

Objects as memory-keepers and relics of material culture: How objects inform our identities

I am drawn to objects that have a particular shape, texture, colour, pattern, material, construction method, age, history, or were handed down or given to me by a family member or friend. I develop strong relationships with these inanimate objects and often their importance as memory-keepers comes to far outweigh their intended function.¹

For example, I have a leadlight silky oak bookcase that belonged to my great-grandmother. The timber has a beautiful grain and the metal fittings are shapely and decorative. It has historical value and an element of rarity or scarcity because furniture like this is no longer made – it is a relic of material culture. On the back, it has my great-grandmother's surname written with chalk in cursive font. While I do use this bookcase to store books, by today's standards, it's quite small and others might consider it to be impractical. But its value as a family heirloom together with its inherent beauty and craftsmanship are worth much more to me than its value or function as a bookcase. Furthermore, my great-grandmother's trace lives on in this object – literally, through her name being written on the back, and metaphorically, in the knowledge that she touched the key in the lock before I did and that she stored her books inside the bookcase before I did. Though I never knew my great-grandmother Lucy in person, we are strongly connected by this object.²

One of the theoretical areas that interests me in my art making and research is semiotics, which is also known as semiology. Semiotics is the study of signs or signifiers. Everything in a historical, cultural, or social context functions as a sign, whether we realise it or not – this includes clothing, jewellery, hairstyles, cars, books, household objects, furniture, architecture, technological devices, and even art.³

But objects don't function as singular signs – when placed in a historical, cultural or social context, they become complex systems of signs.⁴ For example, one of the signifiers of expensive jewellery is monetary value. Jewellery also signifies something about the socioeconomic bracket and cultural group that the purchaser belongs to. It is likely that the time period in which the jewellery is made will be signified through its design, material choice and method of production. In another example, an

¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 56.

² Kyoko Murakami, "Materiality of Memory: The Case of the Remembrance Poppy", in *Handbook of Culture and Memory*, ed. Brady Wagoner (Oxford Scholarship Online, October 2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190230814.001.0001>.

³ Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 53.

⁴ Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 51.

object made from recycled materials may signify that the maker and purchaser are environmentally aware and mindful of fair-trade practices. If the object is considered to be beautiful, or well-made, or is an artwork, further significations come into play.⁵

For those of us who choose to work as artists in sculpture, assemblage or expanded practice, the concept that objects are complex systems of signs capable of multiple meanings is especially relevant. For example, if you are an artist who incorporates objects into their artistic practice as I do, the finished artwork will consist of an even more complex system of signs made up of each object's individual system of signs in addition to the sign value of the artwork itself.⁶ All artworks have their own systems of signs and their own place in historical, cultural and social contexts. Even if an artist works with new materials such as bronze or marble, the finished artwork is still going to contain the sign system of the chosen material and will also refer to that material's place in one or more historical, cultural or social contexts. In other words, when we look at a contemporary marble sculpture, we are reminded of historical marble sculptures we have seen, as well as perhaps other contexts we may see marble in, such as in everyday kitchens or in palaces.

Aside from signifiers of monetary value, socioeconomic bracket, cultural group, time period or belief systems, objects can signify another person's love, friendship or respect.⁷ This is especially so when the object is a gift. The gift does not need to be expensive or rare – it can be inexpensive or even worthless, such as a shell or stone. The object becomes precious to its owner due to its sign value and because of its role in a social context, the context of it being a gift and a sign of someone's love, friendship or respect. This is the same as for souvenirs - objects which are acquired when travelling. The object becomes a reminder of the place visited or of an experience shared with others while at that place. When a person looks at the gift or souvenir, the object triggers a memory of the social context in which it was first experienced. In this way, objects can function as memory-keepers or souvenirs - 'souvenir' in fact being the French word for 'memory'.⁸

So objects function as complex systems of signs in addition to their intended purpose and people establish relationships with inanimate objects due to their sign value and their historical, cultural or social context. In other words, objects mean something.

⁵ Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 73.

⁶ Murakami, "Materiality of Memory", 11.

⁷ Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 15.

⁸ Murakami, "Materiality of Memory", 3.

Ernest Dichter, the American psychologist, noted in his book *The Strategy of Desire* (1960):

“The objects which surround us do not simply have utilitarian aspects; rather, they serve as a kind of mirror which reflects our own image.”⁹

Dichter is observing that the objects we choose to surround ourselves with have been carefully selected by us because they signify or mean something in addition to their functional value. Semiotics tells us that these additional meanings are derived through signs as well as through the object’s place in its historical, cultural or social context. This explains why objects can inform and reflect our identities – we link objects to a particular time, place, idea, goal, person or relationship that is important to us and reflects our personal values. For example, my great-grandmother’s bookcase reflects many of the qualities I value in objects: it is well constructed; it is made of quality materials; it has attractive decorative fixtures; it has historical value and therefore an element of rarity or scarcity; it is a family heirloom; and it carries the literal and metaphorical trace of my great-grandmother, which connects me to her. These qualities can be extrapolated out to reveal several of my personal values: striving for high standards in my own work and respecting the same in the work of others; a preference for traditional and concrete materials (as opposed to abstract materials, such as technology); an admiration and fascination for pattern and decoration; a respect for history; a desire to preserve family connections; and my enduring love of objects.

I have discussed the sign value of objects, their role in historical, cultural and social contexts, their ability to act as memory-keepers or souvenirs, and how objects can inform our identities by reflecting our personal values. For further reading on these topics, I would recommend the following sources:

Manco, Tristan. *Raw + Material = Art: Found, Scavenged and Upcycled*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2012.

Miller, Daniel. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Murakami, Kyoko. “Materiality of Memory: The Case of the Remembrance Poppy.” In *Handbook of Culture and Memory*, edited by Brady Wagoner, Chapter 5. Oxford Scholarship Online, October 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190230814.001.0001>.

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⁹ Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 14.