

# Editorial

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December 2021, Bengaluru, India

# The Public Lives of Objects

How can objects further our understanding of the past, of a people or a culture? When do objects become endowed with meaning and agents in their own right? Objects acquire agency because they are capable of a 'social life', a life where objects move in and out of social contexts, building or maintaining social relations. Human intervention is necessary for this movement, at least to begin the process of objects affecting social relations and vice-versa. Objects manifest, in material form, the ideas, laws, arts, habits, morals, systems and all that governs the behaviour of individuals in a society.<sup>2</sup> The manifestation can take on many forms, which are made sense of depending on the context. The representation and interpretation of objects change as humans construct and use them, and when there is a transition in the context in which the objects move. The same object may show this in various ways. They could be looked at as evocative objects, as representing something concrete or an idea. Our interpretation of the object varies according to our social and cultural conditioning. What is to be highlighted in this interpretation is the 'public' that differentiates between a kitchen utensil and a museum object. The telling of history can be made more compelling and understanding of culture is made more thorough with the use of objects. Objects provide an alternative to the verbal and the written sources. Prown suggests that objects be considered primary data rather than mere illustrations or as secondary to other sources.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of objects is inherently interdisciplinary and the method of enquiry can take on multiple forms depending on the intent - either piecing together a history, a culture, an archaeological site or even understanding a home. Which are the objects then one considers? Or, are all objects equally relevant? Through an anthropological perspective, Miller's edited volume has evocatively responded to this dilemma in many ways by challenging the notion of 'material' in material culture.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is also something very keenly observable in the objects at home, which provide an anchor to lives and life stories.<sup>5</sup> They, or the lack thereof, provide a gateway into individual and family lives.

Some of the methodological approaches that use objects are reflected in the contributions to this issue, whether to understand reconstructions, invented heritage, or objects in homes or in institutional archives. The articles in this issue look at the history and material culture of objects and the functions they come to be associated with when bestowed with agency and meaning. This issue of UnBound was envisaged during the inaugural winter school which was based on the theme The Public Lives of Objects. The contributions discuss and construct an understanding of meaning of objects in their social and public lives. They address a variety of themes related to the object in different sites and times and seek to unravel some aspects of objects as they circulate in the public sphere. All contributions to this issue are solicited, drawing from the talks and discussions during the winter school, while other articles were invited from contributors with knowledge of their area of research and practice. The themes on which submissions are based include the production and circulation of objects, materiality of objects, use of objects, memories related to objects, objects in the archive, accessibility to archives and museum objects; and objects at home

The contributions reflect on the different aspects of the object in different ways. The interview with Dr Klaus Staubermann was conducted along with my colleague Dr Srijan Sandip Mandal. It sets the tone for the articles that follow as Dr Staubermann responds to questions about museums, often viewed as the largest storehouse of objects; the role of objects, as belonging to history and witnesses to historic knowledge, in understanding the past. Reconstruction of objects was central to his discussions during winter school and it figures in the interview as well. The interview also gets him to address some of the contemporary issues like the difference in the way objects are studied in history of science and technology and archaeology; critiques to museums, particularly about issues of colonialism and repatriation.

Lisa Onaga's article scrutinizes silk suture as the object and locates silk and its production in labour history, history of textile fabrics and motifs, history of technology, of medicine all of which have a bearing on the humans interaction with the materials of silk, with a focus on silk sutures. The insights she shares are drawn from a collaborative project between her as a researcher and academic, and artists who experimented with the ways in which information, historically and socially, around silk is made (in)visible

The photo-essay by Swarup Bhattacharya is an ode to boats, boat makers, boatmen and all that comes along as the boat manifests and travels its course. It takes us on a journey, albeit vicariously, to a way of life, that is absorbed around boats, through photographs, writing and songs that are evocatively translated. The songs that are born of the joys and frustrations of boatmen strung into songs and sung as the boat journeys through the river. In the essay Vrunda Pathare challenges the notion of the conventional archive, a closed and guarded space, by laying out for us the many meanings it has come to be associated with in the contemporary times. She takes us into the archives and on a fascinating journey through three different objects in the Godrej Archives, the ballot box made for the first elections held in a newly independent and democratic India, the typewriter and objects used by a community. Her article illustrates that through public participation the archives can truly open up and be redefined.

Sarita Sundar's essay *Inherited Objects, Invented Traditions* challenges the wisdom we tend to confer on objects of the past, as bearers of particular memories, knowledge set that continue to inform us of the past. It makes us re-look at the traditions and rituals that are invented in the more recent past, often through the medium of inherited objects. She illustrates this with three rituals that are performed in the public sphere by individuals, community or the nation-state. Through these examples, Sarita challenges the semantics of terms like tradition or invention, thereby making us critically think of cultural practices and processes. The essays thus far are visually rich and have provided photographic representation and documentation of the object they engage with. Photographs are abundantly found in personal, institutional and state archives, to the more ubiquitous mobile phone photographs. Even with abundant photographic archives accumulated over nearly two centuries '...the book reflects the unevenness of photography in India, even though one can only feel its ubiquity in contemporary times.' The photographic archive, the photographic practice in independent India are the focus of the essays in the book that is reviewed. The book-review by Suryanandini Narain covers an important segment in the issue by reviewing the book *Photography in India: from archives to contemporary practice* that addresses photographs as objects in their own right, and not mere accompaniments to text. The review made me reflect on the use of photographs to anchor text and vice-versa.

The inClass essay by Junuka Deshpande looks at the involved engagement with objects in an ‘...attempt to understand what encounters with objects evoke in the journey of observation, research and intervention in the context of design practice.’ What starts with a quintessential weaving tool – the loom – the object under discussion, it also becomes a pedagogical tool and makes us think about research, design, practice and the role of the human body in any craft. She draws from her experience as a facilitator of a project with the seventh semester project in 2019 and provides deep insights into such encounters, often by experimenting with unconventional pedagogy. In the emerging talent category, we have two student essays in this issue. Their work has evolved from a unit that the Centre for Public History facilitated in the first year of the pandemic titled History@Home. Akshata Murdeshwar’s essay is based on an heirloom, a gold necklace, that has been in the family for a few generations. Through the necklace and the interview she conducts of her uncle, she gives us not just her family history, but also some of the prominent historical events that occurred in certain parts of India, the remembrance of which have become tied to this piece of jewellery. The essay is a classic example of objects as carriers of and triggers to memory during the recounting and retelling at home. The other student essay is by Medha Agarwal who pieces together a fascinating life-story of her great-grandfather, mostly through interviews with her grandmother and her memories of him. However, biography is often mediated through objects that she finds in her home – a novel he wrote, photographs and even an invite to the centenary celebration of her great-grandfather. All of this, again, points to the relevance of objects in communicating the past.

All the contributions together reflect on the practice, pedagogy, inheritance and the multiple ways of engaging with objects sometimes suggesting novel ways of looking at them, especially in their public lives. They emphasise the use of objects as data and as agents to understand a people in a given time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> This elaboration on the notion of material culture builds on E.B. Tylor’s definition of culture.

<sup>3</sup> Jules David Prown. “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method” in *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol 17, No 1 (1982): 1- 19.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Miller, ed. *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, (London: UCL Press Ltd.,1998).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).