

1) Should historians pay more attention to objects?

Objects are key to our everyday lives and can make us reflect upon the past existence of others. The tangibility of artefacts brings History to life, drawing links between the identities of past societies and those of present ones¹. Often, objects capture the public spirit and imagination, driving funding for museums and curation efforts and thus emphasising that, for historical research to prevail, intrigue must be maintained in material culture. Yet, often in museums and exhibitions, we receive a skewed sense of what life was like in the past, with our perceptions often guided by the items of the wealthy²; these items have been rarely handled and thus, better preserved. Commonplace items are underrepresented in the collections of the present day and therefore, it is apparent that historians should pay more attention to the everyday (but by no means mundane) objects of the past, providing insight into the lives of everyday men and women. When this is done, those who study and observe these objects can develop the feeling of empathy and a sense that the common man of the past is inextricably linked to the common man of the present. Through greater historical research into the objects of ordinary people, there will be greater balance in the way in which History is portrayed; materials are not solely used by the elite, but they are needed in the lives of us all. The way in which people use objects³, care about their existence and collect them (or disregard them) can also give a clear insight into their importance and it is in questioning the fundamentality of individual objects that historians can benefit so greatly from the study of material culture.

Objects act as gateways into the lives of the lower classes in a way that written primary sources typically cannot and therefore, they deserve greater attention. A written primary source and provenance may give an indication of an individual's views, but these sources are reserved for the literate, giving a skewed perception on reality, as such accounts are typically written by the wealthy or those of the clergy. It is particularly in the field of the History of Religion, that the benefit of objects can be observed. The work of academics in the research project '*Domestic Devotions: The Place of Piety in the Italian Domestic Home 1400-1600*' gives a clear insight into the religious attitudes of the non-elites⁴. A representation of the Madonna embracing her healthy son can be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum and was used as an example of domestic, private worship in the research project. The rustic, terracotta, 'down-to-earth'⁵ figures were often found in the bedchambers of women during childbirth, with the Madonna representing a figure of guidance. This artefact, although rare, represents an object of lower-end production available to poorer consumers. Thus, a study of objects helps to complement what is already known about the devotional Catholic beliefs of the lower classes. The fact that the terracotta figure is so well preserved despite the fragility of its material implies that it was a focal point for admiration from afar, a symbol of awe for the owner; for them on Earth, the heavenly figure of the Madonna was somehow out of reach and suspended above them, not to be tampered with. This emphasises the pedestal on which the Virgin Mary was placed in Renaissance Europe, despite the gradual rise of Humanist thinking during this period. The fact that such research projects are already occurring emphasises the fact that material culture already plays a significant role in the study of History (as highlighted through the fact that there is a journal for this field of interest⁶). Yet, emphasis needs to be placed on the word 'more' in the question. Historians and teachers rely heavily upon written primary sources⁷ to guide

¹ [We ask the experts: why do we put things into museums? | University of Cambridge](#)

² [Animating objects: what material culture can tell us about domestic devotions | University of Cambridge](#)

³ [Living in a material world: why 'things' matter | University of Cambridge](#)

⁴ [Animating objects: what material culture can tell us about domestic devotions | University of Cambridge](#)

⁵ [Animating objects: what material culture can tell us about domestic devotions | University of Cambridge](#)

⁶ [Material culture - Wikipedia](#)

⁷ [Historians and Material Culture | Perspectives on History | AHA](#)

their research and teaching but, objects should, wherever possible, also be taken into consideration in order to solidify an argument or help develop a counter meaning.

When large groups of people have created an attachment to an object⁸ or have become intrigued by its story, this builds upon that sense of fundamentality and should therefore act as a catalyst for the question 'Why do they care?'. For example, objects are indispensable for the History of Science and can act as clear visual links of how the past reflects upon the present. A pair of surgical rubber gloves in the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives⁹ give a clear insight into the History of Medicine when studied alongside written context. The fact that similar rubber gloves are kept in the William Halsted Museum, Baltimore¹⁰ and the story of their being is explained in the Thackray Medical Museum, Leeds implies that, the public of the US and UK are intrigued by the objects, emphasising that they are worth studying. Whilst appearing relatively inconspicuous on the surface, these gloves are embedded deeply in the socio-historical context of the time, which was characterised by great innovation. The gloves are a symbolic product of the advances made by Pasteur and Koch in Germ Theory as well as Joseph Lister's use of carbolic acid, as William Halsted asked Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company to make a pair of gloves for one of his nurses who reacted to the carbolic spray in 1889¹¹. The gloves also represent a catalyst for further changes to the operating theatre, aiding its shift towards sterility. By 1911, 50% of surgeons wore gloves despite early scepticism¹². In the early part of the 20th Century, masks started to be worn in the operating theatre and, over time, mass-produced latex gloves became prominent. During the pandemic, PPE manufacturing and the ability for such equipment to keep both healthcare workers and patients safe has once again been under the spotlight and prior to it, there have been developments in non-latex surgical gloves to combat the rise in latex allergies¹³. The fact that the roots of such equipment and the efficacy of these things in reducing disease transmission and post-surgical infections can be found in the objects of History help to create that sense of a shared life and closeness between the inventors of the past and the scholars/ users of these objects in the present. It is justifiable to suggest that when revitalised by current affairs with renewed appreciation from the public, these objects need to be reviewed by historians through the lens of material culture.

Tangible things can not only have an impact on Social and Cultural History but also on Political and Economic History. In Marx's *Theory of Historic Materialism*, he argues that 'all objects, whether living or inanimate, are subject to continuous change.'¹⁴ In Germany, the Coca Cola bottle has changed shape over time, with the later introduction of cans and plastic bottles. But it also has varying meanings, a symbol of the immense political and economic change the nation faced in the 20th Century. The first vending machine for Coca Cola appeared in Germany in 1929, a year that represented the end of the Golden Age, a period where the Dawes Plan (1924) from America allowed Germany to recover post-WW1. Thus, the introduction of Coca Cola to Germany under the Weimar Constitution emphasises the economic intentions behind the political diplomacy, for which Dawes was awarded a Nobel Peace prize¹⁵. The influx of foreign capital into the nation undoubtedly aided German recovery, but it also gave many American brands a European manufacturing base. Under the Nazi regime, the Coca Cola bottle became a symbol of compliance, with the company

⁸ [Living in a material world: why 'things' matter | University of Cambridge](#)

⁹ [The Nurse Who Introduced Gloves to the Operating Room | Science History Institute](#)

¹⁰ [How a romantic gesture helped bring surgical gloves to American operating rooms - WHY](#)

¹¹ [The Nurse Who Introduced Gloves to the Operating Room | Science History Institute](#)

¹² [The Nurse Who Introduced Gloves to the Operating Room | Science History Institute](#)

¹³ [The History of Surgical Gloves - Past Medical History](#)

¹⁴ [Marx's Theory of Historical Materialism \(yourarticlelibrary.com\)](#)

¹⁵ [Dawes Plan - Wikipedia](#)

using sporting events such as the Olympics of 1936 and future Hitler Youth rallies for marketing purposes¹⁶, which suggests that economic benefits prioritised over political ethics. Then, during 'die Wende' (the period of change in Germany between 1989-1990) the Coca Cola drink (which came in plastic and glass bottles or in a can by this stage) becomes a symbol of great economic change, with the westernisation of the East causing many easterners to experience consumerist society for the first time. Between February and November 1990, 7 million cases of Coca Cola had been sold in the former GDR, with Coca Cola Company supposedly beating its competitors 10:1 on sales¹⁷. Thus, the bottle/can at the time of the reunification is symbolic of the shift from a state-directed economy to a free market economy, where competition, intensive marketing and consumerism thrive. The fact that in the present, the Coca Cola bottles of 'die Wende' are not avidly sought after by the masses, implies that the current society is consumed by consumerism and that commodities are experienced and thrown away, not always preserved. As a result, it is apparent that by paying attention to the objects of the past, however ordinary some may seem, historians can complement their understanding of the economic and political histories of nations and how these histories affected the buying habits of inhabitants.

In addition, objects give us 'access to ideas that may have been too fundamental to a person's life ever to have been written down.'¹⁸ Barratt implies the condition of objects - whether they are well-thumbed and covered in striations or in perfect condition - can give a great idea about their fundamentality. It is therefore apparent that, written sources and objects must be used in conjunction with one another, forming a layered approach to study. When introducing the theme of material culture, Zara Kesterton¹⁹ cites the ideas of Anne Gerritsen and Georgio Puello, stating that this field is an 'intriguing counterpart or companion' to the written word. This is undeniably the case as, in order to obtain the necessary socio-historical context of the object, one must look to the written sources of the time period. Tangible things are not a replacement for written sources but instead an opportunity to propel the stories of the past into real life in an engaging manner. Tangible things also offer a gateway for interdisciplinary work²⁰, with the study of material culture reliant on a range of fields such as Anthropology and Archaeology. Therefore, historians should pay more attention to objects whilst conducting research in order to encourage work between disciplines and thus create a bounty of perspectives on the past.

Objects can also be considered as vehicles for education and can engage the public, thus suggesting they are worthy of greater historical attention. Successful podcasts such as '*A History of the World in 100 Objects*' by BBC²¹ indicate there are high levels of public interest in the material culture of History and therefore, objects are worth historians investing more research time into. In addition, the Historical Association draw from material culture and objects in their suggested primary learning programmes²², suggesting the study of artefacts is at the core of History in education and thus, this needs to be reflected in the wider historical field.

With the rise of Time-Space Compression due to greater technology and travel opportunities, one might suggest that there is no necessity for historians to pay more attention to objects as, in an

¹⁶ [How Coca-Cola invented Fanta during World War II \(businessinsider.com\)](https://www.businessinsider.com/2013/07/11-how-coca-cola-invented-fanta-during-world-war-ii/)

¹⁷ [German Unification Creates New Ground For Coke and Pepsi Battle \(apnews.com\)](https://www.apnews.com/1990/11/07/german-unification-creates-new-ground-for-coke-and-pepsi-battle/)

¹⁸ K. Barratt (Curator of Art pre-1800 at Royal Museums Greenwich)- [We ask the experts: why do we put things into museums? | University of Cambridge](https://www.museums-governance.com/2016/05/we-ask-the-experts-why-do-we-put-things-into-museums/)

¹⁹ [Fashion Gallery as Archive: Researching Dress History in Museums | Doing History in Public](https://www.fashiongallery.com/2016/07/fashion-gallery-as-archive-researching-dress-history-in-museums-doing-history-in-public/)

²⁰ [Living in a material world: why 'things' matter | University of Cambridge](https://www.museums-governance.com/2016/05/living-in-a-material-world-why-things-matter-university-of-cambridge/)

²¹ [BBC - A History of the World - List of Objects](https://www.bbc.com/history/100-objects/)

²² [Objects / Primary Teaching Methods / Historical Association \(history.org.uk\)](https://www.history.org.uk/primary/teaching-methods/)

increasingly virtual world, physically seeing tangible things and examining them will not be the common practise. In addition, one might argue that such virtual experiences will be better suited to the viewing and analysis of primary written sources. However, Time-Space Compression must not be viewed in such a negative light. During the pandemic (and prior to it), the ability of curators and historians to access online collections or to use Virtual Reality in order to see objects has meant that artefacts have been available on a much broader scale. The virtual handling of historical objects can often occur in a Virtual Reality world/ setting²³. By placing the objects in the setting of their use, historians and students can gain a greater understanding of the socio-historical context of an object. The sharing of opinions and research online means that the ideas surrounding the material culture of History should increase, highlighting the importance of digital collections in complementing (not replacing) the real objects. The rise of technology and its development into the future means that the importance of objects for historians should increase with the greater ability for worldwide discussion.

In conclusion, it is apparent that historians should pay more attention to objects, particularly those of the lower classes, as this can help to create a degree of balance with the primary sources and collections we are typically confronted by, limiting the degree to which our perceptions of the past are skewed. Tangible things give insights into the History of Religion and Science and can be examples of how meanings change temporally, particularly regarding Political and Economic History. Finally, artefacts of the ordinary people of past societies can engage the public greatly due to the empathy they evoke in their domesticity and commonness, ensuring funding through donations for further curation and historical research. Thus, as DH Lawrence alludes to, objects should be 'awake through years with transferred touch'²⁴; historians should pay more attention to tangible things, keeping the stories of these objects alive through research and public engagement.

²³ [History repeating: how tech is changing the way we explore the past | TechRadar](#)

²⁴ [Objects / Primary Teaching Methods / Historical Association \(history.org.uk\)](#)

Bibliography

Barton, M [The History of Surgical Gloves - Past Medical History](#) (Published- 19th September 2018)

BBC [BBC - A History of the World - List of Objects](#)

Echevarria, G [How Coca-Cola invented Fanta during World War II \(businessinsider.com\)](#) (Published- 15th November 2019)

English, T [How a romantic gesture helped bring surgical gloves to American operating rooms - WHY](#) (Published- 12th February 2015)

Fearn, N [History repeating: how tech is changing the way we explore the past | TechRadar](#) (Published- 17th September 2016)

Historical Association [Objects / Primary Teaching Methods / Historical Association \(history.org.uk\)](#)

Jones Weickel, S [Historians and Material Culture | Perspectives on History | AHA](#) (Published- 26th January 2015)

Kean, S [The Nurse Who Introduced Gloves to the Operating Room | Science History Institute](#) (Published- 5th May 2020)

Kesterton, Z [Fashion Gallery as Archive: Researching Dress History in Museums | Doing History in Public](#)

Priya, R [Marx's Theory of Historical Materialism \(yourarticlelibrary.com\)](#)

Rice, M [German Unification Creates New Ground For Coke and Pepsi Battle \(apnews.com\)](#) (Published- 25th November 1990)

University of Cambridge [Animating objects: what material culture can tell us about domestic devotions | University of Cambridge](#) (Published- 24th October 2017)

University of Cambridge [Living in a material world: why 'things' matter | University of Cambridge](#) (Published-18th October 2017)

University of Cambridge [We ask the experts: why do we put things into museums? | University of Cambridge](#) (Published-26th November 2013)

Wikipedia [Dawes Plan - Wikipedia](#)

Wikipedia [Material culture - Wikipedia](#)