



Object Lessons:

Making Meaning from Things in History Museums

by Laura Burd Schiavo

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History museums are all the same, Jane opined over pizza, and they feel like work.

The genesis of this paper is a conversation I had with a friend and former colleague over lunch. The collections manager at a small historical society, Jane (name changed to protect the innocent) loves history and its practice. Yet she relayed a recent realization: while her family devotes most vacations to national parks and historic sites, they have stopped going to history museums. History museums are all the same, Jane opined over pizza, and they feel like work. Not long after that declaration, *New York Times* museum critic Edward Rothstein made a related comment in a discussion at The George Washington University: history museums—with “identity museums” the most culpable in his estimation—are too didactic. They are driven by messages and morals rather than wonder (Jane’s “they feel like work”).

Soon after that conversation, I came across a compelling article by Benjamin Filene (2012) in *Public Historian* commenting on two seemingly contradictory, while in fact coincident, phenomena: on one hand, a zest for history among enthusiasts (from genealogists to re-enactors to viewers of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and fans of StoryCorps); on the other, decreasing attendance at history museums. Filene argues convincingly that as public historians we ought to pay more attention to what moves the enthusiasts and be less encumbered by the prejudices rooted in academic training in history. Among these prejudices, for example, are biases against the “unsystematic” and “self-indulgent” nature of nostalgia or the “narrowness” of family history.

Objects and Meaning

Occurring for me as they did in the space of a few weeks, these observations got me thinking. They made me reflect on something already on my mind: the status of the object in history museums. While none of my informants addressed objects per se, the lack of an exciting engagement with things may be the tie that binds these estimations of history museums’ disappointments. I disagree with Rothstein’s underlying assumptions (rooted as they are in what I judge to be a glorification of an Enlightenment model without the necessary critique), and I admit to resilient and possibly restrictive academic bonds of my own. However, I think there may be something to Jane’s conclusion, sweeping as it is; too often—although surely not always—history exhibitions feel ponderous and labored. This may be because they too rarely provide what many visitors have come for—the chance to make meaning from things.

As museum critics and historians have pointed out over the last decade, museums have become less and less centered on the object. The dominance of themes and stories, rather than collections, can mean a more limited engagement with artifacts. Elaine Heumann Gurian (1999) charted a number of other developments (the elusive nature of the “real” in an age of mechanical reproduction; the popularity of non-collecting institutions) all of which support her argument: “objects are not the heart of the museum.” Objects are not sufficient, she argues, and may not even be necessary. Steven Conn (2010), in a more methodical approach, reaches similar conclusions in *Do Museums Need Objects?* He charts the declining

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significance of the object in all but art museums. In history museums in particular, Conn notes the preponderance in the last few decades of museums of cultural identity. These museums start with a mission rather than a collection, so while they have (thankfully) exploded the myths of a narrow, authorless, and objective “American” story, their success “does not depend on objects on display, because objects are largely secondary to the museums’ strategies” (p. 46). In concluding his chapter on this topic, however, Conn notes, “Museums—some of them anyway—may not need objects anymore, but without objects we may all miss the delights and surprises that come with looking” (p. 57).

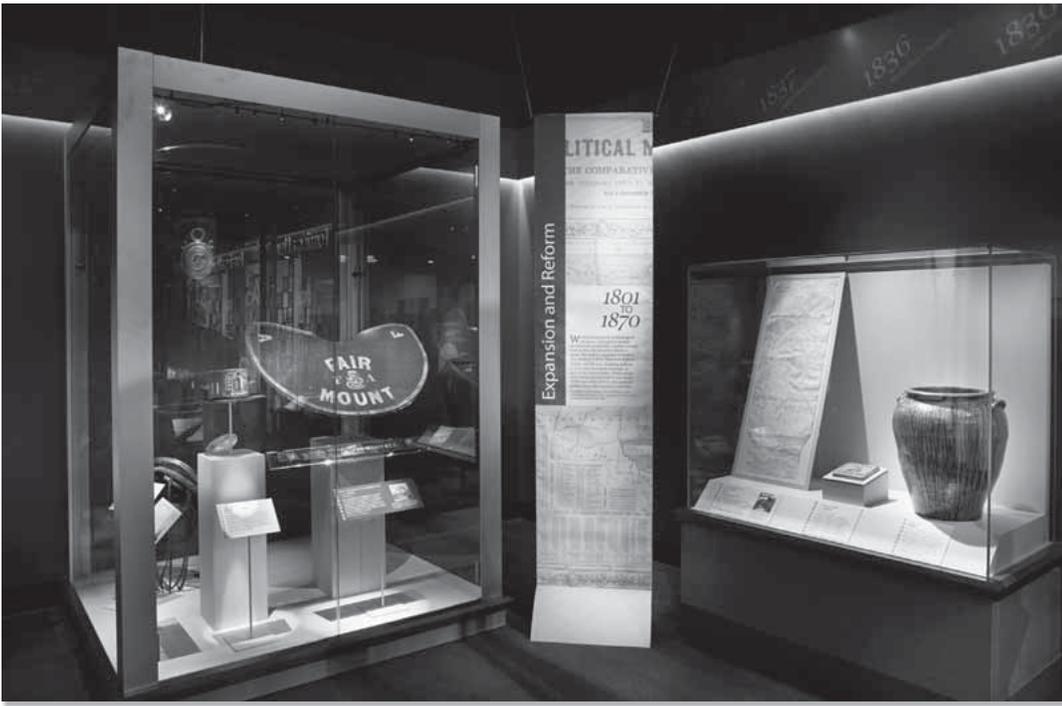
Using Objects: Two Examples

I am an ardent defender of exhibitions driven by stories, themes, and ideas, but an idea-driven exhibition does not necessarily mean one where objects cannot have a bolder role to play. In the paragraphs that follow I look at two recent history exhibitions, both of which feature objects more predominantly than may be the norm. In *American Stories* at the National Museum of American History (2012) and in (sections of) *House & Home*, a long-term exhibition at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. (opened 2012), objects are the primary holders of meaning rather than “mere” illustrations of a dominant and dominating idea. I concentrate on these two shows because I find both of them effective and engaging. But I also look at these exhibitions in particular because they accomplish their successes in different ways and start from different places.

In contrast to larger, thematic shows that the National Museum of American History has opened over the past few decades, *American Stories* is collections-driven. The driving force was a group of more than 100 objects that were important for the museum to display but that had no place to reside due to a major renovation that would leave many galleries dark. Together, the objects would become the core of the Museum’s first attempt to present the sweep of U.S. history. Curator Bonnie Campbell Lilienfeld’s exhibition concept was to explore this history exclusively through the objects. The temptation might have been to create big themes (work, land, democracy) or to drive home specific lessons about pluralism or the march of freedom. In



Introductory panel, *American Stories*. Rather than trying to sum up the content of the exhibition, the *American Stories* introductory panel is about “what we can learn from artifacts.” It locates objects as sources for understanding history and identity. Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Behring Center



Section text and objects, 1801-1870, American Stories. Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Behring Center.

(continued from page 49)

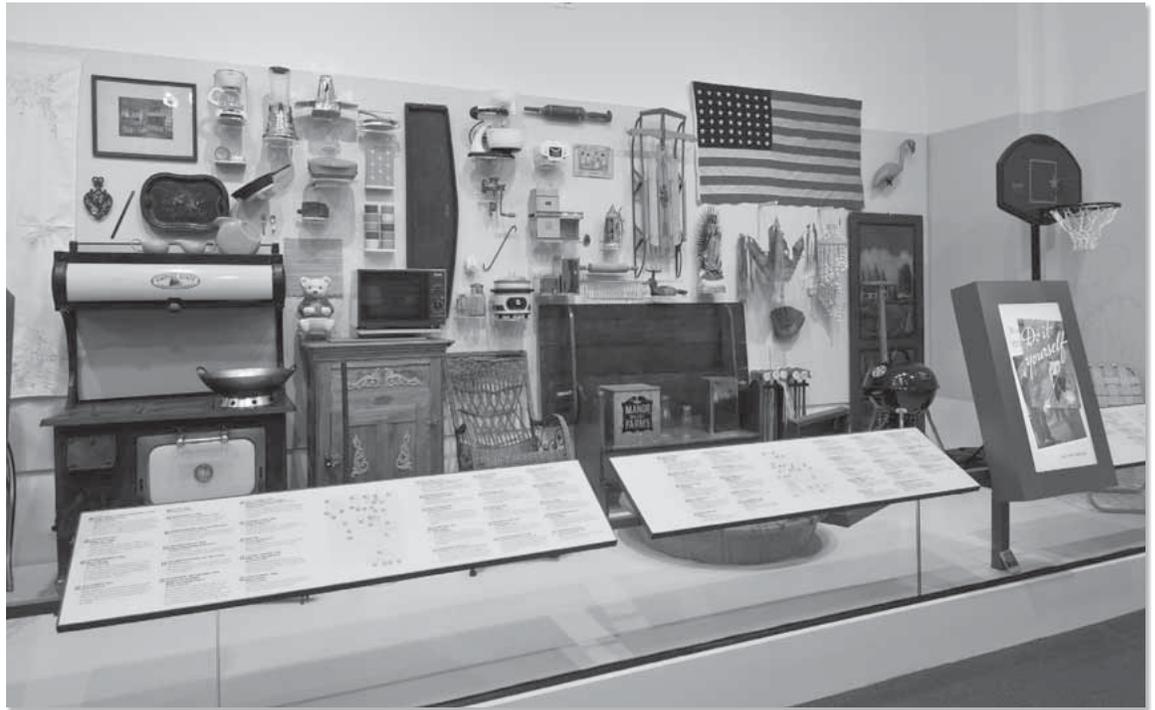
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American Stories, however, the section text—that would otherwise likely hold these big ideas—is minimal. Hanging banners, which provide a structuring periodization (based on National History Standards), are sparingly written. Fewer than 75 words cover the most sweeping developments in a given era—“westward migration, technological advances, and rapid economic development,” along with “urbanization and industrialization” for the 1801-1870 section, for example. The real historical weight is carried by the objects in this simply designed, 5300 square-foot gallery with roughly 100 objects at any given time. The object labels hold content that might otherwise be unanchored on a banner or panel, about work (pin-making machine patent model, 1841); land and conquest (Silver peace medal, 1801, issued under President Thomas Jefferson and given to an Osage chieftain); expansion (Plate with view of the Erie Canal, 1820s–40s); or civil rights (John Brown pike, 1856; Alice Paul’s Equal Rights Amendment charm bracelet, 1972; NAACP cap, 1963, worn by the donor during the 1963 March on Washington). The exhibition flies in the face of a logic that says that no one reads labels. While they are not long, at 45 to 75 words each, they pack a punch.

Presentation Saddle, 1866

In 1866, General Philip Sheridan armed Mexican nationalists led by Benito Juárez, and headed a 50,000-man army along the U.S.-Mexico border in order to pressure France to end its occupation of Mexico. That same year, a Mexican friend gave Sheridan this elaborate saddle with embossed silver medallions. (47 words)

American Stories is not a perfect exhibition. As Lilienfeld herself has cautioned, the danger of a chronological (over thematic) exhibition is that visitors too easily equate chronology with either progress or inevitability. But this is the first history exhibition I have seen in a long time where it is the objects that motivate the text, instead of the other way around. The emphasis on the object might seem to be a result of merely shifting the location of the exhibition script; information that might otherwise appear on a panel is moved instead to object labels. However, this is much more than a design issue. The relationship between the history and the object is more direct in this format. There is a greater sense of objects as an integral part of how history is made, experienced, and enacted. That this strategy of object-based interpretation



A section of the object wall in House & Home. Photo by Lee Stalworth. Courtesy of National Building Museum.

can be successful for a topic as broad as “American history” suggests the potential for the technique for exhibitions both wide and narrow in scope.

At the National Building Museum, the theme of *House & Home* is clearly narrower, but still demands attention to the breadth of time, place, and peoples. The exhibition is about houses (structures in which people live); the idea of home (encompassing notions of comfort, individuality, economy, space, consumption, and taste); and their intersections in American history and culture. In the second gallery a 90-foot stretch of wall, and a platform in front of it, is the site of an artfully installed array of objects. Although certainly not exhaustive, these objects are representative of those that could have been found in American homes over the past two centuries—chandelier, corner hutch, beanbag chair, computer, sampler, mantle, Slinky, fondue pot, shower curtain, screen door, Tupperware. A didactic point reads clearly on the panel text beside the exhibit: “the objects we collect and take with us help transform a house into a home” and “each has its own story to tell about changes over time in technology,

gender roles, and design.” But the artifacts are not arranged chronologically (they are clustered in six locations in a house, such as kitchen and dining, bedroom, and bathroom) and the experience of the objects potentially leads to a more open-ended encounter than these statements would suggest.

For me at least, the clusters of objects suggest a fact of lives lived outside *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine or *Pottery Barn* catalogues: people do not exclusively own only the things produced in their own time. Even those items manufactured in one’s own lifetime often stick around for decades beyond their vintage. The objects in our homes come from different times and carry meaning as heirlooms, rare antique store finds, and hand-me-downs. The collage of objects on the “object wall” relays this idea in ways that are more visual, more intuitive, and more fun, than reading this idea on a wall would ever be. A cacophony of stuff, objects unencumbered by lengthy labels with didactic lessons, opens up the making of meaning and gives the visitor a chance to engage with what all this might say about houses and homes, identity and consumption, utility and pleasure.

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(continued from page 51)

Reference:

Conn, S. (2010). *Do museums still need objects?* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Filene, B. (2012). Passionate histories: “Outsider” history-makers and what they teach us. *The Public Historian*, 34(1), 11-33.

Gurian, E. H. (1999). What is the object of this exercise? A meandering exploration of the many meanings of objects in museums. *Daedalus*, 128(3), 163-183.

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What’s more, this exhibit is a potent reminder of the oft-repeated idea that people make meaning from things in their daily lives, and not everyone makes the same meaning from the same thing. According to the label, television tray-tables were manufactured in the 1950s “as television geared its early-evening programming to families” and “dinner moved to the living room or den.” My own memory of these tables, dating to the 1970s, is unrelated to television. When serving hors d’oeuvres of olives and peanuts in her New York apartment, my grandmother used her light-weight, easily stored TV tables as extra surfaces. The inclusion of so many objects so apparently randomly displayed can allow a visitor to tap into nostalgia for objects that might, in other interpretations, be consciously skirted. Much in the same way that Benjamin Filene advises, Sarah Leavitt who curated *House & Home* does not shy away from this too easily maligned response. Nostalgia for objects in grandparents’ apartments or childhood homes can get people engaged, and get them talking about things, surely an outcome to be welcomed in the social space of a museum.

More Delight and Surprise, Please!

The strategies employed in *American Stories* and *House & Home* approach meaning-making with objects in different ways. At the National Museum of American History meaning is far more deliberately assigned in object labels rich with historical information. At the National Building Museum briefer labels contain less information, leaving visitors more free to make meaning themselves. These are starkly different curatorial strategies, but I hold both exhibitions up for consideration because, like Steven Conn, I am not ready to surrender the primacy of the object. I am dedicated not only to ideas and themes and good history, but also to objects and “the delights and surprises that come with looking.” In retrospect, I have too many exhibitions under my curatorial belt where the idea at center stage caused the objects to fade somewhat into three-dimensional illustrations, where the artifacts were not as wondrous—or surprising or delightful—as I would have hoped. These two exhibitions are themselves objects lessons for those of us who make meaning from things and want to help our audiences do the same. ✨