

Evocative Objects

Things We Think With

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INTRODUCTION: THE THINGS THAT MATTER

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I grew up hoping that objects would connect me to the world. As a child, I spent many weekends at my grandparents' apartment in Brooklyn. Space there was limited, and all of the family keepsakes—including my aunt's and my mother's books, trinkets, souvenirs, and photographs—were stored in a kitchen closet, set high, just below the ceiling. I could reach this cache only by standing on the kitchen table that I moved in front of the closet. This I had been given permission to do, and this is what I did, from age six to age thirteen or fourteen, over and over, weekend after weekend. I would climb onto the table in the kitchen and take down every book, every box. The rules were that I was allowed to look at anything in the closet, but I was always to put it back. The closet seemed to me of infinite dimensions, infinite depth.

Each object I found in the closet—every keychain, postcard, unpaired earring, high school textbook with its marginalia, some of it my mother's, some of it my aunt's—signaled a new understanding of who they were and what they might be interested in; every photograph of my mother on a date or at a dance became a clue to my possible identity. My biological father had been an absent figure since I was two. My mother had left him. We never spoke about him. It was taboo to raise the subject. I did not feel permitted to even think about the subject.

My aunt shared the small apartment with my grandmother and grandfather, and sometimes one of them would come into the kitchen to watch me at my investigations. At the time I didn't know what I was looking for. I think they did. I was looking, without awareness,

for the one who was missing. I was looking for a trace of my father. But they had been there before me and gotten rid of any bits and pieces he might have left—an address book, a business card, a random note. Once I found a photograph of a man standing on a boardwalk with his face cut out of the picture. I never asked whose face it was; I knew. And I knew enough never to mention the photograph, for fear that it too would disappear. It was precious to me. The image had been attacked, but it contained so many missing puzzle pieces. What his hands looked like. That he wore lace-up shoes. That his pants were tweed.

If being attentive to the details of people's lives might be considered a vocation, mine was born in the smell and feel of the memory closet and its objects. That is where I found the musty books, photographs, corsages, and gloves that made me feel connected. That is where I determined that I would solve mysteries and that I would use objects as my clues.

Years from then, in the late 1960s, I studied in Paris, immersed in the intellectual world of French structuralism. While I was away, my grandparents moved out of their apartment, where the contents of the memory closet had been so safely contained. Much of the closet's contents were dispersed, sent to an organization that collected books to be read to the blind. Far away from home, I was distressed at the loss of the objects but somewhat comforted to realize that I now had a set of ideas for thinking about them. In Paris, I read the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who described *bricolage* as a way of combining and recombining a closed set of materials to come up with new ideas.¹ Material things, for Lévi-Strauss, were goods-to-think-with and, following the pun in French, they were good-to-think-with as well. While in France, I realized that during my many hours with the memory closet I had done more than daydream ideas into old photographs. When I first met the notion of bricolage, it already seemed like a childhood friend.

Ideas about bricolage were presented to me in the cool, cognitive light of French intellectual life. But the objects I tried to combine and recombine as a child had been clues for tracing my lost father, an experience of bricolage with a high emotional intensity. So, from my first introduction to the idea in the late 1960s, I began to consider bricolage as a passionate practice.

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.

In this collection of autobiographical essays, scientists, humanists, artists, and designers trace the power of objects in their lives, objects that connect them to ideas and to people. Some of the objects described in this book are natural: an apple. Some are artifacts: a train. Some were made by the author: a knot. Others were presented ready-made: *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Certain authors reflect on an object's role in a significant life transition—an object serves as a marker of relationship and emotional connection. In other essays, the balance shifts to how an object tied the author to intellectual life—to building theory, discovering science or art, choosing a vocation. In every case, the object brings together intellect and emotion. In every case, the author's focus is not on the object's instrumental power—how fast the train travels or how fast the computer calculates—but on the object as a companion in life experience: how the train connects emotional worlds, how the mental space between computer keyboard and screen creates a sense of erotic possibility.

This collection begins with essays on the theme of discovery and learning, and then, following the arc of the life cycle, the essays discuss the opportunities and challenges of adulthood—the navigation of love and loss—and finally, the confrontation with transcendent issues such as spirituality and the sublime. Life, of course, is not lived in discrete stages, nor are the relationships with objects that accompany its journey. Objects have life roles that are multiple and fluid.

We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity. Yet only recently have objects begun to receive the attention they deserve.

The acknowledgment of the power of objects has not come easy. Behind the reticence to examine objects as centerpieces of emotional life was perhaps the sense that one was studying materialism, disparaged as excess, or collecting, disparaged as hobbyism, or fetishism, disparaged as perversion. Behind the reticence to examine objects as centerpieces of thought was the value placed, at least within the Western tradition, on formal, propositional ways of knowing. In thinking about science, certainly, abstract reasoning was traditionally recognized as a standard, canonical style; many have taken it to be synonymous with knowledge altogether.

Indeed, so highly valued was canonical abstract thinking, that even when concrete approaches were recognized, they were often relegated to the status of inferior ways of knowing, or as steps on the road to abstract thinking. It is poignant that Claude Lévi-Strauss and the psychologist Jean Piaget, who each in their way contributed to a fundamental reevaluation of the concrete in the mid-twentieth century, also undermined the concrete thinking they promoted.² Piaget recognized that young children use a style of concrete reasoning that was too efficacious to be simply classified as “wrong.” His response was to cast children’s “close-to-the-object” approach as a stage in a progression to a formal think-

ing style.³ Lévi-Strauss recognized the primitive’s bricolage as a science of the concrete that had much in common with the practice of modern-day engineers. He said he preferred to call it “prior” rather than “premature”; yet it was not fully equal.⁴

Beginning in the 1980s, concrete ways of thinking were increasingly recognized in contexts that were not easily dismissed as inferior, even and perhaps especially in the world of science, the very place where the abstract style had been canonized. Scientific laboratories were shown to be places where discoveries are made in a concrete, ad hoc fashion, and only later recast into canonically accepted formalisms; Nobel laureates testified that they related to their scientific materials in a tactile and playful manner.⁵ To this testimony from science studies was added the work of feminist scholars who documented the power of concrete, contextual reasoning in a wide range of domains.⁶ Indeed, there has been an increasing commitment to the study of the concrete in a range of scholarly communities.⁷ To this conversation, *Evocative Objects* contributes a detailed examination of particular objects with rich connections to daily life as well as intellectual practice. Each author has been asked to choose an object and follow its associations: where does it take you; what do you feel; what are you able to understand?

A jeweled pin, simple, European, clearly of the old country, ties a daughter to her mother and her mixed feelings about their immigrant status. An immersion in the comic books of youth teaches a man how to read the lessons of superheroes in midlife. A lonely graduate student is comforted by her Ford Falcon. The car feels like her “clothing” in the world of the street, a signal of her taste and style. When she becomes a mother, it’s time for a trade-in and a BMW station wagon.

Some objects are experienced as part of the self, and for that have a special status: a young child believes her stuffed bunny rabbit can read her mind; a diabetic

is at one with his glucometer. Other objects remind us of people we have lost.⁸ An artist dies, his collection of Chinese scholars' rocks is left behind. A rock of meditation, "The Honorable Old Man" becomes a presence in the life of his widow, who describes it as she would her artist-husband—"obsession, looking, openness to being surprised and moved, dignity."

Most objects exert their holding power because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into the author's life. Some, however, seem intrinsically evocative—for example, those with a quality we might call *uncanny*. Freud said we experience as uncanny those things that are "known of old yet unfamiliar."⁹ The uncanny is not what is most frightening and strange. It is what seems close, but "off," distorted enough to be creepy. It marks a complex boundary that both draws us in and repels, as when, in this collection, a museum mummy becomes an author's uncanny "double." Other objects are naturally evocative because they remind us of the blurry childhood line between self and other—think of the stuffed bunny whose owner believes it can read her mind¹⁰—or because they are associated with times of transition. Transitional times (called "liminal," or threshold, periods by the anthropologist Victor Turner) are rich with creative possibility.¹¹ In this collection, we follow a young man from the Australian outback as he boards the Melbourne train, finally a passenger on a long-imagined journey. On the train, poised between states of being, everything solid and known can be called into question.

Evocative objects bring philosophy down to earth. When we focus on objects, physicians and philosophers, psychologists and designers, artists and engineers are able to find common ground in everyday experience.

Each narrative in this collection is paired with a short excerpt drawn from philosophy, history, literature, or social theory. The authors of these excerpts

range from Lewis Thomas to Umberto Eco, from William James to Susan Sontag. These texts begin to describe the kinds of connections that help us investigate the richness of objects as thought companions, as life companions.

The excerpted theorists engage the essays across a wide range of ideas. I have already noted some. *There is the power of boundary objects and the general principle that objects are active life presences*. Lévi-Strauss speaks of tinkering; Jean Piaget, of the child as scientist. With different metaphors, each describes a dynamic relationship between things and thinking. We tie a knot and find ourselves in partnership with string in our exploration of space. *Objects are able to catalyze self-creation*. When Igor Kopytoff writes about the "biography of things," he deepens our understanding of how a new car becomes a new skin, of how a change of jewelry can become its own voyage to a new world. *Objects bring together thought and feeling*. In particular, objects of science are objects of passion. Essayists who raise this issue are paired with writings from philosophy (Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, on nature's sublime) and also from anthropology (Mary Douglas, on the passion behind our need to classify).

I have also touched on the idea that *we often feel at one with our objects*. The diabetic feels at one with his glucometer, as increasingly we feel at one with the glowing screens of our laptops, our iPods, and our BlackBerries. Theorists as diverse as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Karl Marx, and D. W. Winnicott invite us to better understand these object intimacies.

Indeed, in the psychoanalytic tradition, both persons and things are tellingly called "objects" and suggest that we deal with their loss in a similar way. For Freud, when we lose a beloved person or object, we begin a process that, if successful, ends in our finding them again,

within us. It is, in fact, how we grow and develop as people. *When objects are lost, subjects are found.* Freud's language is poetic: "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego." The psychodynamic tradition—in its narrative of how we make objects part of ourselves—offers a language for interpreting the intensity of our connections to the world of things, and for discovering the similarities in how we relate to the animate and inanimate. In each case, we confront the other and shape the self.

For me, working with these ideas, editing this book, combining the narratives with literary and theoretical texts, and seeing them refracted through different prisms, became its own object discipline, my own practice of bricolage. In this sense, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* became for me an evocative object. Its elements were new, but the activity of working on it was familiar, as familiar as carefully handling the objects in the memory closet I knew as a child.

Walt Whitman said: "A child went forth everyday/ and the first object he look'd upon, that object he became." With generosity of intellect and spirit, the authors in this collection engage with the objects of their lives. For every object they have spun a world. They show us what they looked upon and what became the things that mattered.

Objects of Design and Play