

HISTORY from THINGS

Essays on Material Culture

Edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery

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Why We Need Things

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

It goes without saying that one consequence of our evolution as cultural beings has been an increasing dependence on objects for survival and comfort. Compared with the hunter-gatherers, described by Marshall Sahlins, who were horrified by the idea of having to accept gifts because it meant having to carry one more blanket or kettle along on their nomadic journeys, we are slowly being buried under towering mounds of artifacts. Recently it has been calculated that every American will own more than four hundred electronic appliances during his or her lifetime (Massimini 1989).

This proliferation of artifacts would not be a problem were it not for the fact that objects compete with humans for scarce resources in the same ecosystem. Forests are being destroyed to provide lumber, wood, and pulp; metals and oil

are consumed to build and propel vehicles. The potential energy contained in our environment is dissipated as we convert it into objects, which rapidly become obsolete; thus we accelerate the processes of entropy that degrade the planet.

The survival of humankind depends on finding a *modus vivendi* not only with the physical world—viruses, bacteria, the animal kingdom, and one another—but also with the objects that we are incessantly producing. Some of these are obviously dangerous, such as the innumerable missiles, bombs, assault rifles, and automobiles that currently are the leading causes of death for people under forty years of age. Others are dangerous only indirectly, such as the plastic containers that are slowly shrouding our beaches, the aerosol cans that are destroying the ozone layer, and the computer on which I am writing these lines, whose chips were etched with acids that are polluting the water table in Silicon Valley.

In some respects artifacts are like new species that reproduce themselves alongside biological ones. Looking at an illustrated history of musical instruments or weapons or vehicles, it is easy to imagine that one sees the record of an evolutionary process tending toward greater and greater complexity of function. We like to think that because objects are human-made they must be under our control. However, this is not necessarily the case. An object with a specific form and function inevitably suggests the next incarnation of that object, which then almost certainly will come about. For instance, the first crude stone missile begat the spear, which begat the arrow and then the bolt, the bullet, and so on to Star Wars. Human volition seems to have less to do with this development than do the potentialities inherent in the objects themselves.

Every artifact is the product of human intentionality, but that intentionality itself is conditioned by the existence of previous objects. When General Motors decides to build a new line of cars, its decision is contingent on what models are already available. When the Pentagon commissions a new submarine, this act is not the expression of some abstract human purpose but the reaction to the existence of other submarines. Whenever someone buys a new food processor, that person is not expressing an essential human need but acting in terms of a consciousness shaped by appliances. Thus artifacts are sometimes symbiotic with humans, but at other times the relationship is parasitic, and the survival of the object is at the expense of its human host (Csikszentmihalyi 1988).

Given this interdependence between our survival and that of the artifacts we produce, it seems useful to look a little more closely at the

relationship we have with objects. If we do not achieve a better understanding of things, we may find ourselves entirely in their thrall. The point I wish to emphasize is that our dependence on objects is not only physical but also, more important, psychological. Most of the things we make these days do not make life better in any material sense but instead serve to stabilize and order the mind.

OBJECTS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF EXPERIENCE

It is difficult to understand our psychological dependence on objects as long as we hold to the belief that human beings are naturally in control of what happens in their minds. This cozy anthropocentric illusion is a useful prejudice in navigating through the shoals of life, but it does not bear up well under closer examination. The fact is that our hold over mental processes is extremely precarious even in the best of times (Csikszentmihalyi 1978, 1982).

Contrary to what we ordinarily believe, consciousness is not a stable, self-regulating entity. When left to itself, deprived of organized sensory input, the mind begins to wander and is soon prey to unbridled hallucinations. Most people require an external order to keep randomness from invading their mind. It is very difficult to keep ideas straight without the assistance of a sensory template that gives them boundaries and direction. When people have nothing to do, they generally begin to fret, become depressed, and become anxious; unless they turn on the television or find some other activity that will direct their attention, their moods progressively deteriorate. That is why people report their worst moods on Sunday mornings, when, deprived of a cultural script, they flounder in the quagmire of freedom. The mind was not designed to be self-regulating or to function well when idling (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Nor is it easy for the mind unaided to keep order in the temporal progression of events. It is difficult to remember the quality and texture of past experiences and keep in mind one's plans and hopes for the future. Without external props even our personal identity fades and goes out of focus; the self is a fragile construction of the mind. One must conclude that a state of psychic entropy is the normal state of consciousness—at least for organisms, like us, who have stepped beyond the guidelines of

their genetic programming and have become conscious of themselves. Yet we experience this psychic entropy as something unpleasant and therefore keep searching for ways to reestablish a purposeful order in its stead.

This is where objects can be helpful. As Arendt observed:

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that . . . men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world. . . . Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity. (Arendt 1958: 137)

Artifacts help objectify the self in at least three major ways. They do so first by demonstrating the owner's power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Third, objects give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network as symbols (literally, the joining together) of valued relationships. In these three ways things stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness.

Objects of Power

From earliest times people have taken pains to choose and own things that encapsulate their personal power. For men this power tends to be synonymous with traditional virile virtues such as strength and endurance. Native American braves carried around their necks medicine bundles holding the claws of the bear they defeated in combat or other objects of momentous significance that reflected the owner's ability to control physical and sacred energy. Evans-Pritchard noted that for the Nuer pastoralists of the Sudan power was concentrated in the spear:

A man's fighting spear (*mut*) is constantly in his hand, forming almost part of him . . . and he is never tired of sharpening or polishing it, for a Nuer is very proud of his spear. . . . In a sense it is animate, for it is an extension and external symbol . . . which stands for the

strength, vitality and virtue of the person. It is a projection of the self. (Evans-Pritchard 1956:233)

Power is still symbolized by kinetic objects, although today it is expressed through cars, boats, tools, sports equipment, and household appliances. It is also invested in objects that have a great mass, such as houses or imposing furniture. But symbols of status have become extremely complex, and now one can show superiority by collecting art (or almost anything else that is rare) or by owning things that are tasteful, ancient, or just ahead of the times.

The power of women has traditionally been expressed through objects symbolizing equally stereotyped feminine qualities, such as seductiveness, fertility, and nurturance. Dresses, ornaments, jewelry, furs, silver, china, domestic appliances, and fine furniture witness to a woman's ability to control energy (often meaning the psychic energy of men) and hence the importance of her self.

It has been argued that the desire or compulsion to display one's identity may have been a stronger impetus in the development of technology than the search for survival and comfort. Discussing the introduction of the first metal objects at the end of the Neolithic period, Renfrew writes:

In several areas of the world it has been noted, in the case of metallurgical innovations in particular, that the development of bronze and other metals as useful commodities was a much later phenomenon than their first utilization as new and attractive materials, employed in contexts of display. . . . In most cases early metallurgy appears to have been practiced primarily because the products had novel properties that made them attractive to use as symbols and as personal adornments, in a manner that, by focusing attention, could attract or enhance prestige. (Renfrew 1986:144, 146)

Objects still serve the same self-enhancing purpose. In describing the eating utensils used by traditional upper-class families of the New England towns he studied, Warner (1953:120) writes: "They give objective expression to the inner feeling of the person involved about themselves, help to reinforce the person's opinion about himself, and increase his sense of security." Because our sense of self is vague and insecure and because it depends on the reflection we get from others' reactions to it, we shall

continue to rely on displaying objects having qualities others prize so as to get a solid and positive sense of who we are through the mediation of the things we own.

Objects and the Continuity of the Self

For most people the home is not just a utilitarian shelter but a repository of things whose familiarity and concreteness help organize the consciousness of their owner, directing it into well-worn grooves. The home contains a symbolic ecology that represents both continuity and change in the life course and thus gives permanence to our elusive selves, as we learned in a study of the meanings that household objects had for a representative sample of American families (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

A wealthy attorney whose home was full of rare art and expensive furniture, when asked what was the most special object he owned, invited the interviewer down to the basement den and took out of a trunk an old trombone. He used to play this instrument in college, he explained, when life was fresh and spontaneous. Now he feels weighed down with cares, and whenever he is depressed he goes to the den to play a few tunes, and some of his worries disappear for a time. So the trombone helps both focus attention, reducing entropy in consciousness, and vividly brings back old memories and experiences, thus adding a sense of depth and wholeness to the self of its owner. For this man the expensive collection of art and furniture served as power objects, as signs of his status and achievements. But the most meaningful symbol of his private self was the trombone, which alone had the power to put him back in touch with himself.

The selves of young people and old, of men and women, are usually expressed through different objects. In our study we found that the most important household object for young people is the stereo set and, quite a bit further down the line, the television set, followed by some musical instrument such as a guitar or a trumpet. All these are things that produce ordered stimulation, either auditory or visual, and hence help the mind stay on track. Music is especially important in adolescence as a modulator of moods: Whenever these threaten to engulf a teenager's consciousness, turning on a tape helps focus and objectify emotions; the music and the lyrics reflect the formless yearnings of the listener and give them substance and legitimacy.

For adults, furniture, paintings, sculpture, and books serve as the

main repositories of meanings about the self. These objects embody the values and tastes as well as the accomplishments of the owner. For older people photographs are the things most often mentioned as special. Pictures serve as icons of the past, concrete reminders of a life that otherwise would run the risk of getting lost in the labyrinths of memory.

The objects people see as special in their home point to different directions in time, revealing different aspects of the self that are important, depending on the person's age. Teenagers, for instance, are interested almost exclusively in objects that embody their current concerns, things with which they can interact here and now. The present self holds center stage, and action is its main mode of expression.

Their parents are almost evenly divided between the past, present, and future. Some of the objects they own are cherished because they bring back earlier aspects of the self: examples are a youthful diary, a well-used hiking boot, or the attorney's trombone mentioned earlier. Some of the objects are things being used right now and thus express the current stage of the self's development—a musical instrument, perhaps, or some plants. And some things are important because they stand for what the owner hopes to accomplish in the future—a French grammar, which is a reminder of an imminent and long-anticipated European vacation, or a kit for assembling a rooftop solar energy collector, which urges the owner to act out his or her environmental concerns in the future.

For the grandparents the temporal balance shifts again; the past self is most prominently evoked by the symbolic ecology of the home. Instead of action, contemplation is the preferred way of relating to things that represent former actions and events. But an emphasis on the past does not mean a complete absorption in it; in our study 97 percent of the oldest generation of respondents also mentioned objects that were special because they pointed to the present or to the future.

In addition to differences due to progression along the life course, one finds many patterns that distinguish one gender from the other. As one would expect, the selves of men are much more often expressed through active instrumental objects such as television sets, stereos, power tools, sports equipment, vehicles, and cameras. Women, on the other hand, mention significantly more often things that express a concern for nurturance and conservation—houseplants, plates, glass, photographs, textiles, and sculptures. It is remarkable how even in this day and age gender stereotypes still flourish in the objects men and women choose to represent their identities with.

Objects and Relationships.

Next to giving permanence to the self, the most frequent symbolic use of household objects is to give permanence to the relationships that define the individual in the social network. In this sense things stand for the ties that link a person to others. Of the youngest respondents 71 percent mentioned objects that were special because they reminded the owner of his or her family; in the parental generation the proportion was 85 percent; and in the grandparents' generation, 86 percent.

A woman feels a special attachment to the chair in which she sat to nurse her babies; a man looks with pleasure at the seascape hanging on the living-room wall, which he bought during his Mexican honeymoon; photographs chronicle the growth of children and grandchildren. But it is not only the immediate family whose presence shines forth from special objects. Relatives of all kinds are recalled by the objects filling up the home. There is the quilt sewn by Aunt Elly, the bed in which Grandmother was born, porcelain cups from Great-grandmother's family, and the Bible inscribed by even more distant ancestors.

Friendships also are commemorated by objects in at least one-fourth of the homes. The objects that most often recall friends are paintings, furniture, and sculptures (including plastic figurines). One-fifth of the homes contain objects that embody some ideal of the owner, and the objects that most lend themselves to this are books, which generally signify values such as wisdom, creativity, and courage; plants, which usually refer to such values as nurturance, care, and love for life; and musical instruments. Ethnic origins are most often objectified by plateware, sculpture, and paintings; religious identity, by books and sculpture.

Families whose members have strong positive feelings for one another and for their home possess many objects that are cherished because they symbolize common ties. In the ten "warmest" households in our study, seven husbands mentioned special objects that referred to their wives, whereas only one of ten husbands in the "coolest" families mentioned a symbol having to do with his wife. In warm homes adults have more symbols relating to their own parents, their children, and their own childhood.

In a stable culture, where relationships continue uninterrupted from cradle to grave, there may not be a need to secure one's position in the web of kinship through material symbols. But in our mobile American society things play an important role in reminding us of who we are with respect to whom we belong. One young woman we interviewed answered

our questions about things with disdain, professing that she was not "a goddam materialist," that objects did not matter to her, that she cared only for human relationships. It turned out, however, that she had no family and no friends. In general, if the home had few things that evoked meaning, its owner tended to be socially isolated.

Our addiction to materialism is in large part due to a paradoxical need to transform the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things. The body is not large, beautiful, and permanent enough to satisfy our sense of self. We need objects to magnify our power, enhance our beauty, and extend our memory into the future.

In looking at these functions, it seems clear that power objects are not only the most dangerous but also the most expensive with respect to scarce resources and labor. When things are necessary to prove dominance and superiority, human costs start to escalate very quickly. It is striking to note in comparison how inexpensive things that stand for kinship and relatedness tend to be. Tokens of remembrance, respect, and love typically have trivial intrinsic value, and the labor invested in them is usually voluntary. Thus, the kind of selves individuals choose to build have great consequences for the material culture and for the natural environment that must be despoiled in order to create it. In times past it was said that the saints wore their selfhood as a light cloak on their shoulders. Now that each of us on this planet carries the burden of the equivalent of 4,000 pounds of TNT, we can see the wisdom of that image.

The addiction to objects is of course best cured by learning to discipline consciousness. If one develops control over the processes of the mind, the need to keep thoughts and feelings in shape by leaning on things decreases. This is the main advantage of a genuinely rich symbolic culture: It gives people poetry, songs, crafts, prayers, and rituals that keep psychic entropy at bay. A Brahmin can afford to live in an empty home, because he does not need objects to keep his mind on course. In our culture mathematicians, musicians, and others adept at the use of symbols are also partially freed from reliance on an objectified consciousness. We very much need to learn more about how this inner control can be achieved. Then objects can again be used primarily as instruments rather than as projections of our selves, which, like the servants created by the sorcerer's apprentice, threaten to drown their masters with relentless zeal.

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