Possessions and the Sense of Past

Russell W. Belk

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ABSTRACT -

Objects that stir our memories include souvenirs, photographs, heirlooms, antiques, monuments, and gifts. Such possessions are used mnemonically to create, store, and retrieve a sense of past that is instrumental in managing our identities. It would be a mistake however to assume that the processes involved are those of cognitive information storage and retrieval. For mementos evoke nostalgic, affective, and often fanciful links to the past rather than more documentary cognitive linkages. Material memory processes operate intentionally as well as unintentionally, at both individual and aggregate levels of identity, with systematic differences over the life course. Although they appear to be pervasive and inescapable, such processes have been the subject of very little prior research. The present chapter offers some redress to this fundamental omission.
When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before. But if the while I think on thee,
dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

(Shakespeare 1609/1961).

In his thirtieth sonnet, Shakespeare foreshadows much of what I shall say about possessions and sense of past. From the opening courtroom metaphor until the final couplet, the mood is one of wistful recollection of former friends, lost loves, departed ambitions. But the final couplet, appropriately, closes the sonnet on a joyful note. Such is the bittersweet, sad but longing, nature of nostalgia (Belk 1990, Davis 1979, Starobinski 1966, Stewart 1984). And it is nostalgia that provides the initial key to understanding the use of possessions in providing a sense of past.

NOSTALGIA AND MEMORY

Before the development of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, intergenerational legacies in the form of family heirlooms and portraits were restricted to the upper class (Ames and Ayres 1985). In contemporary societies, the most pervasive way to establish a sense of past are snapshots. Snapshots have democratized self images and from the start of photography they have been available to nearly all social classes. They also ostensibly offer the possibility of accuracy in these images (Belk 1989). Quite unlike the veridical representations and documentary precision sought in scientific photographs however, the snapshot aims at an accuracy that is more akin to poetry (Tibbetts 1981) or magic (Kaufmann 1980). The snapshots that fill our drawers, slide trays, and family albums do not present an honest portrait of our everyday lives. They are heavily biased selections of important moments involving family gatherings, celebrations, vacation trips, new possessions, and such rites of passage as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, and graduations. Our snapshots of these selected and posed gatherings are then further edited before entering our wallets, purses, picture frames, and family albums. It is these selective repositories that portray the selves we wish to preserve for the future -- our own and that of our descendants (Boerdam Martinius 1980, Chalfen 1987, Milgram 1977, Sontag 1977).

In reflecting on these repositories filled with pictures of ourselves and loved ones, we are guided to the staged in depicted were always totally happy ones. Not only do the people appear happy, but the cars were new, the house decorated, and the places visited were only the most scenic or historic landmarks. Only occasionally, as in the case of a recently flooded community showed me, are the momentous Limes inherently sad ones. Rather, it is the realization that these happy times lie in the past, that the people are older and perhaps dead or departed, that produces the nostalgic wistful sonnet. The associations and memories themselves are joyous, thanks largely to judicious editing. It is the fact that things past are past that
tempers this joy and produces the bittersweet emotion of nostalgia.

Among the photographs that were found to produce nostalgia for informants were such themes as my first car, a traveling family, a truck we used to own, the children, our wedding, my parents, a dog that I used to have, our lives in Africa. These photos have in common, besides their pastries, their focus on persons, places, and objects possessed. That is, they share a tendency to make of the past a possession that can be savored, handled, treasured, and kept safe from loss.

For the most part, this is done knowingly, so that these photographs can produce and reproduce the bittersweet emotion of nostalgia.

That photographs, as well as other mementos, tend to provoke nostalgia-laden memories is both inescapable as the vast psychological literature on human memory. The major reason for this neglect is that the overwhelming majority of memory research has been conducted in laboratory contexts with memory tasks divorced from daily life, friends, and family (see Neisser 1982). Ignored by all but a few (e.g., Neisser 1989) are those rare exceptions like Korosec-Serfaty’s field study (1974) which acted as a family memory box, Bachelard’s (1964) analysis of the wardrobe as an intimate place for secret memories, and G. Stanley’s (1899) early study of his visits to the farms and houses of his childhood in order to examine the memories these artifacts might bring to mind:

... through every room of which I slowly went alone, note book in hand, memories crowded very thickly with the opening of every new door, and seemed almost to affect the vividness of sense impressions. I paint never looked so white, the castellated stove, almost never used except on Thanksgiving Day there; on this side lay my grandfather and here my aunt in their coffins; the old mirror with its wide frame still had the little crack in the corner, which was even better remembered than the mirror itself; smaller long narrow one with its gilt and black frame and the gaudy flowers painted in the glass of part; the red table which still showed my ink spot on it; the old daguerreotypes; the carpet; wall paper; mahogany sofa; the same old black books ... were well remembered images in this room unvisited for at least thirty years (p. 498).

... several dress and bed quilt patterns; the little red and lettered cup; my penny banks; a curious old firkin; -- of a good many of these I could write a brief treatise were I to characterize all the incidents and especially the feelings which they brought to mind (p. 506).

While Hall has turned much of his nostalgic experience into words, it is not words but emotion-laden images which are the direct product of such memento-cued memory (Bartlett 1932). Such images are not necessarily visual, as Agee and Evans (1941) found:

All these odors as I have said are so combined into one that they are all and always present in balance, not at all heavy, yet so searching that all fabrics of bedding and clothes are saturated with them, and so clinging that they stand softly out of the fibers of newly laundered clothes. Some of their components are extremely ‘pleasant,’ some are ‘unpleasant’; their sum total has great nostalgic power (p. 155).

Even the recent more ecological studies of memory have not considered such topics as souvenirs, snapshots, and heirlooms (Neisser 1988). The external memory aids that have been examined are those that aid prospective memory (e.g., shopping lists, reminders for what Casey (1987) calls “remembering-to” -- rather than retrospective memory (Harris 1978/1982). No doubt many of us would prefer to think of ourselves in the rational utilitarian way in which most memory research portrays us. One woman (WF 60) first insisted that she had no strong attachments to sentimental possessions and that everything she owned could be replaced if it were lost. Later in the interview she lamented the recent breakage of clay handprints made by her children in kindergarten, calling it a “casualty” and “a sentimental thing.” She again retreated to a utilitarian posture in saying that she is unconcerned with what happens to her things after she is dead. Except, she went on, she would want her children to keep her china and silver heirlooms, the walnut furniture she and all the family photographs. She also recalled that she is preparing a genealogical photo record of her family and that she has saved all of her children’s toys for the past 40 years.

If traditional research and discourse misses the nostalgic nature of object-induced memories, art does not. As Hall (1935) noted of the 1935 song “These Foolish Things” (Remind Me of You), the relevant memory cues for this lost love include such objects as an airline ticket, a piano, silk stockings, dance invitations, and perfume. In a more recent song Crystal Gayle laments:
Though I very seldom think of him,
Nevertheless sometimes a mannequin’s
Blue silver dress can make a window like a dream;
Ah, but now those dreams belong to someone else,
Now they talk in their sleep in a drawer where I keep
All my old boyfriends (Gayle 1982).

One informant (WF 40) made a point of keeping photos of her old boyfriends and encouraged her daughter to do the same. A Swedish woman W 35 interviewed by the SAMDOK homes project (Nyström and Cedrenius 1982, Stavenow-Hidemark 1985), displayed gifts suitors in a wall display that also included souvenirs and gifts from others (Tyrfelt 1988). As found by others (e.g., Rochberg-Halton 1981, Mehta and Belk 1991, Wallendorf and Arnold 1988), many of our dearest possessions are imbued with meaning that extends beyond what they tell us about the persons or events they represent. As with wooden staff images and knotted cords with which the Polynesians formerly remembered their ancestry (Volland 1987), these mnemonic linkages are generally intentionally forged, as when we take a photo knowing that it will memorialize the occasion and those present. However, it may be the unintended associations represented in mementos that produce the deep meanings. This contention rests on a second theme that helps us understand the role of possessions in sense of past: possession evoke richly textured webs of personal memories.

**POSESSIONS, WEBS OF MEANING, AND EMOTION**

The best example of the webs of meaning that may be evoked by possessions from the past is Marcel Proust’s three-volume autobiographical novel Remembrance of Things Past (1913-1917/1981). Initially spurred by the long-forgotten taste of lime blossom he remembered from childhood, and later prodded by photographs, clothing, and other everyday objects that had absorbed parts of his past, Proust (actually the novel’s Marcel) floods the reader with rich details and stories from his autobiography. These memories came rushing back to him largely unbidden and unsought -- they are "passive memories" (Spence 1988) -- and this makes them magical or sacred (Salaman 1970/1982). They are memories of sights, people, moods, scents, events, conversations, and numerous other details. But more than that, they are part of an interwoven web that can hold and sustain both writer and reader. Rather than being evoked in a documentary or even iconographic fashion where the stimulus objects "stand for" these memory nets are evoked in a revivifying web in which each object and memory "leads to" numerous other labyrinth that makes the past come to life (see Caughey 1984, pp. 126-128). Such objects are able to create an almost deeply experienced the object previously, except that unlike true deja vu, the feeling is warranted. They may actually evoke in the body a visceral feeling of what it was like (Casey 1987). We say such memories transport us back in time and space because though we are there once again. It is this transcendence of the here and now that characterizes the sacred experience (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

The difference between these two types of memory parallels and reflects differences between two types of knowledge. The more documentary type of knowledge is propositional knowledge or knowledge that a thing happened or that a person existed at a time and place. The associative web type of knowledge is experiential knowledge or knowledge of what some thing, time, place, and/or person was like (Belk 1986, Langer 1963). It is an image into which we are able to project ourselves. This distinction in types of knowledge that distinguishes the experiment from the ethnography and cognitive understanding from emotional understanding (Denzin 1989, 120-124).

Besides evoking webs of associations, objects that stimulate memories of our personal past also stimulate emotions. As Wright Morris (1978/1989) observes:

> When we say "How well I remember!" invariably we remember poorly. It is the emotion that is strong, not the details. The elusive details are incidental, since the emotion is what matters. In this deficiency of our memory we have the origins of the imagination .... Artifacts mystically quickened with sentiment await their reenactment and a confirmation. Each time these tokens are handled they give off sparks (pp. 7577).
If it is the emotion that matters to our most cherished memories, it is not surprising that memory and fiction share much in common. Just as Stone (1988) finds to be true of family stories, the images of self and family that are constructed, rehearsed, and retained in our possessions (either intentionally or unintentionally) are essentially personal and family heroic fantasies rather than veridical documentaries. Nevertheless, they help define who we are, what we value, and how we got to be as we are. Such effects on sense of self form a third theme involving possessions and our sense of past.

SENSE OF PAST AND SENSE OF SELF

Just as our sense of self is extended physically through possessions that make us symbolically larger (Belk 1988), extended temporally when possessions connect us to the past. While the same is true of possessions that connect us to the future (Belk 1990, Olson 1985), such connections are not within the scope of the present chapter. By adding the dimension of time to the spatial dimension of self extension, we become richer characters; we are both literally and figuratively more multidimensional. This occurs in several ways, now considered.

Possessions and Ancestor Worship

Many of our possessions engage us in a contemporary western form of ancestor worship. While ancestor worship in a formal religious context is associated with traditional societies (e.g., Houghton 1955, Howells 1954, Uvi-Strauss 1962/1963) and elsewhere (Hult, Takizawa 1927), in a less religious sense of sacredness ancestor worship is much more pervasive (Belk, Wal Hirschman 1985, Marcus 1988, Wiggins 1974). Although one function of all forms of ancestor worship is to extend the identities of these ancestors (Maines 1978), another function is to invoke the spirit of these ancestors as protectors of their descendants. It was once popular to use locks of hair from ancestors to invoke their memories (Miller 1982). Other possessions are currently more popular as memorials. For instance, one woman (WF 35) interviewed treasured the last photograph of her mother and her great-grandmother. Another woman (WF 35) kept a doll that had belonged to her mother in a place of honor. A third woman's (WF 40) favorite possession was the jewelry that had been her mother's. And a fourth woman (WF 35) displayed her grandmother's pewter plates on the fireplace mantle. It was common to find pianos, fireplace mantles, and televisions used as shrines on which to display photographs of the ancestors along with those of current generations. Sometimes special wall groupings of ancestor photos or ancestral artifacts (e.g., the shoe lasts of a cobbler grandfather) were employed to the same end (see Coster and Belk 1990, Milspaw 1986, Pateman 1986).

While female linkages to female ancestors were those most commonly celebrated in revered possessions (not surprisingly in light of stereotypical female roles in preserving social linkages -- Cheal 1988), male linkages to male relatives were not uncommon in these cases. It included automobiles, swords, tools, books, homemade furniture, and photographs. Preserving and displaying cross-sex relatives was also observed, but not as frequently as preserving possessions of same-sex ancestors. This identity implications of these possessions, since the traits of same-sex relatives are generally most salient to sense of self (Stone 1988).

The importance of such objects was evident in interviews with the flood victims in a recently flooded eastern community and with a disaster relief worker who was helping these people to rebuild their lives. Aside from loss of a loved one in the flood, the victims most missed were family photographs, family heirlooms, and such memorabilia as gifts connecting the victims to ancestors. The loss of these possessions resulted in a grief process that was virtually the same as that experienced at the death of a loved one.

When death does occur, cemeteries, monuments and funerary urns show our persistent desire for tangible reminders of our ancestors (Dethlefsen 1981, George and Nelson 1982, Grofman 1978, Pike 1984). It may be significant that India is a cremating and not a burying culture. As Vaidyanathan (1989) notes, India also has done little to create historic monuments and the history of India is an elusive one. Our attitude toward the dead may well parallel our attitude toward the past in general.

Romanyshyn (1989) distinguishes the totally de-personified corpse from the personified dead body and argues that the latter is more salient to us than the former:

The dead body is a memory. It is a memory of the person and of the relations of that person to you, farewell to his or her body. This is the body that we bury, and the grave that is prepared to receive the place of remembrance. Indeed the grave may very well be the first instance of memory in the human species, for we are the only species who bury the dead in a fashion which marks it as a
mark a site in a special way and we prepare in one way or another the dead body which we lay in a journey. In doing so, we acknowledge a continuing kinship with the person of this body (p. 124).

This is an intentional act of remembrance; an act intended to provoke the active memory. Still it is passive memory of things accidentally encountered possessions of the deceased, that are likely to be the most powerful:

... things are often the most poignant and painful reminders of someone's death. Even after a long absence through death of someone you have loved can be brought home sharply upon discovery their things. The pipe he smoked in the evening found now beneath the chair, or the necklace wh her favorite, attest in their patient waiting to the depth of the loss. At such times it is as if the dumb of things intensifies our emotions and through them we enter more profoundly into our grief (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976). Still, ancestor worship persists and is aided by a variety of icons and image

Antiques and Sense of Past

While it is evident that objects linking us to ancestors help to temporally expand our sense of self, it is perhaps less obvious that objects originally owned by strangers can also help provide a sense of past. In some cases antiques are used as surrogates for objects owned by ancestors or associated with personal history. Thus, one woman (WF 70) collected stickpins that were like the one she had worn. Another woman (WF 45) bought her husband a wooden wagon like the one he used to deliver newspapers in used military goods described a common type of customer who is trying to recreate the medals that a loved one had earned. In such cases, the antique is used to evoke a time, place, or person that the owner admires. For instance, a baseball fan (WM 40) collects baseball cards and owns a sign reading "Entrance to the Lower Grandstand" from the stadium of the old Washington Senators. He enjoys knowing that an elaborate music box he owns once belonged to Winston Churchill. The extent to which a past is shown in statements by three different antique collectors that they feel a kinship toward certain antiques associated with these objects or others like them in a former life (see also Cherry 1989). Others feel they are guarding a sacred preserving antiques. Even among several dealers, there was concern expressed that the antiques they sell go to "who will appreciate and care for them properly.

The music box once owned by Winston Churchill does not physically announce this linkage. While it is vital for the be imparted that this linkage be regarded as authentic (Belk 1990, Handler 1986, Trilling 1971), the association is clearly inferior due to their inability to evoke such a special magic of the genuine antique (i.e., one that participated in the past). Hillier (1981) notes that in this sense the antique acts as a talisman or fetish object used to conjure up the past. Reproductions are clearly inferior due to the past with anything resembling the special magic of the genuine antique (i.e., one that participated in the past).

Souvenirs and Sense of Past

Another type of possession instrumental to sense of past is the souvenir. When we think of souvenirs we commonly think of objects acquired during trips or visits to famous sites in order to remember and proclaim these places and our experiences there (Stewart 1984). This type of souvenir was indeed prevalent in the Odyssey research and in some cases was enshrined as with a Japanese souvenir cabinet set up by one family to memorialize their trip to Japan. Informants like these hope they can share the memories represented by such souvenirs by answering visitor questions about these objects with stories about them.

An equally important category of souvenir memorializes personal experiences not involving travel. Objects in this category that the informant once played, vehicles once driven, wedding dresses, love letters, gifts, jewelry, t-shirts that encode places and events, toys, dolls, comic books, ticket stubs, and wine bottles. One man (WM 35)
he once drove because it reminded him of the dates he had in it. Another man (WM 35) kept the wine bottles associated with prior sexual adventures. And a third man (WM 30) assembled his miscellaneous childhood memorabilia into a memory box that houses souvenirs and photos from a trip, such personal souvenirs act as mementos that evoke and perpetuate the myth or youth (McCracken 1988).

Besides childhood memories, memories of lost loves are the other significant category of non-travel souvenirs. The combination of nostalgic emotions contained in these two dominant categories of souvenirs is captured by John Prine’s (1972) song "Souvenirs":

All the snow has turned to water,
Christmas Days have come and gone.
Broken toys and faded colors
Are all that’s left to linger on.

I hate graveyards and old pawn shops;
Boy they always bring me tears.
I can’t forgive the way they rob me
of my childhood souvenirs.

[Chorus]

Memories, they can’t be boughten;
They can’t be won at carnivals for free.
Well it took me years
To get those souvenirs,
And I don’t know how they slipped away from me.

Broken hearts and dirty windows
Make life difficult to see,
That’s why last night and this morning
Always looked the same to me.

I hate reading old love letters;
Boy they always bring me tears.
Can't forgive the way they rob me
Of my sweetheart souvenirs.

[Chorus Repeats]

Variations Over the Life Cycle

The importance and nature of possessions signaling the past appears to vary over the human life cycle. Immanuel Starobinski (1966) insightfully postulated that nostalgia is a longing for our lost childhoods. While childhood is a common focus of nostalgia, it is an uncommon age period in which to experience nostalgic longings. In my fieldwork I have encountered little memorialization of personal experience before adolescence (although objects from pre-adolescence may be treasured later in life). Younger children, like the eleven- and twelve-year-olds encountered visiting Gettysburg, may be interested in the meaningful times in their personal lives as lying more in the future than the past. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that while parents and grandparents were likely to choose favorite objects based on the memories they evoke, children were much less likely to do so. Nevertheless, Rue (1990) found that by high school, students save memorabilia with an eye to the future, citing justifications that "what I've done and where I've been is who I am" (F), "you can depend on the past" (M), and "it helps remind me of where I come from" (M).

In old age, two opposing processes affect our use of possessions in remembering the past. On one hand there is a tendency to assemble the objects of our lives, and especially memory-cuing objects like photographs, in order to perform a life review (Gygi and Powell 1989). In addition, like paralyzed accident victims (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978), there is a tendency in old life was better for them in earlier stages of their life cycle and to cherish objects from this past (Kastenbaum 1977). On the other hand, there is a tendency (usually, but not always, voluntary) to begin to ready ourselves for death by disposing of material possessions. When we can bequeath meaningful items and heirlooms that we ourselves have received, we do so, hoping that they will remain with a person after death. Becker (1975) explains this motivation:

What man [sic] really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance. Man wants to know that his life somehow counted, if not for himself, then at least in the larger scheme of things, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning (p. 4).

Sussman, Cates, and Smith (1970) found that of 1102 people interviewed (heirs, contingent beneficiaries, and disinherited persons), 170 mentioned receiving something of sentimental value from an estate. They also found that in cases of extreme attachment, possessions may remain with a person after death:

It sometimes happens that the object is so inextricably linked to the decedent that the memento itself is "his." "His lodge pins are buried with him." "We buried her with rings and rosary." "His best cuff pin were put on him in the casket." (Sussman, Cates, and Smith 1970, p. 158)

When there is no willing heir for possessions from which we would like to detach ourselves, we must dispose of them in other ways. In several follow-up visits with a man (WM 70s) who had accumulated three garages full of potentially useful but somewhat reluctant disposition of this hoard to strangers. But he was emphatic that the photographs, family souvenirs he had accumulated were being retained for heirs he hoped to convince to take them. The importance of such tangible connections to him was shown when an older neighbor (WM 85) for whom he was caring recently died; he was able to find heirs for his other furnishings, but she has 20 cardboard boxes filled with the miscellaneous mementos of this man's possessions "to remember him by'.

Somewhat similarly, due to failing physical health an otherwise spry woman (WF 85) in an expensive retirement home had to abandon her apartment and move into one of the home's infirmary rooms. In the process her furnishings were reduced in number. She was able to find heirs for her other furnishings, but she has 20 cardboard boxes filled with the miscellaneous mementos of this man's possessions "to remember him by'.

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life that she has had placed in storage. These mementos include old love letters, greeting cards, cancelled checks, maps, travel diaries, newspaper clippings, books, yearbooks from her years as a teacher, and a number of documents that was sold when he died. The boxes, she says, contain her life. She won’t discard them because, “It was my life.” She hopes these things will mean something to someone and imagines that when heirs finally go through what an interesting life she has had. Neal (1985) tells a similar tale of how her 89-year-old grandmother became possessions stripped away as she moved into a nursing home. Her bag and purse, attached to her walker, became overstuffed with possessions which she feared others would steal. Dignity during old age in a materialistic culture of the things from our past.

COLLECTIVE SENSE OF PAST

Collective Memory and Aggregate Sense of Self

The use of possessions in creating a sense of past is not limited to individuals and individual identity. As Lowenthal (1975) put it, “collective past is no less precious than the personal; indeed, the one is an extension of the other” (p. 12). For members of society, the collective memory is jointly enacted (Lynch 1972, Madden 1964). Even though it is uncommon to think of memory at anything except the individual level, hero worship is the counterpart of individual level rituals (e.g., McCracken 1988, "Lois Roget: Curatorial Consumer," pp. 44-53), but the more people who share this knowledge, the safer it becomes. Thus, as the scope of sense of self increases from individual to family to neighborhood to region to nation, the security and stability of our sense of past and sense of aggregate self also increases.

Closely aligned to collective memory (a societal phenomenon) is the individual experience of aggregate levels of the things from our past. This is not to say that the collective memory is necessarily fixed and invariant within a generation. Kavanagh (1989) notes that social changes, a tiger that is shot, stuffed, and put in a museum may go from being an animal to an economic commodity (to the taxidermist) to a trophy to a symbol of class (for the donor) to a museum object to a "symbol of imperialists at play, disrupting and wasting wild life and natural resources" to evidence of wildlife in other lands to a nuisance and symbol of folly in acquiring multicultural museum teaching. Such a progression perhaps reflects a greater malleability in collective memory of self which is anchored by the experiences of a single individual rather than those of an entire society or generation.

At the broader level of the nation, specific individuals and props are less important for ritual performances than the symbolic props. While a divorce or a fire that destroys familiar Christmas props can disrupt a single family’s Christmas celebration more broadly. Thus, as the scope of sense of self increases from individual to family to neighborhood to region to nation, the security and stability of our sense of past and sense of aggregate self also increases.

At the national level, hero worship is the counterpart of individual level ancestor worship and the religious veneration of saints and prophets (Weeter 1941). An example of such hero worship is found in the numerous artifacts produced in the eighteenth century in support of the mythical national cult of George Washington (Ames and Ayers 1985, Fishwick 1985, Rabinowitz 1978). Popular household objects that carried Washington’s heroic portrait during this era included cups, pitchers, spoons, clocks, prints, jugs, maps, travel diaries, newspaper clippings, books, yearbooks from her years as a teacher, and a number of documents that was sold when he died.
knives, watches, mirrors, snuff boxes, and plates. This same iconography was depicted and remains in such aggregate possessions as portraits, statues, busts, documents, monuments, Mount Vernon, currency, coins, and architectural friezes. Even without the Washington stories, namesakes, slogans, and birthday celebration, these tangible reminders assure that George Washington will remain first in the hearts of his countrymen. As Geist (1978) argues, we seek (or if necessary create) in the past that which is missing in the present.

Monuments are especially important in preserving aggregate memory, as Vygotsky (1978) posits:

> It has been remarked that the very essence of civilization consists of purposively building monuments so as not to forget. In both the knot and the monument we have manifestations of the most fundamental characteristic feature distinguishing human from animal memory (p. 51).

Hubbard (1984) concludes that whereas books help us know previously unknown things, monuments help us re-deepened emotion. Casey (1987) also notes the function of "commemorabilia" in intensifying our remembering, rituals such as the American Memorial Day observances (see Warner 1959). Informants interviewed during their battlefield, recognized that their pilgrimage helped them relive national history. Children were actively instructed on these visits and encouraged to buy souvenirs to carry a piece of this history home with them. For visitors to the Statue there was also a sense of pilgrimage to a national historical site. In this case however, family sense of past was also the case for visitors whose parents and grandparents had entered America here. Other informants celebrated another sort of historical homes such as those of the Vanderbilts, William Randolf Hearst, Thomas Edison, and John Ringling. Al though George Washington, these people, through their artifacts, also provide a self-enlarging sense of heritage and the majority of these visitors. More local and regional counterparts to this claiming of aggregate self are found in the friends and relatives local historical landmarks. The sense of identity and pride in these places was evident in the disparaged such a landmark. it was as if they themselves had been criticized. Such feelings of place identity appear more strongly among older residents of an area (Belk 1987).

Another sort of aggregate possession yielding a sense of past is seen in various national treasures such as crown jewels. It is essential in order for emotions of national pride and sense of past to emerge that these treasures be owned by the country rather than the ruler. Crown jewels are an example of a collective inheritance, of something that belongs to a dynasty but used by an individual (pp. 236-237).

By and large, dictators lack Crown Jewels -- that is, objects with a history, with a pedigree -- and so they build monuments to themselves instead .... Ferdinand Marcos, a man in some sense in business for himself, built statues of [himself], put [his] pictures on currency, and placed [his] portraits in every public place on the front page of every newspaper. When they fell, their statues were pulled down, their pictures clipped out of the bills, and their portraits smashed .... Kings and shahs allow access to the Crown Jewels and assume that the displays of wealth, and of the genealogy of both themselves and their objects, contributes to their legitimization. Democratically elected leaders also invite the people to tour the seats of government. But the self-made tyrant, like Marcos, makes private that which should be public (p. 239).

However, our collective markers of the past are not composed solely of intentional monuments, national treasures, and designated historical landmarks. Just as such everyday personal possessions as tables and chairs can absorb a part of our lives through contagion, ordinary community objects like factory buildings, department stores, and street lamps can form important links to the past. Bommers and Wright (1982) term such objects a part of our "micro heritage." Although such objects may lack the ritual recognition of being capable of evoking strong emotional meanings and feelings of community identity. Dominant social classes may have hegemony of the monuments, media, and museums conveying our "macro heritage" (Radley 1990, Lipsitz 1990), but control of everyday collective objects is unlikely. Rowles (1980) studied older residents of an Appalachian community and found that over time each resident has created an environment richly differentiated as an array of places laden with personal identity.
This is why we feel a sense of loss when the buildings of our familiar landscape are destroyed, especially if we realize that our familiar landmarks are no longer there.

Hyperreality

According to one interpretation, as we are increasingly alienated from our postmodern environment, we seek memories of the past (e.g., Berger 1973). Just as antiques originally owned by strangers can provide a focus for an individual, there are also national and regional sites that attempt to create a sense of past out of ersatz artifacts. A prominent example is Disneyland. Although many other theme parks and some religious centers offer similar pseudo-histories (O’Guinn and Belk as Disney World and Heritage Village, U.S.A.), a key feature of the theme park is "Main Street, U.S.A." which evokes an imaginary, image of small town midwestern America circa 1900 (see Francaviglia. 1981 and Wallace 1989). The emphasis is on romanticized architecture, 5/8- to 7/8-scale buildings, horse-drawn trolleys, patriotic flags, and pristine cleanliness. The feeling achieved in such places is one of postmodern hyperreality (Baudrillard 1975, Eco 1983, Stewart, 1988). In hyperreality the sign has become conflated with its referent. Thus, the American gothic frame house with its gingerbread trim, picket fence, and porch, comes to the public alike flock to see these wonders and talk to their resident creator. This evokes a nostalgic, if entirely imaginary, image of small town midwestern America circa 1900, and a cockney woman, he finally gets a job, and a gentleman and lady for a book and is fortunate enough to find them in this imaginary historicism. To refuse to do so would be like telling the children that Santa Claus; it would rupture the sacred myth of this "magic kingdom" (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

Disneyland and Heritage Village were not the only sites studied where the creation of a false sense of past through sanitized presentations included a midwestern historical museum study of a recreated village as a living history museum. In a circle, a family of four sisters (WF 60s with spouses) had come for a family reunion, and the couple and substitutes an Italian street vendor; it would rupture the sacred myth of this "magic kingdom" (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). In fact any such presentation of history is necessarily a re-presentation that becomes more a part of the place evoked the era of their childhood and helped "bring back memories." This is clearly the museum’s intent. Such museums hope to create “the human side of the past” (Vanderstel 1989). At this museum a slide presentation narrated by Henry Ford’s romantic period music, tells the visitor that "the choke of nostalgia grips us at every turn," "everything is completely true but not long hours of toil, oppressive sex roles, and racial prejudice. It is not any such presentation of history is necessary nostalgically plunders the past to give meaning to the present (MacCannell 1976). The houses and period household furnishings (e.g., a baroque piano, golf clubs, a stained glass dome) shown in the museum are those that belonged to the elite of society rather than the average American. The feeling achieved in such places is one of postmodern hyperreality (Baudrillard 1975, Eco 1983, Stewart, 1988)
Nor is this preference for the hyperreal limited to amusement parks and shopping malls. Museum curators I have talked with recently worry about the "Disneyfication" of their museums. Eco (1983) reflected on the jumble of sacred, royal, and secular artifacts in Hearst's San Simeon castle:

It is like making love in a confessional with a prostitute dressed in a prelate’s liturgical robes reciting Baudelaire while ten electronic organs reproduce the Well-Tempered Clavier played by Scriabin (p. 22).

Others worry about the "touristification of cities and nations in order to market their history to international tot some of this criticism can be dismissed as elitism, the appetite of the public for the hyperreal shows how plastic (Lowenthal 1985). As George Herbert Mead (1929) observed, the past is as hypothetical as the future. While objects and memory, our predilection toward nostalgia and hyperreality also assure that these memories are highly selective and often fanciful ways. In Orwell’s (1949) 1984, an authoritarian control of the past was imposed on the past; who controls the present controls the past.” No such authority is needed for the hyperreality.

The loss that our slide toward hyperreality, even in our personal possessions, may entail is described by Romanyshyn (1989) and Berman (1989) as an anonymous alienation from ourselves. As Rilke (1939) forecast:

Even for our grandparents a "House," a "Well", a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was more, infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored human come crowding over from America empty, indifferent things, pseudo-things, DUMMY LIFE.... Th experienced things that SHARE OUR LIVES are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. WE ARE PERHAPS THE LAST TO HAVE STILL KNOWN SUCH THINGS. On us rests the responsibility of preserving, their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. ("Laral" in the sense of household-gods.) (p. 129)

What is at stake here is what we take to be authentic. As more of our lives are given over to mass production, mass media, mass marketing, and mass consumption, it should come as no surprise that the past is also becoming a commodity that is produced and marketed on scale with standardization, pre-packaging, and advertising. What we lose are precisely those objects Morris (1978) "saturated artifacts." Instead of objects saturated with meanings inscribed by time and contagious proximity, we accept objects with a thin, if shiny, veneer of meaning painted on by others.

**SOME CONCLUSIONS**

Why Seek a Sense of Past Through objects?

Aside from the mnemonic value of mementos and their ability to act as projective stimuli for our recollections of the past, several deeper motivations appear to underlie our preservationist attitudes toward possessions. Part of the reason we save and seek possessions that evoke a sense of past is that these objects provide a sense of security. Most, if not all, of the objects we have been discussing are what Laughlin (1956) calls sotorial objects. These are objects that provide a "magical kind of security," via "a reaction through which security and protection which are apparently out of proportion to the stimulus come to be experienced as coming from an external object" (Laughlin 1956, 198). A familiar type of sotorial object is the transitional object (e.g., teddy bear, blanket, pacifier) that helps the child reduce separation anxiety when first learning to be away from mother (Bowlby 1969, Furby and Wilke 1982, Winnicott 1953). While some of the objects discussed in this paper may serve as transitional objects, another type of sotorial object that is more generally implicated in these adult attachments is the set that Laughlin (1956, 199) refers to as mementos, and souvenirs. Such objects provide security through the magical belief that we are anchored in the present, unattached to the experiences of other people and our own past.

Another motive sometimes underlying the accumulation and preservation of objects involving a sense of past is prestige. Especially in the case of antiques, prestige may be derived from material links to famous persons (e.g., Winston Churchill’s music box, the Mayflower), and personal history (e.g., it has been in the family for over 300 years). Even in America older is famous or aristocratic ancestors are best of all. Given the right audience, more recent historical objects such as a presidential inauguration, souvenirs from visits to exotic lands, or a movie star’s autograph, can also provide prestige.
But perhaps the most general underlying motive for acquiring and possessing objects that provide a sense of past is instrumental to knowing who we are. Without a demonstrable past, without the ability to remember where we’ve been in our history, we don’t know who we are and cannot forecast or plan where we’re going. We are likely to feel at amnestiacs or victims of Alzheimer’s disease who have been alienated from life by being alienated from their past and Smith 1989). Rousseau argued that memory is essential for interpreting and benefitting from our experience.

I have studied men, and I think I am a fairly good observer. But all the same I do not know how to look at these labels nor restricts her daughter, even here something is bound to be lost. One informant is lost in the process. In this case, the events and people in these instances derives from demonstrating personal attachment to a prominent person, place, or event in history, we don’t know who we are and cannot forecast or plan where we’re going. We are likely to feel at amnestiacs or victims of Alzheimer’s disease who have been alienated from life by being alienated from their past and Smith 1989). Rousseau argued that memory is essential for interpreting and benefitting from our experience.

The essential role of possessions in contributing a sense of past to the memory of self is shown in the trauma of the elderly are separated from their home and belongings (e.g., Sherman and Newman 1977).

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

It does not follow from the ability of certain past-signaling objects to preserve a sense of self-worth, that the more the better we will feel. In the present materialistic age it is imperative that we dispose of a great many of our possessions and hope only that a few may be claimed as reminders of us after we die. For objects that have become highly cherished, it may be necessary to store these things for a while so that these memories can "cool" to the point that we may not be very different from our prehistoric forebears who commonly buried grave goods with the dead because there was fear that the spirit of the dead still clung to their possessions.

As illustrated by the desirability of an impressive provenance for an antique, the associations believed to inhere in it may disappear when we dispose of it. Some of the antique dealers interviewed said they feel slightly uneasy in handling someone's heirlooms. They rationalized this behavior or dissipated their uneasiness by assuring themselves that they would rather forget (La Branche 1973). For one woman (WF 40) at a swap meet selling the last of her ex-husband's possessions at estate sales, said that when he dies he hopes his own antique collection is never opened to the public this way. In the last sale -- that of his left-handed golf clubs -- was a cause for celebration.

Appreciative owners of an antique, however, are unable to preserve the same sense of past that the object had for its anonymous, owner. Therefore, even at bargain rates, the market for other families' photograph albums is minute. The photographs are generally admired only for their artistic or general historical interest. In this case, the events and people in these instances derives from demonstrating personal attachment to a prominent person, place, or event in history. We can at least imagine the same I do not know how to see what is in my mind can work (quoted in Di Piero 1989, p. 118).

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grief process for some tearful acceptance of their losses, he was still beside himself with anger. It was not just that he had symbolically lost his father all over again. It was as if he had been barred from achieving the closure of Shakespeare's final couplet:

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, All losses are restored and sorrows end.

In closing, it is useful to consider briefly whether the tangible preservation of memories in possessions is a good thing. This evaluation must be contingent upon the degree to which such a focus on past is central to our lives. Certainly a person, family, or nation that has lost something important (e.g., Haley 1976). The sense of security, identity, and continuity which possessions provide is clearly beneficial. But when the past becomes so central to our lives that it begins to crowd out the present, there is cause for concern. An excessive focus on the past can also make us resistant to any change (McCracken 1988). As Bartlett suggests:

When remembrance becomes an end unto itself, mere nostalgia, it degenerates into a terminal bitterness, a past that both closes one off from the living spontaneity of the present and denies the possibility of its own regeneration [But] Without remembrance, a life is subject to all the transient social fashions of the day, a leaf in the stream, incapable of calling anything truly its own, without its own conditioned history and ground for self-control (p. 188).

While this conclusion perhaps makes too much of a virtue of western notions of mastery and self-control, it appears that within limits, the tangible remembrance of things past can be a good thing. Reified reminders are not the only way of transcending our present time and place, but they are one of the most meaningful and reliable ways. Without these objects our memories may be as ephemeral as flowers. But through our treasure troves of mementos and souvenirs, these flowers can bloom again and again.

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