselves can tell us about the people who made and used them. They need not be considered mere illustrations for the traditional word historian's work. In themselves they provide a three-dimensional record of the use of materials, construction and manufacturing techniques, and the evolution of design, and, perhaps more importantly, may provide

the only clues to the world view of past generations who left no other records behind. Object historians may record their findings using the techniques and the discipline of word historians. Future object historians may then draw on that work and so depend on written documents for many of their conclusions. But the process starts by looking at things, by touching the "relics" from the past.

NOTES

1. E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 153-73.
2. For a study of the use of woods in English-Canadian furniture, see Donald Blake Webster, "The Identification of English-Canadian Furniture, 1780-1840," *Antiques* 115 (1979): 164-79.
3. George Savage, *Directory of 19th Century Antiques* (London: Barris and Jenkins, 1978), p.259.
4. Polly Anne Earl, "Craftsmen and Machines: The Nineteenth Century Furniture Industry," in *Technological Innovation and the Decorative Arts*, eds. Ian M.G. Quimby and Polly Anne Earl, Winterthur Conference Report 1973, (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p.309.
5. Robert C. Smith, "The Decorative Arts," in *The Arts in America: The Colonial Period*, Louis B. Wright et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp.297, 302.
6. See Frank L. Horton and Carolyn J. Weekley, *The Swisegood School of Cabinetmaking* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 1973) and Helen Comstock, "Furniture of Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky," *Antiques* 61 (1952): 58-99.
7. Charles F. Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period (1788-1825)* (New York: Viking, 1966), p.37.
8. G. Elmore Reaman, *The Trail of the Black Walnut* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), pp.95-108, 113-14.
9. John McIntyre, "Niagara Furniture Makers III," *Canadian Collector* 13, no. 2 (1978): 24-28.
10. Canada Department of Forestry Bulletin no. 61 *Native Trees of Canada*, 6th ed. (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1963), pp.110, 250.
11. Alfred Alder Doane, comp., *The Doane Family and Their Descendants* (1902; reprint ed., Boston: 1960), p.228.
12. Jean Palardy, *The Early Furniture of French Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963), p.213.
13. Savage, *Dictionary*, p.169.
14. Geoffrey A. Godden, *Encyclopedia of British Pottery and Porcelain Marks* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1964), p. 318.
15. Author's collection.