PATTERNS IN PRACTICE

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Interpreting History through Objects

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Tea tables, candlemolds, blanket chests, Terry clocks, and hand mills—these things speak for times past when they were made. Objects help us understand history. The displays and scene-settings of exhibitions and historic sites are built on that generally accepted but little understood premise. In trying to teach history with things, educational directors and their staff interpreters often end up teaching something else. Yet by paying attention to what history is and by following a few simple guidelines, they can come closer to their historical objective.

As a discipline, history concerns people, people from the past who behaved in various ways. History seeks to explain their thoughts and actions. In order to use objects in a historical context, we must first relate the objects to the men, women, and children who made, sold, bought, and used them. Second, we must relate the people and the objects to behavior patterns and then analyze the activities. The progression should move from things to people and their actions and then to an exploration of ideas about the behavior. From meat cleavers, bread peels, candlemolds, and a whole assortment of craft and domestic paraphernalia, we should try to envision butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, their kith and kin, and all the others up and down the social order. And once we have identified the people, we should try to identify the activities the people engaged in with the objects. Finally, we should ask. Why? What personal, economic, social, political, religious, and cultural assumptions motivated their actions?

This seems straightforward, and it can be. However, the fact is that most books, museum exhibitions, and historic sites that illustrate or display objects do not move from things to people, to activities, to ideas. They stop short of establishing these relationships; they fail to search for explanations. Let me take you to an unspecified but fashionable mid-19th-century historic house where the guide might say:

> This lovely bedroom is furnished in the Chippendale style. The tea table was a new form of furniture at that time. The curving legs and the carved border around the circular top mark it as the height of fashion. A mechanism under the pie crust surface allows it to

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be turned up so the table could be placed against a wall when not in use. Isn't the handworkmanship beautiful!

In 69 well-organized words visitors are introduced to a room full of objects that are identified by style, and the history of one item is selected for special mention. The history of things can be a useful first step in teaching history with artifacts, but these separate histories of dressing tables, looking glasses, and the fabrics that draped them fall short of, first, connecting the objects to people and activities and, second, looking for explanations for their behavior. Similarly, stories of technology that identify raw materials and the sequence of steps in production processes should not be confused with the discipline of history. They concentrate on the way things are made, not on the people who made them and the importance of production activity in their lives.

For most museums and historic houses the practical starting point has to be the structures and objects they have to display to visitors. In connecting people to the tangible survivals or to technological processes, I recommend that you ask a series of questions. They are based on the familiar ones: Who? What? When? Where? How? And Why? But they are adapted to interpretive purposes.

First, What is this object?

Second, What activity was it a part of? Was it used alone or as part of a larger functional system? Historical interpretations of objects become broader if you think systems rather than specific artifacts, and it is worth remembering that the original system may have included artifacts that have not survived. Think artificial illumination, not candles; think accounting and financial transactions or personal correspondence, not desks. One should begin with practical direct function and, if appropriate, move on to social and ideological aspects. A single candle may have lit the way to bed; seven created a "splendid" effect in Robert Carter's dining room in 1773.

Third, Who made, owned, maintained, or used the object? To explore the wide range of subjects a single artifact can open up, interpreters need to be aware of all people associated with every phase of the artifact's existence, although to keep the length of a specific interpretation manageable not all can be presented to the public.

Fourth, How did the people work together to make the activities happen or to achieve the desired result? Of course, people don't always share the same goals. Sometimes conflict replaces cooperation. As a reminder of the breadth of an adult individual's experience, I often think of six categories of human behavior anthropologists sometimes use to organize their fieldwork—making a home, earning a living, rearing and training the young, using leisure time, engaging in community activities, practicing religion. Everything people do can be placed in one of those six groups.

Fifth, How have things and people's circumstances and relationships with one another changed from one period to the next?

Sixth, Why? Or, as a consequence of what? The fifth and sixth questions address

historians' interest in change over time; they help us explore why people and their actions differ from one decade to another.

A modern example may clarify the method. First, the object is a tin can containing 1 pound 5 ounces of cherry pie filling. Second, the obvious activities associated with it are cooking and eating. Cherries are made into pie, and, as a dessert, pie does more than provide basic sustenance. It suggests the pleasure of leisurely dining with family or friends. It also has ideological significance for Americans, thanks to Parson Weems and his story of little George and the hatchet.

Third, Who made, owned, or used the can of cherry pie filling? The list of people expands the range of activities associated with the object beyond cooking and eating—commercial growers, seasonal processors, metallurgists, miners, assembly-line makers of cans, color separation specialists and printers of labels, advertisers, food store stockholders, managers, and checkers, the home cook (the can is a domestic size), diners, garbagemen, and administrators of city waste.

Fourth, how did the people work together to make the activities happen? Many were hired, some were fired, others organized for better wages, and a few were invited to dinner. The activities may lead to harmonious or competitive relationships.

Fifth, How have things and people's circumstances and relationships with one another changed from one period to the next? Two hundred years ago rural farmers grew cherry trees, picked the fruit, and marketed it locally for housewives or servants to bake into pies. Today commercial agriculture, heavy industry, long-range transportation, and modern marketing have combined to reduce the seasonality of menus and to make meal preparation easier. Furthermore, family relationships have changed; the home cook may be the father.

Sixth, Why? Explanations are never simple. A full exploration of the significance of the can of cherry pie filling in modern society is certainly more complex than anyone of sound mind would introduce in a single museum interpretation. Although some answers are more plausible than others and museum interpretations should offer suggestions, people should be encouraged to form their own opinions about an answer to the open-ended question, Why?

This discussion of a can of cherry pie filling has shown how useful the six questions are in telling *history with things,* but it is far too long for a museum label or a historic site interpretation. I'd like to revise the earlier interpretation I offered for the tea table in the Chippendale bedroom. Based on the six questions, the content of the 76-word message centers on people and tries to indicate the role the tea table played in their lives. I would like to explain more, but since my visitors won't stand still, I only offer hints:

> A fashionable woman slept, dressed, and entertained in this bedroom. Her servants moved the chairs and the tea table away from the wall to a location near the fire in winter or near a breeze in summer. They adjusted the top to support the silver teapot, jug, sugar bowl, and spoons and china cups and saucers they carried from the kitchen, so their mistress and her visitors could leisurely gossip and laugh over a warm drink.

With practice any interpreter can learn to develop a coherent historical theme by using these six questions to move from objects to people and their behavior and to encourage visitors to search for their own reasons why people of earlier times might have behaved as they did.

Afterword

In the seven years since Renée Friedman, Margaret Piatt, and I prepared our session on interpretation for the 1984 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums, I have been emphasizing two messages: one is old, the other new—at least to me.

First, every professional interpreter of historic sites and objects needs to control messages more carefully for time, space, and socioeconomic status. Many exhibitions and historic sites now connect their objects and places with people. Often, however, interpreters do not fully identify them. Since people's experiences in the 1750s were no more like those of the 1820s than our lives are like those of our great-grandparents, interpreters should be sure visitors do not confuse or conflate one time period with another. Life in rural Virginia or Maine differed from life in New York, Cleveland, or New Orleans.

In addition to specifying time and place, interpreters must consider socioeconomic status. To make sense of the lives of people in the past, visitors need to be told whether the historical figures were slave or free, poor, of modest means, or wealthy. They should ask what it meant to be one or the other. Nearly all interpretations of objects and houses overestimate the richness of early material life and automatically raise the standards of living for everyone in the past. The impression created minimizes the significance of both the industrial revolution and the consumer revolution in transforming people's material lives, changing attitudes toward things and altering social relationships.

The second message I would like to communicate to interpreters builds on the idea that goods are imbedded in social process. They do not arise out of nowhere. People make objects because they use them to pursue social strategies, often to indicate their present status or to promote their bid for changing it. As agents of performances that succeed or fail, products are not neutral. Once brought into the arena of social activity, they help shape self and group identity. Having or not having access to a particular object or category of objects produces a different kind of person. For instance, people who own and drive cars and those who walk think differently about space and the limitations geography imposes on human relationships.

There is a simple and effective way to ensure that interpreters provide historical characters with spatial, temporal, and socioeconomic identities and that they convey to visitors the notion that people, consciously or unconsciously, used possessions to achieve certain objectives. Tom Woods of the Minnesota Historical Society calls it

"perspectivistic interpretation." Others call it "third person with a first-person point of view." And still others use actors and first-person interpretations to achieve the same ends. Let me build on the examples I used in the original essay to show in 74 words how perspectivistic history can encourage visitors to use objects and houses to think about changing social relationships.

> At a rich man's city house on an evening in the early 19th century, a liveried slave opened the door to guests and later handed around trays with tea things. This African American might have hoped to be free and to manage his own catering business. However, he knew he would not have the opportunity to earn the wealth that bought the white man's house or the social position that led to fancy tea parties.