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Aura of Authenticity: The Impact of Original Objects in the Museum Guest Experience

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An Abstract of a Thesis in
Museum Studies

by

Alyssa M. Frijey

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of:

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Department of History and Social Studies Education

Thesis Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to defend the maintenance of original object-based collections in museums with the argument that they provide profound, unique, and irreplaceable experiences for museum guests. Authenticity of an artifact carries with it an aura of importance which is a highly valuable means of connection within museums. Such meaning is the direct result of the manner in which human beings interpret material culture. Keeping in mind that this value can only be fully experienced through that which is original, it is crucial that original objects should be maintained in these institutions.

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Chapter I:

Introduction

Authenticity is a term synonymous with museums as renowned institutions of the public trust. A contributing factor to this belief is the preservation, maintenance, and exhibition of original objects in a great majority of these institutions. However, the place of objects in museums has become less and less certain as a result of changing times. The majority of museums exhibit no more than five percent of their collection at any given time. This trend not only causes original materials to become invisible and underutilized, but also undervalues the inherent ability for these items to contribute strongly to the success of the museum. Original objects are valuable because they provide meaningful and incomparable experiences for museum visitors in great part due to their authenticity. This stems from a basic human disposition toward and preference for the genuine in an array of situations. The appeal of authenticity and the original experience is deeply rooted at the core of human interpretation of material culture, however it is understood; whether it be sociologically, anthropologically, or psychologically.

We interpret material culture throughout the duration of the guest experience in museums, particularly during the moment of human-object engagement. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the significance of the use of authentic objects in the museum experience by exploring the manner in which

humans interpret and experience material culture, emphasizing the power of authenticity. This basis of human understanding and analysis relates directly to the quality of experience guests have in museums when engaging with objects. This work in no way seeks to suggest that original objects are the only medium suited for display in museums, as this author freely acknowledges the benefits of supplemental material such as models, modern technology, and replicas. Other forms of engagement within museums unrelated to original artifacts, such as performance art, are valuable as well. This work simply argues that original objects provide meaningful experiences that cannot be replicated through other mediums, thereby supporting the necessity of their continued presence in their prospective institutions.

The body of this work has been organized into six chapters, the first of which being this introduction. The second of these chapters outlines the manner in which human beings interpret material culture in general. This basic understanding of human experience as related to objects is the foundation upon which this paper is built. Chapter three addresses the place of original objects in museums and addresses two topics; the first is the decline of object presence in museums over time. The shift away from object-based thinking in museums is a direct threat to the continued place of artifacts in these institutions. The second chapter builds off the information in the first chapter to explore the manner in which guests experience objects specifically in museums, emphasizing the impact such materials has in creating a meaningful experience. The third chapter narrows the focus to the quality which contributes so strongly to original object

value: authenticity. This section deals heavily with the concept of “aura,” developed by Walter Benjamin, and explains what it is about authenticity that resonates strongly with people. The following chapter provides evidentiary support for the thesis argument. In addition to analyzing case studies and survey results regarding guest preferences, the chapter also touches on guest expectations of museum experiences, as well as answers to common counter-arguments. In short, the evidence shows that, not only are objects often the most memorable aspect of visitor experiences, the presence of original objects is preferred by an overwhelming majority of guests across all demographics.

Chapter II:

Literature Review

The object of this paper seeks to emphasize the irreplaceable impact original objects have during a guest's museum experience. Objects represent the principle medium of communication between institution and guest consistently throughout the history of museums. As a result, they are discussed at great length throughout the majority of literature written on the subject of museums. The sources referenced in this work provide insight ranging from the broad topic of object interpretation, to the role of objects in museums, through even more specific topics like the auratic value of a particular artifact.

In *What Objects Mean?: An Introduction to Material Culture*, Arthur Asa Berger explores a multitude of theories pertaining to the way human beings interpret material culture. The author presents evidence that suggests objects reflect beliefs, attitudes, and values found in various societies. This work is particularly useful in understanding how objects are defined as well as the possible meanings they can convey. While human interpretation and understanding of objects may seem quite general, it is the foundation upon which this thesis is built and is important background to have. Although the theories presented are all unique, they share a common understanding that objects to have profound meaning for and impact on those who encounter them.

Additionally, Berger offers concise and clear definitions of language related to the subject matter that must be clarified for overall understanding.

Interpreting Objects and Collections, edited by Susan Pearce, explores to great extent the paradigm shift in object use within museum collections. This demonstrable shift away from use of objects in museums was a great source of inspiration for this work as it seeks to support the further use of original material. Similarly to *What Objects Mean?,* this work adds to the understanding of object classification and perception, with a model outlined by Ian Hoddard being of particular use. Hoddard describes the manner in which objects function as signs and symbols in a society. His explanation supports and, in instances, marries methodologies endorsed by Berger. In *"*Cultural Practice and Museum and Archival Objects," Pawel Rodak offers a similar model for the classification of material culture in social reality, particularly focusing on the meaning and value of objects in our everyday lives. These interactions and associated values impact the manner in which we experience objects in museums.

The authenticity of original objects represents a non-replicable experience and this is a strong argument for the need to maintain object-based collections in museums. The need for this argument stems from a shift of opinion in the museum field, which questions the usefulness and necessity of objects in modern display. Two connected sources address the questioned relevance of objects in modern museums. In his book, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?,* Steven Conn addresses issues at the heart of contemporary museum culture and politics. Conn investigates the relationship between museums and knowledge,

the connection between culture and politics, and the representation of non-Western societies in American museums and public institutions, with particular focus on the changing nature of their constituencies. The author discusses the historical development of objects in museums, outlining the shift away from object-based epistemology over time. In an age where the role of objects in museums has strongly come into question, Conn argues that museums and their collections possess tremendous potential as sites of learning and places where civic identity is shaped and sustained. Of particular relevance is the chapter pertaining to the Philadelphia Commercial Museum which presents the proper use of objects as a means through which museums may either be successful or fail altogether. Steven Conn's book was a source of strong inspiration for this thesis and is present throughout the chapters pertaining to objects in museums and object authenticity.

The usefulness of objects is further discussed in an article by Rainey Tisdale, which was inspired by Conn's work. "Do History Museums Still Need Objects?" addresses similar questions to those *in Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, except focused on historical museums and institutions. Tisdale explains concerns in the museum community and general public regarding the relevance of objects in contemporary times. As this article presents an argument in favor of object use, it is essential to understand concerns regarding their effectiveness, especially regarding authenticity.

Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations, edited by Sandra Dudley, is about objects, people, and the engagement between

them. The work deals with the fundamental experience human beings have with objects, specifically in the context of public display such as museum and gallery spaces. Several things may take place during even the briefest interaction between a human being and an artifact, including analysis, recognition, or perhaps emotional response. This experience is what constitutes the effectiveness and value of objects in museums. The model of object interpretation outlined in an essay written by Jules Prown was of particular use. This source builds off of the themes explored by Arthur Berger beautifully because it translates human interpretation of material culture in general to object engagement in the museum. A chapter in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, titled “Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums”, offers a third outlook and outlines three models which summarize how visitors understand the objects they encounter.

The personal benefits reaped by museum guests who encounter object-based collections in museums are explored in Lois H. Silverman’s, *The Social Work of Museums*. The author outlines a framework of key social work perspectives while utilizing her social work and communications background to show how museums are evolving a needs-based approach to provide valuable services for their audience. This is in agreement with Conn’s argument that there has been a shift in museums from an object-based epistemology to a guest-centered focus. Silverman goes a step further in her argument that the inclusion of object-based collections in museum display leads to positive, personal, and meaningful responses. She suggests that “as people engage with objects and

each other, museums become containers and catalysts for personal growth." Considering the focus of the book is entirely set in museums, it is interesting that the work is so critical of museums' motivations pertaining to revenue. The tone suggests that goals for exhibitions to garner repeat guest visitation is hollow exploitation and that time would be better spent focusing on how to build meaningful relationships. Such criticism is dearly misplaced, as revenue generation is a justified top priority for these institutions and relationship-building is the principle means through which such funds are secured. Despite these criticisms, the book does provide an excellent source regarding the personal ways that visitors benefit from the presence of objects on display. Silverman's perspective regarding the beneficial aspects of museum visits as well as her criticisms of museum practice are likely the result from her background as a social work professional; as such it may be difficult to understand the financial challenges museums face. However, it is useful and enlightening to consider the professional opinion of those outside the museum field, particularly if they find value in museum work. Additionally, *In Museums and Their Communities* by Sheila Watson, the author places a strong emphasis on the effect objects can have on a human being, especially in terms of their authenticity. Watson vehemently argues that an individual will always react differently to a three-dimensional model, in the flesh, than they will to a two-dimensional representation.

Despite the abundance of resources, finding material that touched specifically on the effect of object authenticity was a challenge. A consistent

pattern throughout the source material revealed that, because museums are trusted by the public, it is assumed by many that the objects displayed are the real thing. Several source materials are referenced throughout the chapter pertaining to object authenticity. Though there is no formula with which to measure the value of authenticity, it is important to thoroughly explore the topic from different angles. Sources written by John Henry Merryman, George Savage, and Paige S. Goodwin were particularly useful in communicating the coveted nature of authentic objects through the history of the repatriation debate. Repatriation is a highly controversial and heated topic between museums who claim ownership of authentic material. Merryman's work provides an excellent example in the repatriation debate of the Elgin Marbles between Greece and The British Museum. In *Forgeries, Fakes, and Reproductions*, by George Savage, the value of original material is expressed through the documented aversion people have towards "fake" pieces. Human beings generally feel ill-disposed to reproductions and fake artifacts, often using very personal and emotional language to express the displeasure of feeling deceived. This, therefore, supports the argument that authenticity is highly valued.

In defining the value of authenticity, no other work served as greater inspiration than *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, by German Marxist critic and essayist Walter Benjamin. He was interested in the effect of capitalism on society during the rise of Fascism, especially regarding the increasing presence of reproduced consumer goods. As a result he developed strong opinions about originals versus reproductions in terms of value. Benjamin

argues the value of the authentic lies in its “aura” or associated value. This associated value is carried with the object and can be experienced in a number of ways. Above all, the author strongly emphasizes that the aura of an original object with all its associated value can never be present in a replica. This theory is further supported in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, edited by Kevin Crowley, Karen Knutson, and Gaea Leinhardt. The essays presented offer great insight on the learning experiences that take place in museums via object-based collections and discuss the associated value individuals experience during encounters with authentic material in the museum. Additionally, this source provides information on the relationship between object authenticity and the curation of exhibits. The planning and execution that goes into the creation of exhibits contributes to the way objects are viewed by the public.

The feedback these institutions receive about their offerings is directly reflective of guest expectations of museum experiences. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan provide thorough survey material in their book, *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. The surveys create a picture of what the public expects of museums and how they are viewed across a wide range of demographics. The demographics are divided by identifiers such as race, income, age, and education, providing a well-rounded analysis. In two sources by Susie Wilkening, the statistical data demonstrates guest preference for the authentic, as well as the relationship between original objects and beloved memories of museum experiences. These are just a few examples of the survey

results, guest commentary, and statistical data which not only support the use of original objects, but combat common counter-arguments.

Chapter III:

The Meaning of Objects

The object defined

We have existed in a world constructed of and around material things –a world that has shaped our perspectives and sensory responses through our prolonged, enculturated exposure to them. This consideration is reasonable given human tendency throughout history and across all civilizations to express ourselves through material culture. This thesis argues that the value of original objects in museums is due to their qualities, both tangible and intangible. These qualities act as messengers through which the value of objects may be interpreted. Before addressing the intrinsic and extrinsic value of material culture, we must first explore the manner in which objects are viewed and interpreted by human beings.

The terms object, artifact, and material culture are often used interchangeably, as is the case here; however there are definitions for each. The term object generally refers to items of a more or less contemporary nature, while artifact refers to items from ancient times; both, however, fall under the generalized definition of material culture. Berger defines material culture as “the

world of things that people make and things that we purchase or possess, so it is part of our consumer culture." [1]

The object interpreted

There are several scholarly theories regarding the processes through which objects are perceived, analyzed, and interpreted. The majority of these arguments find their foundation in the relation of objects to culture. Therefore, before exploring them, the term "culture" must be defined. The book, *What Objects Mean? An Introduction to Material Culture*, notes an excellent definition of culture, courtesy of distinguished American sociologist, Henry Pratt Fairchild:

> "A collective name for all the behavior patterns socially acquired and transmitted by means of symbols, hence a name for all the distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool-making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion but also the material instruments or artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc." [2]

Fairchild's interpretation was written in his *Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences* and is most appropriate here as it highlights the connection between objects and culture. Non-tangible aspects of culture, such as achievements, traditions, and ways of thinking have always been reflected in material artifacts. This broad description of the relationship between human beings and objects will serve to explain the connections that are made between museum visitors and artifacts on display.

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[1] Berger, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p. 16.

[2] Fairchild, Henry Pratt. *Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences*. Totowa: Littlefield, Adams, 1966.

Objects are more than just reflections of human culture. They also act as vehicles through which we understand the world around us and ourselves. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains three ways in which artifacts "objectify the self." They first demonstrate the owner's perceived power, energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing focal points of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Lastly, objects give physical evidence of one's place in the social network as symbols of valued relationships.[3] It is in these ways that our material belongings stabilize our sense of who we are, the way we understand ourselves, and the way we wish to be understood.

This idea of the interconnectedness between object and self is further explored in Berger's work. He outlines six methodologies of object analysis, arguing above all that the manner in which objects will always reflect beliefs, attitudes, and values in various societies. This reflection will directly affect the manner in which the object is perceived because of the viewer's own cultural development and experience. Of the six methodologies, the ones particularly relevant to this subject matter are the semiotic, sociological, anthropological, and archaeological approaches. Interpreting objects in this way can teach us a great deal about the societies in which they are found as well as our own. It is vital to understand the manner in which artifacts are defined, perceived, analyzed, and interpreted because it is during this process that the value of objects is conveyed.

[3] Lubar, Steven, and W D. Kingery, eds. *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*. N.p.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993.

Semiotics is, simply put, the science of signs. While seemingly unrelated to the understanding of material culture, this approach suggests that objects function as signs within a culture that communicate meaning. Semiotics offers the ability to interpret objects and artifacts and to explain how these objects tie in cultural code and matters, and communicate these elements to human beings within the culture. Experts in the field determine the meaning and significance of objects as signs through a variety of semiotic concepts. Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, offered a definition of a sign, which he explained was comprised of two parts – a signifier (word) and signified (concept.) [4] For example, the signifier "pencil" signifies the object consisting of wood, lead, etc. used as a writing utensil. Although seemingly black and white, the relationship between a word and concept is not exclusive, but entirely at the mercy of convention. An example of this is the word "love," that while defined, holds a different meaning for every human being. While a single word may signify an array of meanings to countless individuals, this lends itself positively to the notion of an artifact as a sign. An artifact behaves, not merely as a sign, but as a system of signs through its size, shape, texture, color, and grain, creating an abundance of unique and individual experiences museum guests may relish. Aside from physical qualities, artifacts, even as trivial as those in our every-day life, carry more meaning than merely their designated function. Roland Barthes, a modern semiologist, spoke of the paradox of objects in *The Semiotic Challenge*:

[4] Berger, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p. 47.

> "The paradox I want to point out is that these objects which always have, in principle, function, a utility, a purpose, we believe we experience as pure instruments, whereas in reality they carry other things, they are also something else: they function as the vehicle of meaning…there is always a meaning which overflows the object's use…there is no object which escapes meaning." [5]

As human beings grow, mentally develop, and evolve over time, it is reasonable to suggest that the meaning they interpret from artifacts may grow and change as well.

As the study of groups and institutions, the sociological approach to material culture relates quite strongly to the role objects play in museums. "We are in society and society is in us, and it is simplistic to neglect either of these two sides to our nature." [6] We can say the same thing about artifacts: they are part of society, molded and created by man; society, therefore, is reflected in them. The objects we interact with directly and use every day generate great meaning in our lives; this affects the way we understand and interpret them as well as objects we may relate to them. The sociological approach offers insights into the role that objects and artifacts play in our lives, but also raises questions about how these objects function for people and what motivates the desire to possess them. Similarly, the Economic or Marxist approach explores the discrepancies between needs and desires as well as the underlying aspects of objects, including design, manufacture, transport, use, advertisement, and sale. Berger defends the usefulness of this approach, arguing that it is "necessary to look for the hidden or latent function of objects to fully understand the role they

[5] Barthes, Roland. *The Semiotic Challenge*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988.
[6] Berger, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p 65.

play in our lives." [7] Objects have often been coveted as symbols of power through which to display one's own perceived authority and status. Women, for example, have often done this through ownership of fine clothing, ornaments, and household possessions.

Anthropology is defined as the study of the physical, social, and cultural development of man.[8] Culture is primarily concerned with the production and exchange of meanings and "things" rarely if ever have any one single, fixed, and unchanged meaning. Culture plays a role in the creation of objects and their use, and the fundamentals of one culture differ greatly from another. Similarly, an anthropological approach to the understanding of objects suggests that cultural values are incorporated into or reflected by material culture. It is by our use of things and what we think, say, and feel about them – how we represent them – that gives them a meaning. [9] The author argues that an object has different meanings and valuations in different cultures, as well as changing meaning over time, and that this must be kept in mind. This understanding also lends itself to the argument that objects may produce different meaningful connections, even with the same person, every time. For example, a gift from a loved one may garner a different reaction from its owner, perhaps even an increase in personal value after that loved one has passed away.

[7] Berger, Arthur A. p. 88.
[8] Berger, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p. 101.
[9] Berger, Arthur A. p. 102.

Archaeology is defined as “the scientific study of historic and prehistoric peoples and their cultures by analysis of their artifacts, inscriptions, monuments, and other remains.” [10] This approach to understanding material culture is unique because, archaeologists lack living references for information. They take an inferential route, spending more time investigating the production, distribution, and use of objects. As with the other theoretical approaches, the argument reaffirms that culture is reflected in the objects created by those who are a part of it. Lacking evidence, the only inferences we may draw from ancient relationships between person and artifact are a direct reflection of our own modern relationships between person and artifact. Artifacts have been witnesses to our past and remain so still today.

In *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Ian Hoddard’s essay, “The contextual analysis of symbolic meanings,” argues that there are three broad types of meaning regarding material culture. His explanation supports and, in instances, marries methodologies endorsed by Berger. First, there is the object as it is involved in exchanges of matter, energy and information, understood principally by its efficiency to do a job. We can discuss both how the object is used, and how it conveys information about social characteristics, personal feelings and religious beliefs.[11] This relates directly to the semiotic notion of objects as signs and carriers of meaning. Second, an object has meaning because it is part of a code, set or structure. With this sociological supposition in mind, the object meaning is entirely dependent on its place in the code, set,

[10] Berger, Arthur A. p. 119.
[11] Pearce, Susan M., ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London: Routledge, 2003.

structure, and more specifically who is interpreting it. [12] The third involves the historical content of changing ideas and associations to the object itself[13], very much in the spirit of archaeological and anthropological methodology. An example of this would be an artifact reflecting a particular time period or event, such as pottery from ancient Greece or a military uniform from World War II. This concept in particular relates to the ambiguous state of original objects. While an artifact may exist in a certain time period, its interpreted meaning and value are ever changing. Ancient Egyptian temple icons, for example, were statues of venerated deities placed in exclusive areas, off limits to all but high priests and royalty. As such, they were understood to be sacred items of religious worship. Today, such items are on display in museums around the world for public enjoyment and education, no longer items of religious worship.

In his work, "Cultural Practice and Museum and Archival Objects," Pawel Rodak offers a similar model for the classification of material culture in social reality involving three potential outcomes. In the first, objects are perceived from the perspective of the meanings attributed to them as derived from the object's status.[14] This perception supports the propositions of both Berger and Hoddard that the meaning and value of objects is the result of its interpreted "place" in the world or even within the smaller scale of a cultural code. The second focuses on consumption involving objects, particularly regarding consumption and

[12] Ibid.
[13] Pearce, Susan M., ed *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London: Routledge, 2003.
[14] Rodak, Pawel. "Cultural Practice and Museum Archival Objects." The New Ethnography (2014): 48

manufacture.[15] We once again find sociological concepts, Marxist and Economist principles, applied to the way material culture is seen by human beings. Although the concept of material and extrinsic value may appear unrelated to appreciation of original objects in museums, it is important to consider that the term “original” alone is embedded with latent value appreciated in world markets. Lastly, the third involves objects present in everyday life that are related to home and work.[16] While similar to the first model, Rodak brings attention to the meaning of objects present in our everyday lives, which are often vital yet taken for granted. The everyday objects people interact with, however unacknowledged these occurrences are, affect the manner in which we engage with objects in museums.

Studies such as these have existed for generations and continue to occur, producing an abundance of hypotheses, theories, methodologies, and applications with the goal of explaining our relationships to the objects around us. The concepts introduced in this chapter differ from one another, yet coexist harmoniously, providing a well-rounded understanding of human interpretation of material culture. This interpretation relates directly to the manner in which visitors engage with museum artifacts on display. These concepts will apply in later chapters to demonstrate the way original objects are interpreted, noting specifically the value applied by museum visitors to authenticity consistently and across a range of demographics.

[15] Ibid.
[16] Rodak, Pawel, p. 48.

Chapter IV:

Objects in the Museum

The decline of the object in museums

As previously stated, the purpose of this thesis is to present object authenticity as an impactful measure through which the necessity for the continued presence of artifacts in museums may be supported. The relevance of this argument's existence is evident in the diminishing presence of objects in museums. The diminished presence of objects in museums is directly related to the mission of the institution and what is expected of museums by their staff, audience, and the field in general. In order to fully comprehend how the diminished presence of objects came about, the development of museums throughout history must be examined, with particular focus on change in role.

The museums of today trace their origins back to the aristocratic collections and cabinets of curiosities assembled in early modern Europe. These collections were shared by their owners to reflect their status as powerful individuals of knowledge and prestige. The focus was equal parts display and possession. During the eighteenth century, the institutional context of these collections began to change as private collections became public and the serendipitous irrationality of cabinet display became rationalized.[17] This focus on

[17] Conn, Steven. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 20.

driving collections towards increased organization and public access propelled the field into the early twentieth century, leading to the creation of great civic museums. These institutions operated through what Conn defines as an "object-based epistemology"; a museum's success in uplifting and educating its audience lay with its ability to scientifically categorize, organize, and display collections.[18] This dependence and focus on objects decreased dramatically throughout the twentieth century, continuing on into the twenty-first. While museums continue to be categorized in a way that reflects their origins, the relationship between categories of knowledge and the objects that were once thought to constitute them has been altered.[19]

Museums at the turn of the twentieth century were built on the assumption that visitors would be educated by visually engaging with objects – the more the merrier. The sentiment amongst collectors was also the same, amounting to a desire to impress with the quantity of precious materials they possessed. However, by the second quarter of the century, the faith in the ability of objects to communicate information independently eroded. By the 1920s and '30s, an increasing number of museums had added supplemental educational programming for the public, suggesting that the institutions were no longer satisfied with the objects' effectiveness.[20] As the presence of such programming increased, fewer and fewer items were put on display. Over the last fifty years or so, the American museum has changed from an "establishment-like institution"

[18] Conn, Steven, p. 20
[19] Ibid.
[20] Conn, Steven, p. 23

focused primarily on the growth, study, and care of its collections, to one with its focus outward to concentrate on providing services to the public, in the forms of educational programming, entertainment, events, cafes, and gift shops.[21]

While these developments are common, they vary depending on the type of museum. The relationship between objects and art museums appears to be the most stable over the last century; this may be attributed to the fact that, even in lesser quantity, art objects continue to function largely as they did in the beginning of museum history. The art objects inside museums are also reinforced by a market outside of the museum, publically acknowledging the monetary and cultural value of these items. [22] Additionally, the transfer of knowledge within art museums is still predicated on the act of seeing and that is precisely what visitors go to do, see art. History museums are also institutions with a degree of consistency over time in object display.

On the other hand, the decline of objects is arguably the most apparent in museums of science and technology. Like many museums, they have "given up" and simply focus on entertainment value, targeted towards children. As a result of this focus and without a research arm through which to engage adults, the use of objects and specimens is largely outshined by technological engagement and play.[23] Although technology may be used as a positive contribution to object display, the replacement of objects with technological alternatives removes all possibility for museum guests to enjoy authenticity.

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Conn, Steven, p.29
[23] Conn, Steven, p. 138

The Moment of Impact

Having briefly examined the gradual decline of object presence in museums, one may wonder what sets objects apart from their alternatives as tools of engagement in these institutions. At present, it may naturally make sense to gradually replace them with alternatives, the better to connect with the modern generation. While this author freely acknowledges the benefits of supplemental engagement, it would be a disservice if the ability of original objects to make meaningful connections in their own right was forgotten. When do these meaningful connections take place? When is object value conveyed? The value and messages encapsulated within an artifact come into play at the moment they are experienced by a human being, in other words, through object-subject interaction. For the purposes of this thesis, object-subject interaction will be understood as the connection between an inanimate physical thing and a conscious person, and constitutes the moment in which a material thing is perceived and experienced through the senses.[24] These interactions are often more than what they seem, sometimes involving a moment of impact where a visitor may experience a profound emotional response.

During an individual's experience with a particular museum subject, the analysis of an object takes place to varying degrees. In *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Jules Prown offers a concise and thoughtful outline regarding three stages of object analysis: description, deduction, and speculation. The

[24] Dudley, Sandra, ed. *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. N.p.: Routledge, 2013, p.5.

description phase involves the object's aesthetics that can be observed objectively.[25] This includes substantial analysis of measurement, weight, and materials in addition to content analysis of decorative design, motifs, inscriptions etc. The deduction phase examines the relationship between object and perceiver, linking the material with the perceiver's world of existence and experience.[26] This is done through sensory engagement, intellectual considerations about the object, and any resulting emotional response. The third phase, speculation, is the period where the individual makes use of their creative imagination regarding ideas and perceptions.[27] They may formulate theories or hypotheses about the item and/or develop a plan for further research and validation at this time. These themes relate directly to those previously discussed regarding human interpretation of material culture.

A chapter in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, titled "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums," outlines three models which summarize how visitors understand the objects they encounter. The first involves visitors gathering information about the objects by carefully viewing, discussing with others, and reading labels. [28] This traditional model is of the reactive variety and most closely relates to the elements of curation such as display, design, and labeling. The reception and registration of information is principally what occurs here. More recent views of the experience focus on the active construction of

[25] Pearce, Susan M., ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 133
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Paris, Scott G., and Melissa J. Mercer. "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums." In *Learning Conversations in Museums*, edited by Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, N.p.: Taylor and Francis, 2003, p. 401

meaning by visitors depending on their prior knowledge, interests, and social situation. This interactive model emphasizes how visitors' unique interpretations result from the interactions of their physical, personal, and social contexts.[29] These two models reflect traditional approaches in learning theories derived from psychology and education. A third model, perhaps most relevant to this research, emphasizes connections between people and objects in the meanings inherent within objects and the effects that objects have upon people.[30] Such transactions may evoke tangential, unintended, or even novel responses. As a result, changes may occur in the knowledge, beliefs, or attitudes of visitors. A transactional model reflects an object-based epistemology that transcends the actual object by virtue of the cognitive constructions and the social experiences engendered by the object. This model resonates with this research because when an individual is engaged with an artifact via its associated value and context, they are engaged with the object's authenticity.

The profoundly emotional and personal impact objects frequently have on museum visitors is addressed in *The Social Work of Museums*. According to Silverman, research has shown that when encountering museum fare "visitors will likely consider and value not only the messages and meanings intended by educators, exhibit designers, artifact makers or artists, they will also value, sometimes equally if not more, the personal or affective meanings they create themselves as they connect with what they encounter to their own lives and

[29] Ibid.
[30] Paris, Scott G., and Melissa J. Mercer, p. 402.

relationships." [31] Though difficult to measure such responses, it has been attempted through museum experimentation. In an effort to sort such responses into a sensible pattern, the touring exhibition that marked the Smithsonian Institution's 150th anniversary in 1996 was divided into three sections, *Remembering*, *Discovering*, and *Imagining*.[32] The exhibit consisted of three-hundred and thirty-six treasures from sixteen museums in Washington and New York.[33] The study revealed that, rather than communicating new information, the primary impact of visiting a new museum exhibition is to confirm, reinforce, and extend the visitor's existing beliefs and experiences.[34] An article written by Sharon Waxman of the Washington Post emphasizes the overwhelming emotional impact of the objects on visitors, particularly the original artifacts. One guest marveled at the painting of George Washington, created by Rembrandt Peale in 1853, saying, "this is the most beautiful painting I've ever seen…it's, it's holy.[35]" Visitors "fell silent" when in they came upon the beaver skin top hat of Abraham Lincoln worn the night of his assassination.[36] Another visitor noted "the longer I stay, the more intense it gets. To see the things that Abe Lincoln wrote, to be so close to something that is woven in the fabric of our history – it goes beyond words.[37]" It is clear from this evidence that the original objects had a deep effect on visitors.

[31] Silverman, Lois H. *The Social Work of Museums*. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 15.
[32] Watson, Shiela. *Museums and their Communities*. N.p.: Psychology Press, 2007.
[33] Waxman, Sharon. "A Peek into the Nation's Attic." The Washington Post, February 10, 1996.
[34] Watson, Shiela, 2007.
[35] Waxman, Sharon, 1996.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

The purpose of this chapter was to briefly outline the decline of object presence in museums and convey the manner in which object value is communicated to visitors in museums. The result of communicated object value is an impact on visitors, which may at times be highly effective and emotionally significant. The Smithsonian's traveling exhibit, in particular, had a profoundly emotional impact on visitors. One may reasonably conclude from the visitors' statements in the Washington Post that the majority of these individual experiences involved original objects on display, such as Abraham Lincoln's top hat, Amelia Earhart's leather flight suit, and paintings by celebrated artists. Having acknowledged this conclusion, the question of why the guests were so impacted still remains. What is it about a particular hat or flight suit that causes people to experience such intensity and emotion? Would an American citizen react in a similar way to these items as a foreign tourist? The foundation of this work rests upon this very question of why original objects have the ability to create such an impact and will be discussed in the following chapter about authenticity.

FIGURE 1 **-** http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/subjects/clothing-accessories

Chapter V:

The Aura of Authenticity

Authenticity Defined

The majority of this work demonstrates the valuable role objects play during the guest experience, particularly when they are engaged. Authenticity is one of the aspects of artifacts that is the most profound, unique and impactful. Authentic objects displayed in a museum-like setting have always possessed the ability to trigger powerful cognitive and emotional responses in those who experience them. The argument regarding authenticity suggests that only through the object itself can historical connotation, social context, or associated meanings and value be conveyed. One need look no further for evidence than the thousands who flock to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. to be spell-bound by Dorothy's Ruby Slippers, embark on a pilgrimage to see John Lennon's glasses in Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, or pay homage to da Vinci's Mona Lisa at the Louvre. What these iconic items have in common is that each is an original object with the associated value that comes with it. Visitors want to see and experience remarkable artifacts that bridge the gap between the present and our past.

The complication that arises when defining authenticity is that the idea itself is complex and open to interpretation; it holds different meanings for different people in every situation. In the simplest terms, authenticity is that which

is real and genuine. However, the application of this concept is not entirely black and white. An artifact, for example, can be both authentic and inauthentic at the same time; a forged dollar bill is both inauthentic currency and an authentic piece of paper. The focus of this chapter will be exploring the different measurements of value placed on objects considered to be authentic. The purpose of this is to understand how authenticity is viewed and why it is such a highly coveted quality. In addition, the magic of original artifacts – that sense of awe felt from experiencing the real thing, so often discussed in this work thus far – will be given a name.

Authenticity Value

Authenticity in general is a desirable quality in material culture, particularly consumer goods. As a result, the value applied to a quality of high demand is understandably high. This is evident in the disposition of many to pay an exorbitant amount of money for an original piece of art by a renowned artist, as well as the price people are willing to pay in travel, admission, etc. to see certain artifacts. The concept is even present with museums themselves, who often offer affordable gift shop prints or replicas of famous works, such as Van Gogh's Starry Night. This allows guests to bring home mementos of their experience and is likely the closest they will ever come to possessing the original piece. Monetary value aside, original objects carry with them great intrinsic value for many individuals and institutions simply by virtue of being authentic or historical. This has been a point of conflict between both museums and nations as a whole regarding the ownership of artifacts deemed to "belong" to a certain party. The

Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon in Athens, Greece is one of, if not the most well-known example of the contention between institutions and countries of origin over ownership and repatriation of authentic material. Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl Elgin, was the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Greece from 1801-1812.[38] During this time, Elgin procured written authority "to remove some stones with inscriptions and figures" in the form of a letter from the Turkish government in Constantinople to the governor in Athens and did so between 1799 and 1803; this action is not considered legal by Greece as its nation was under foreign authority at the time.[39] The collection of artifacts removed from the Parthenon includes portions of the frieze, metopes, pediments, and assorted architectural fragments.[40] Following the Marbles permanent placement on display at the British Museum, an arduous conflict has ensued between the British Museum and Greece over rightful ownership. The fact that such furious disagreement is still engendered by the Parthenon marbles, even despite the museum in Athens having reproductions on display, provides a compelling example of the many elements that people find important when considering artifacts. In addition to ownership, is the significance of experiencing genuine articles as opposed to reproductions – where "reproductions are copies made for honest purposes." [41] It is imperative to consider the gravity of such situations and how often they have occurred because it shows the high standing in which authenticity is held.

[38] Merryman, John Henry. "Thinking About the Elgin Marbles". Michigan Law Review 83, no.8 (1985): 1882.
[39] Goodwin, Paige S. "Mapping the Limits of Repatriable Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Stolen Flemish Art in French Museums." University of Pennsylvania Law Review 157, no.2 (2008): 687.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Savage, G. (1963). *Forgeries, Fakes and Reproductions*, London: Barrie Books Ltd., p. 1.

Fakes

Inherent desire to own or experience “the real thing” may seem quite obvious a notion and, in reality, it is. Therefore, in addition to summarizing the manner in which people interpret authenticity, it is also useful to observe reactions to the inauthentic. Although it depends entirely on context, inauthentic objects are generally not well received. When a work by a famous artist turns out not to be authentic, it may not change its physical appearance but it loses its monetary worth and value as a relic. It no longer provides a direct link with the hand of a painter of genius, and it ceases to promise either spiritual refreshment to its viewer or status to its owner. This notion is illustrated by the negative responses of individuals to items that they consider “fake”, sometimes expressed through quite personal and emotion-based language. [42] In an experiment conducted at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, individuals viewed nine original paintings by Breugel, Rembrandt and Vermeer. Other participants viewed reproductions of these works in slide and computer format. The research found that subjective ratings only significantly differed for the original art work when rated for interestingness and pleasantness. That evidence suggests that an experience with the art is distinctively different when looking at originals versus reproductions in certain aspects, including subjective ratings pertaining to interest and emotion.[43] Having mentioned the generally negative reception individuals have towards “fakes,” it is important to note that reception to

[42] Savage, G. *Forgeries, Fakes and Reproductions*. London: Barrie Books Ltd., 1963.

[43] Locher, Paul, J Smith, and L Smith. "Original paintings versus slide and computer reproductions: A comparison of viewer responses." *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 17 (1999): 121-29.

reproductions is highly dependent on the manner in which they are presented. Reproductions presented as the original piece in an attempt to deceive are quite different from those produced in museums and presented in a forthcoming manner to the public for their enjoyment and education. However, even in the case of museum reproductions, research shows that individuals still look more favourably upon the original piece.

Benjamin's Aura

The heart of the argument regarding the value of authentic objects in the guest experience lies with their ability to evoke unique moments of meaning, emotion, and awe. The emotional response individuals feel from experiencing authentic material culture may be attributed to what Walter Benjamin conceptualized as "aura." Appreciation for aura has disappeared to some extent in the modern age because original objects, especially works of art, have become reproducible. The question here is not whether or not one may enjoy a reproduced work of art. The answer is certainly they may, as they echo the original and may even serve to evoke memories of one's experience with the authentic piece. However, the reproduction will never compensate for the presence of the original.

FIGURE 2 - http://walterbenjaminportbou.cat/en/content/walter-benjamin

Walter Benjamin was a German Marxist critic and essayist, considered to be one of the great philosophical thinkers of the 20th century. He was interested in the effect of politicized capitalization on society during the rise of Fascism, especially concerning consumer consumption of goods. Benjamin's complicated outlook on the subject was ever present in his written works. As described in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, his works conveyed "something of the ecstatic character of Benjamin's political thought at the outset of the 1930s, in which technology appears on a political knife-edge between its possibilities as a 'fetish of doom' and 'a key to happiness.'" [44] He viewed technology as a means of

[44] Osborne, Peter, and Matthew Charles. "Walter Benjamin." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015).

connection between humanity and nature, growing increasingly more relevant during the time he was alive. Part of this capitalization involved the ever increasing physical reproduction of objects and art on a mass scale through a plethora of mediums. His writings are also renowned for their thesis about the transformation of the concept of art by its "technical reproducibility" and the new possibilities for collective experience contained in the wake of the historical decline of the "aura" of the work of art. [45] He suggested that the "original is the prerequisite to authenticity" and that the "authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced." [46]

Aura and aesthetics

Benjamin understood how the unique work of art could carry with it the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. [47] In other words, the historical context affected the existence of the object as the existence of the object affected the historical context. As previously communicated, the historical testament of an artifact includes the changes it may have suffered in physical condition over the years, as well as various changes in ownership. The aesthetics of an original object play an invaluable role in the conveyance of authenticity to the museum guest and act as the physical embodiment of aura. The aura of artifacts includes the facets of its materiality, including color, size, line, texture, composition etc. This concept also relates to Sandra Dudley's

[45] Osborne, Peter, and Matthew Charles.
[46] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Edited by Hannah Arendt, 1-19. Translated by Harry Zohn. N.p.: Schocken/Random House, 2005, p. 4.
[47] Benjamin, Walter, p. 3.

explanation of “materiality” as referring to the form and materials of which an object consists, and the techniques by which it may have been made or formed, any additions or presentational conventions, and all and any traces of passage of time and, especially, physical-human interaction. [48] It is important to note that these elements can only be fully experienced by an individual in person. The response to a real, three-dimensional object whether it is a sample of material from the moon, Michelangelo’s David, or a Jackson Pollock painting is entirely different from our response to a photograph, video image, or verbal description of that same object. An individual, for example, cannot fully experience the Egyptian sphinx on display at the University of Pennsylvania Museum without being there; they cannot marvel at its awesome size, see the texture in the carved limestone, or observe each flaw that bears testament to its age. Each physical detail of an artifact, however seemingly inconsequential, may contribute to the overall impact on a guest and cannot be fully replicated in its absence. However efficient the substitute, it will always be found wanting. The aesthetics of an original object are physical and palpable evidence of authenticity.

Aura and curation

Walter Benjamin’s concept that original objects maintain auratic value is used here as an argument in support of the maintenance and display of original objects in museums. His chief criticism of reproduced works lay with the lack of connection to the historical tradition of the original. However, it may be

[48] Dudley, Sandra, ed. *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. N.p.: Routledge, 2013, p.6.

reasonably suggested that original objects in museums have lost some connection to their own tradition simply because they are no longer in their place of original context. They are no longer where they were first experienced or where they belonged in relation to their first intended function; it is here that the relationship between curation and original objects comes into play. The effect curation has on original objects is complex and unique to every situation, while also being completely open to interpretation by visitors and museum professionals. There are instances where curation may act as a distraction from auratic value and others where it acts as a valuable tool in restoring historical context.

With the understanding of what takes place when a person engages with an object, the effect of curation on museum exhibitions must also be taken into consideration, as it greatly influences visitor experience. Exhibitions are not the hapless combination of objects within a space, but the result of a long and careful process of decisions and deliberation, of solutions devised in response to explicit goals and agendas, mediated by practicalities, unforeseen events, implicit beliefs and values, and the limitations of time and budget. The process of museum display taught in museum courses across the world acknowledges the complex range of meanings that individual objects possess, and the even greater complexity involved when objects are grouped together in exhibitions. This responsibility of curation speaks of the capacity of objects to speak for

themselves, given the right circumstances, and generate debate among those who encounter them, with the museum as the mediator. [49]

The effects of curation, both adverse and positive, should not be underestimated as they have been known to contribute to a museum's success or failure as an educational institution. One need look no further for evidence than the rise and fall of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, an attempt by botanist William Wilson to give the Worlds' Columbian Exposition of 1893 a permanent home. Steven Conn dedicated an entire chapter of his book, *Do Museums Need Objects?*, to this case. The chapter is particularly interesting as Conn specifically attributes the end of the museum to the inability of its objects to embody a coherent body of knowledge about commerce. He noted "the Commercial Museums comparative collection of cotton samples was doubtless unparalleled. Whether looking at all those samples was at all engaging or even remotely useful is another matter." [50] In its poor curation of objects on display, the museum failed to acknowledge the changing manner in which people were viewing objects on display and the method of exhibition. In trying to develop a representation of commerce in the 1890s, the Commercial Museum straddled an intellectual divide between an understanding of the world rooted in the 19th century traditions of natural science and an emerging understanding shaped by the quantitative analysis of the new social sciences.[51] "A museum ceases to be a museum when objects cease to provide coherence to the ideas behind their

[49] Black, Graham. *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge, 2012, p.144.
[50] Conn, Steven, p.186.
[51] Ibid.

collection and display…museums need ideas that continue to compel and inspire and around which their objects can be organized and displayed." [52]

FIGURE 3- http://www.phillyseaport.org/rise-fall-philadelphia-commercial-museum

As a result of failings such as these as well as the palpable shift away from object-based epistemology over time, it is often the case in museums today that little attention is paid to the materiality and physical and sensory experience of objects. Museums instead place great emphasis on the conveyed meaning of an item in greater context. Objects are often utilized simply as a means of communication, a part of a much bigger exhibition, meant to send a pre-conceived message from the museum to the viewer. The efforts and creativity of

[52] Conn, Steven, p.185.

curators should never be disregarded, as their ability to create a meaningful narrative through artifacts is truly an art that delights and educates museum visitors everywhere. It is also reasonable to suggest that the presentation of objects in a thoughtful manner with supplemental materials to contribute to context does result in an effective presentation and this is not in dispute. The argument here is that the ability of objects to create valuable experiences, independent of curatorial influence, should not be underestimated. While the value of well-executed curation of an exhibition space is undeniable, there are instances in which the possibilities for physical and emotional interaction with objects in museums are assumed to be non-existent or restricted, unless they are enabled by information provided by the museum. Some museums' preference for factual information over personal experience may risk the production of displays which inhibit and even prevent such responses. However, in regards to object authenticity, curation may indeed provide a service in replacing the context and history that has been lost.

In the literary work, *Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction*, the uniqueness of a work of art is described as "inseparable from being imbedded in the fabric of tradition." [53] Benjamin believed it was significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original purpose. This however, is no longer the case for such artifacts in museums. Curation, therefore, contributes to auratic

[53] Benjamin, Walter, p. 4.

value by restoring some semblance of the artifact's original function and historic tradition through display techniques. The museum provides the viewer with information about the background of these artifacts, including their origin, function, and history, which create a relevant context for the item to be experienced in.

Walter Benjamin further believed the experience of aura and historical tradition itself is alive and extremely changeable, affected in many ways by the vessels of aura: original objects. In the third chapter of this work, societal norms and mores were described as contributing to the manner in which individuals react to material culture. The aura of one original artifact is likely to be experienced in different ways unique to each individual, in each society, across the span of time. This philosophy was not embraced during the era of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum and may have contributed negatively to its reception by visitors. For example, an ancient statue of Venus stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with clerics of the Middle Ages who viewed it as an ominous idol; both, however, were affected by its aura. [54] This further supports the idea that original artifacts allow countless reactions of varying degrees to occur when analyzed by human beings.

The philosophy of aura is further supported in the research of Gaea Leinhardt and Kevin Crowley through the example of Napoleon's campaign bed. They endorse that authenticity exists in the interaction between specific objects

[54] Benjamin, Walter, p. 6.

and our history and culture. “Thus, the Campaign Bed of Napoleon is authentic because we believe it is actually the bed that he slept in and we know that to be the case because someone who we call an expert has said it is. Not only is the bed a historic artifact by its very nature, it is a means of connection between us and Napoleon.” [55] The response to this authenticity is that the visitor stands right next to, and in some sense shares, the object with Napoleon. In the Henry Ford Museum, this concept expands out to the underlying belief system of Henry Ford himself. Similarly to Benjamin, Ford believed that objects have auras that are tangibly communicable. Although fewer people today share Ford’s faith in psychic mechanism, it is reasonable to assume that many would acknowledge that there is a moment of awe and sense of historical connection when we stand next to objects connected to, venerated, or even loathed individuals and events. [56] Leinhardt and Crowley further elaborate on the concept of aura, as applied to objects simply by virtue of their age:

> “Many may acknowledge the same sense of a personal connection with everyday objects of extreme age in museums – perhaps while looking at the scores and indentations on an arrowhead and imagining vividly the moment when an ancient hunter carefully chipped it out of flint, or looking at the worn, uneven threads of homespun garments, or perhaps thinking about how many dinosaurs were devoured through the jaws of a fossilized T-Rex.” [57]

In “Do History Museums Still Need Objects?,” Rainey Tisdale assigns value classifications to objects in museum collections by “tier” and, interestingly

[55] Leinhardt, Gaea and Kevin Crowley. “Objects of Learning, Objects of Talk: Changing Minds in Museums.” Multiple Perspectives on Children’s Object Centered Learning, 2015, p. 4.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

enough, does so through the concept of aura. He describes top tier artifacts as representing the “most rare and precious stuff” with the example of “the spinning wheel George Washington slept next to.” [58] Tisdale then describes middle tier as artifacts that represent “what life was like in the past but aren’t associated with famous people or events.” [59] He attempts to measure the value of authenticity through his own interpretation of aura. These value classifications may also be considered as a ranking of artifacts as related to visitor response and appreciation. An individual, for example, will likely have a more profound reaction to the spinning wheel owned by George Washington himself, rather than a miscellaneous spinning wheel from that time period alone.

A recent development in the modern age involves the desire for one to not only see and experience objects of authentic value, but to be seen experiencing them. An increased number of museum guests have engaged in photographing themselves with museum objects and sharing the images on social media webpages. The result of this is often dialogue through which the individual is praised by their online colleagues for their association to the artifact. This praise may take the form of demonstrations of interest, expressed envy, and even gratitude for sharing the experience. It follows that the more well-known, or “top-tier” the artifact is, the increased response the image will receive. This motive reinforces the idea of associated value. Museum guests not only want to experience the value of artifacts themselves, but share in it.

[58] Tisdale, Rainey. "Do History Museums Still Need Objects?" *History News*, 2011, p. 22
[59] Ibid.

Having thoroughly explored the auratic philosophy of Walter Benjamin, it may be concluded that original artifacts carry with them an associated value by virtue of their very nature, as well as any affiliation to famous people or events. This associated value or aura lends itself to the creation of meaningful moments between individual and artifact. In an age where mechanical reproduction has become common place and interwoven into the fabric of society, it is imperative to understand that the aura of an artifact cannot be replicated and lies solely with the original specimen. The exhibition of objects through the techniques of curatorial staff serves as a valuable tool in placing original objects into a relevant context. Such restored context, while never to the full extent, elevates the likelihood that the guest will comprehend the manner in which the object was first observed as well as its original purpose. While the value of curation is fully acknowledged, the ability of objects to evoke meaningful connections without assistance must also be noted. The moments of awe and historical connection mentioned by Ford are what aura is all about, because in the end, the experience of the visitor is of paramount importance. Thus, the responses of visitors to original objects in museums must be investigated further.

Chapter VI:

Human Response to Authentic Objects in Museums

Museums enable learning through many different ways including looking at the objects, working with the objects, classification, questioning, passing from concrete observations to abstract concepts, reaching from known to unknown etc. The ability of objects to enable moments of impact with visitors contributes positively to every museum's goals as an educational and community institution. What the guest experiences during their visit and whether or not it is viewed positively or negatively is of paramount importance. Do visitors feel that authenticity is a powerful concept inherent to museums and historic sites? This chapter will begin by exploring the manner in which visitors approach museums, including the effect of pre-conceived notions, expectations, as well as their own self-knowledge. It will briefly touch upon the view people have of museums, including such themes as attendance and trustworthiness as surveyed in the United States. This will provide the foundation for the discussion of visitor response to authentic objects on display and their statistically proven preference for such items over others in the museum setting.

The Visitor Mentality

Visitor attendance and outlook

During the 1990s, a collaborative effort between universities and researchers issued a survey to ascertain the ways in which Americans view and understand the past. The survey was conducted both over the phone and in person on university campuses, resulting in over fifteen hundred responses. Demographics within the survey were organized by the following themes: racial ethnic groups, age, gender, education level, and income. Participants were asked if they had visited any museums or historic sites in the past year, the level of trust they place in museums as a source of information about the past, and the level of connection they feel to the past in museums. [60] Although this survey was limited to the United States, it aids in painting a picture of the outlook individuals have towards museums as public institutions. This lends to the overall understanding of human interpretation and appreciation for the original material they see there.

Across all demographics, museums were found to be the most trustworthy source of information about the past, even above personal accounts from relatives, college professors, and non-fiction books.[61] Those within high brackets of income and college education felt museums were the best place to feel connected to the past. The remaining demographics felt museums were second

[60] Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Thelan. *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.ix.
[61] Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Thelan, p.234-251.

in this area only to family gatherings. [62] This is understandable as family represents a deeply personal, intimate connection to individual past and history. It may be concluded from these findings that, at least in the United States, museums are trusted institutions where people feel connected to the past through highly reliable material and programming.

Experience elements

Before presenting case studies pertaining to the impact of authentic objects, it is essential to address the manner in which visitors approach museums and the aspects of themselves that affect the experience as a whole. Individuals will experience the elements of museums in different ways, quite simply because everyone is unique, with their own personality and way of thinking. These themes echo those pertaining to human interpretation of material culture, discussed in the third chapter, however in this case they are related to overall museum experience as well.

Paris and Mercer offer a concept pertaining to "self-knowing" and this impacts the manner in which people approach museum material. There are at least two fundamental aspects of self-knowing relevant to museum experiences: the self as a learner or agent and the self as a bundle of defining traits, features, and personal experiences.[63] William James touched on the subject of self-knowing through what he described as the four components of self-accordation:

[62] Ibid.

[63] Paris, Scott G., and Melissa J. Mercer. "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums." In *Learning Conversations in Museums*, edited by Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, N.p.: Taylor and Francis, 2003, p.401.

self-awareness, self-agency, self-continuity, and self-coherence. Self-awareness is an appreciation of one's internal states, needs, thoughts, and emotions. Self-agency is described as the sense of authorship over one's own thoughts and actions. Self-continuity is the sense that one remains the same person over time. Self- coherence is a stable sense of the self as a single, coherent, bounded entity. [64] Each element referred to is an aspect of human personality, whether conscious or sub-conscious, that shapes the experience a person has within a museum.

These ideas may be further analyzed through the concept of the "me-self" and "I-self", which describe the mentalities that come into play during a museum visit, particularly regarding the "I-self". Susan Harter used the "me-self" to describe one as an object, with components that include materialization, socialization, and spiritualization of oneself. The "I-self" is the analyzer and agent of thought. [65] This would come into play, for example, if an individual was gazing at a painting and contemplated how they analyze art and what they feel, while relating it to past experiences and their own personality.

The themes present in Rosenzweig's survey regarding different aspects of human classification are present in the article, "Spending time on art," by J.K. Smith and L.F. Smith. They provide a detailed description of a number of elements that contribute to an individual's experience in a museum context. They include the motivations and expectations of museum visitors, their demographic

[64] James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Henry Holt, 1890.
[65] Harter, Susan. *The Construction of the Self: A Development Perspective*. N.p.: Guilford Press, 1999.

characteristics, personal histories, and level of content-related knowledge, and their behaviors within galleries. [66] What is to be concluded here is that there are several factors related to the individual's personality, identity, outlook, demographic classification, experience expectation etc. which come into play during their museum visit and contribute to the overall outcome.

Case Studies

Hallmarks of Authenticity

Previous chapters in this thesis have examined the manner in which human beings comprehend authenticity. It is an important area to understand when examining the pros and cons of maintaining original objects in museum collections. In 2008, Reach Advisors partnered with thirteen outdoor history museums, conducting a survey that delved into a number of issues such as why people visit the museums and why they felt the sites were important. Each museum emailed an online survey to their respective lists of members and visitors and over five thousand individuals responded. [67] The following sections will dissect the survey results, first with general percentages and responses, followed by statistical responses across demographics. The study showed that people not only felt compelled to express the value of authenticity in the museum experience, but also displayed a calculable preference for original objects.

[66] Smith, J. K., & Smith, L. F. (2001). "Spending time on art." Empirical Studies in the Arts, 19, 229–236
[67] Wilkening, Susie, and Erica Donnis. "Authenticity? It Means Everything." *History News* 63, no. 4 , 2008, p.18
[67] Ibid.

In defining authenticity, fifty-eight percent of respondents equated it with historical accuracy." Authenticity means that what you see quite accurately represents the past." [68] This is consistent with the positive view people have regarding museums as trusted educational institutions. One in four participants cited the presence of original artifacts as "hallmarks of authenticity." [69] The survey question with the most relevance to this thesis read as follows: "thinking about Outdoor History Museums, what does 'authenticity' mean to you?" Not only did people respond strongly to this question, they felt compelled to write in their response rather than selecting a pre-written answer on the survey. In response to the value of authenticity, one survey participant described it as "everything!" Another described authenticity as being "synonymous with history museums." [70] The conclusion made was that authenticity is perhaps the most critical attribute of a history museum. In fact, many of the respondents specifically mentioned a preference for both historical accuracy and original aspects of the past.

The purpose of examining statistical results of the survey across a range of demographics is to again acknowledge that authenticity means different things to different people. The largest group of survey participants (just over half) was over the age of fifty and most likely to relate the concept of authenticity to original buildings, artifacts, and people from the past. For example, one-quarter of respondents in their sixties indicated the importance of original elements,

[68] Wilkening, Susie, and Erica Donnis, p.18
[69] Ibid.
[70] Wilkening, Susie, and Erica Donnis, p. 20

whereas only twenty percent of those in their thirties concurred.[71] Women over the age of sixty represented thirteen percent of survey participants and, more than any other group, desired an immersive experience that connected them to the past via original material culture. [72]

Making Memories

Original objects possess the ability to bridge the gap across a range of demographics and ages. The findings when examining adult and childhood memories of museum visits provide evidentiary support for the positive impact of auratic artifacts. The following case study involves the memories of museum experiences from childhood and adulthood and the analysis of them to determine what made them meaningful to the individual. The two consistent themes present in all memories involved original object experiences and hands-on experiences; but which was the more effective? Compiling data on adult memories of childhood museum experiences, the Museums R+D research collaborative issued an online survey to visitors of all types of museums. The results consisted of over twenty-nine thousand responses and more than ninety percent were located in the United States. Another survey was conducted as well regarding the most meaningful experiences visitors have had in museums as adults, collected

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

via an online survey with over 4,000 responses and via qualitative research resulting in nearly three hundred responses. [73]

When adults shared either their most meaningful adult experience in a museum or their most memorable childhood experience, those experiences were predominantly based in the viewing of original objects. [74] The finding was also consistent with young adults under the age of thirty. This finding is surprising when one considers that the people in this demographic grew up in a world where hands-on, technology-based museum experiences are increasingly more prevalent and the reproduction of originals in everyday life is widely accepted. A preference for hands-on experiences among parents of young children and adults who are not regular museum goers was anticipated. However, the results revealed these demographics too displayed a preference for original artifacts.[75] Original artifacts were consistently present across all demographics in their meaningful museum experiences.

In analyzing over twenty-nine thousand adult memories of childhood museum experiences, it was noted that respondents were three times more likely to mention an original object than a hands-on experience.[76] This was not considered a surprise given that many of the respondents were over fifty and generally appreciated more traditional display techniques. The results support the notion that original objects evoke emotional responses in individuals because

[73] Wilkening, Susie. "Beginning to Measure Meaning in Museum Experiences." Dimensions. Association of Science Technology Centers. Accessed January 19, 2016. http://www.astc.org/atc-dimensions/beginning-to-measure-meaning-in-museum-experiences, p.2
[74] Wilkening, Susie, p. 2.
[75] Wilkening, Susie, p. 3.
[76] Wilkening, Susie, p. 4.

the survey effort found that object-based memories tended to be more detailed, evocative, immersive, emotive, and personal. This was evident in the language used in describing the memory, consisting of words such as love, intrigue, and magic; descriptions of hands-on experience were less emotional. [77] As an adult, recalling memories from childhood can be challenging. However, it is impossible to forget visiting the Royal Ontario Museum for the first time, gazing in wonder at the bust of the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra VII. It served as the beginning of a fascination for Egyptian Archaeology that blossomed well into adulthood. Having recently returned to the museum, it was hardly surprising that the first point of visitation was the bust of dark granite from so long ago. It did not take long to find the queen and gaze in wonder once again.

Examining the most meaningful experiences adults have had in museums yielded similar findings. Out of over four thousand experiences, half of responses included an original object, while only ten percent included a hands-on experience.[78] Another interesting development lay in the discovery that the age of the respondent was irrelevant; there were no significant differences between those under thirty and over fifty. Taking into consideration the wide array of values, interests, and manner of thinking that exist among those of differing age, it is incredible that original objects are so universally appreciated across the age demographic.

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

The authentic inauthentic

This work has thoroughly discussed original objects, however little attention has been paid to the concept of the authentic experience. A museum may create an authentic experience for a guest without any original artifacts. This touches on a previously mentioned idea of something being both authentic and inauthentic at the same time. Therefore the effect of authentic experience must be investigated in order to determine whether or not it is just as effective as the original artifact.

An exhibition within the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama provides a telling example of an authentic experience created without use of original objects. The purpose of the institute is to document the events and display objects from the Civil Rights movement. The museum is located across the street from the iconic 16th Street Baptist Church, which was savagely bombed during the struggle. One of the most prominent features in the museum's gallery space is a burned out bus, more specifically, a precise replica of a Greyhound bus that had been bombed and burned. Several buses were bombed in retaliation against freedom riders of the day and the replica provides a shockingly real example of the horrors that took place. This example is drawn from a study conducted in 2001 in which the students of fifty teachers attended the exhibit and had their reactions documented during an interview that followed. The students were all between the ages of twenty and twenty-two, and while they were aware of the history surrounding the freedom riders, most tended to view it

as part of the distant past. [79] It is easy to view things that one has not personally experienced as somewhat distant. This is why the responses of the students regarding the connections they made to the bus are so compelling.

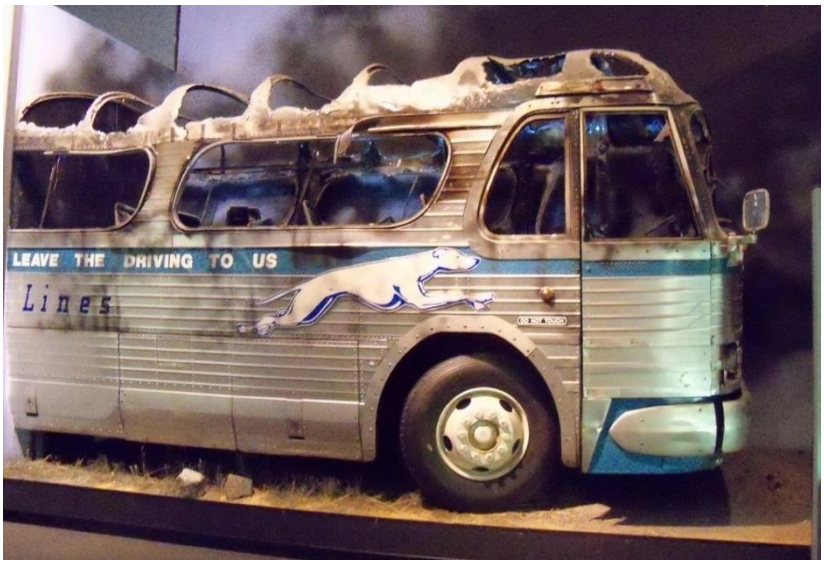

FIGURE 4 - http://www.bcri.org/

The immediate impact of the bus on visitors lies in the harsh reality within its aesthetics. The bus itself is a full scale replica, the sheer immensity of its size imposing upon visitor after visitor. Even more shocking, is the density and detail of information evoked through the charred metal sides, utterly destroyed seats, and shattered glass windows. One student observation and reaction to the

[79] Leinhardt, Gaea, and Kevin Crowley. "Objects of Learning, Objects of Talk: Changing Minds in Museums." *Multiple Perspectives on Children's Object Centered Learning*, 2002, p. 5

appearance of the bus reads as follows: “yeah, where they busted the windows and all that. And you hear stories about that kind of stuff, but when you see it, it makes it more real.” [80]

The aesthetics of the model, aside from being independently effective, lend a degree of authenticity to the object. A model of such accuracy is meant to echo the past and present the observer with a concrete example to connect with on a deeper level. The visitors, for example, are prompted to consider their own experiences with buses and the assumptions of safety and protection we usually make within one. The experience is authentic – the bus is an exact replication of a burned Greyhound bus from the Civil Rights Era. However, it does not carry the aura of the original bus and is therefore lacking, if even in a small way. This bus was not savagely destroyed as an attack against freedom riders during the Civil Rights Movement. The absence of aura is undeniable and was felt by the audience as evident in their responses. The first question or comment noted in almost all of the document conversations involved students asking whether or not the bus was “real.” [81] This notion of curiosity common place among many of the students suggests that, had the bus been the original object, it would’ve been all the more impactful.

The reliability of the bus to impart an assortment of educational and personal experiences to visitors is evident in that each student was affected in a different way by the same object; it may, therefore, be suggested that the burned

[80] Leinhardt, Gaea, and Kevin Crowley, p.7.
[81] Leinhardt, Gaea, and Kevin Crowley, p. 6-7.

out bus is a valuable, inexhaustible resource. The documented reaction of one student reads as follows: “the bus was…I mean, I knew a little about what that was but to actually see that and to read more about it. And I didn’t realize that there was so much violence that went on, you know the ride. When they were traveling.” [82] This particular student was struck by the degree of violence that occurred during an event that is highly relatable for most human beings today, every-day travel by bus. Another student, deeply touched, said “I learned how brave people really were and now, I thought about, if this was happening today, would I be as brave as those people were to do the sit ins…do all those things where they were in risk of their lives every day.” [83]

The bus provides an authentic experience through its aesthetics, despite the lack of aura, but what makes it such a powerful guest experience? The once abstract concept of freedom riders was made more concrete and relatable through the symbolic, authentic impact of the bus. More specifically, as Crowley and Leinhardt suggest, the success lies in the iconic nature of buses and the likelihood that most can imagine climbing into a sleek, silver Greyhound bus, and riding it to a destination. However, what cannot be imagined is that bus being blown apart by a bomb. “Seeing the results of that shatters the safe, solid image, and it is that precise conflict that makes the bus so valuable.” [84] While the purpose of this argument is in no way to undermine the bus as part of a profound museum experience, it must be noted that the students still craved the original. A

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

model will never be the original. An authentic experience with a model bus will never be the auratic experience with the original bus. A similar example regarding an inauthentic authentic experience was present in a traveling exposition about the Titanic. A large slab of ice was available for guests to touch as a sensory experience to convey the merciless exposure to cold suffered by the victims of the sinking. While the slab of ice was not part of the iceberg responsible for the ship's demise, it still provided another means through which guests could meaningfully connect with the event.

Technological supplementation

One cannot discuss the place of original objects in museums without referencing the increased presence of technological supplementation in museum exhibits. In addition to auratic value, original objects provide a sense of reliability that is lost in technological replacement; the associated value is gone and the display is entirely at the mercy of functioning software. However, there is great potential for the use of technology as a supplement to object-based collections. Such collaboration has the potential to keep exhibitions fresh and modern, contributing overall to a positive guest experience and has a place both in-house and online. Similarly to curation, technological supplementation can also provide context to the original artifact in a unique way. The development of virtual museums on institution websites is on the rise as well. "Virtual museum" is defined as "a logically related collection of digital objects composed in a variety of media which, because of its capacity to provide connectedness and various points of access, lends itself to transcending traditional methods of

communicating and interacting with visitors…; it has no real place or space, its objects and the related information can be disseminated all over the world" [85] Digital collections, though not authentic, provide a means through which artifacts may touch audiences from the comfort of their own homes and classrooms. With all of these positive qualities in mind, the question posed is whether or not original objects are needed any longer. Does it have to be one or the other? The fact is, online representation of objects and technological replacement cannot offer the "real thing" to visitors. Many museum professionals, in fact, have come to believe that the increase in digital versions of objects actually motivates people to see the items in-person and enhances the value of in-person encounters with tangible, real things. [86] A study of individuals in their twenties supports this notion. The survey found that "seeing stuff online only made them want to see the real objects in person even more." [87] Furthermore, the participants' comments consistently revolved around how important authenticity was to them because real authenticity is increasingly hard to find in our "crazy world." They felt that museums were inherently authentic, largely because they have authentic objects that are unique and wonderful." [88]

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the way people view museums, what personal aspects shape their expectations and experiences, and their outlook on authenticity and auratic objects. Statistically, museums are viewed as reliable sources through which one may learn about and feel

[85] Schweibenz, Werner. "The Development of Virtual Museums." ICOM News 3, 2004.
[86] Tisdale, Rainey, p. 19.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

connected to the past. It is important to remember that, during object-subject interaction, the individual is not an independent variable. Aspects of a person, both known and unknown, will impact their expectations of and reaction to authentic museum content. Authenticity is of paramount importance during the museum experience and original objects are often considered to be the most effective facilitator of this value. Additionally, original objects are consistently present in recollections of both adult and childhood museum experiences, often as the most valued part; they are memorable. Additionally, two of the case studies presented discuss two principle competitors of original objects in museum spaces: models and technology. It is true that models are effective museum tools with great impact, especially when executed well. They often serve as practical alternatives to original objects that cannot be shown for whatever reason, whether it is size, fragility, etc. However, on the part of the guest, authentic objects will always be more desirable and meaningful. It comes down to the simple truth that people want to see the real thing. Technology is an excellent supplement to authentic object displays in museum and certainly acts as an excellent conduit through which collections may be experienced digitally. It also resonates strongly with the younger generation who grew up and exists in an increasingly technological world. However, based on guest responses, digital collections only increase the individual's desire to experience these artifacts in-person. Technological reproduction and digitized exhibition merely echo the authentic artifact. It is with this evidence in mind that the unique, incomparable

ability of original artifacts to foster meaningful experiences with museum guests again and again can be contemplated and acknowledged.

Chapter VII:

Conclusion

> ***"****While these objects may no longer function epistemologically, they can still function magically. There remains something extraordinary, if finally inexplicable, about the experience of being in the presence of a Cézanne, from Alaska, or a fossil pterodactyl…even as prosaic a group as historians, most of whom do not study objects, will admit to the thrill of holding actual archival material in their hands. Perhaps this is why museums can still be places of education, of inspiration, or amusement, reflection and wonder. Perhaps, in the end, there are objects."*
>
> - E. Margaret Evans, Melinda S. Mull, Devereaux E. Pulling

The presence of authentic objects in museums provides guests with incomparable, irreplaceable, and deeply profound experiences. Appreciation for the authentic stems directly from the manner in which we, as human beings, interpret and value material culture. In spite of this, the quantity of objects on display in museums continues to dwindle, their place now occupied by alternative forms of engagement and revenue. These materials have withstood the test of time, facilitating countless experiences over the generations as physical representations of times long past. While it is true that museums as public institutions must continue to develop and adapt in order to remain relevant in changing times, they may still serve their original purpose to preserve and protect these artifacts. However, museums must also remain open and functioning, and this cannot be done without sustainable income. As a result, a great deal more research must be done in order to determine how object-based collections may further contribute to this goal. How can the use of these materials be maximized

for public appreciation and profit? If the purpose of objects in these institutions is to be preserved, these questions must be answered. Some may wonder what the point is. Why are these objects worth saving? There is something indescribably magical about what we encounter in the hallowed halls of museums. It is a profound feeling to be in the presence of history, to see beyond the object, to the place it was made, the person who wore it, or the events it witnessed. Perhaps this is why museums can still be places of education, of inspiration, or amusement, reflection and wonder. Perhaps, in the end, there are objects.

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