Collecting From Analog to Virtual (And Back)

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The study of a community of collectors both online and offline raises the issue how digitalization, the Internet and related technologies affects collecting. Many offline activities simply move online, without much change. But seemingly solid limiting phenomena like materiality and scarcity suddenly appears highly volatile. There are also powerful discourses of sharing and gift giving on the Internet that both appeals to collectors and create problems.

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Remembrances of Things Past: Silent Voices in Collections
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Prior work has found that collectors often counter the charge that they are materialistic and frivolous by invoking their mythical role as noble saviors of artistically, historically, or scientifically important objects neglected by larger society. This paper suggests in addition to those who invoke this romantic heroic myth, other collectors instead see themselves as conduits of more intimate meanings linked to the lives of the object’s makers or prior owners. In this more nurturing guardian capacity the collector takes on a vital role in a perceived community of caring.

Collecting has been described as consumption writ large (Belk 1995). It involves a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxuries, often procured in the marketplace. In order to justify their collecting activity, many collectors describe themselves as performing a valuable service for society. One informant who collected elephant replicas in a variety of forms from ceramics and brass to posters and product packages, espoused his belief that “History will one day stand in awe of what I have done.” Such justifications typically make a claim for the collected objects’ importance to art, science, or history. They also position the collector as the opposite of the shallow materialistic consumer. In this narrative, these objects are being collected not for self gratification but for the future generations who will stand in awe and appreciation. Furthermore, the collector is positioned as the heroic savior of otherwise neglected or unappreciated objects. For them the collection is worth any sacrifice and they are among the few with the insight, knowledge, taste, and skill to acquire and thereby rescue these things (Belk 1998a). But this heroic savior self-mythology ignores other, more intimate, collector motivations and mythologies.

Consider the case of collections of a certain type of antique Korean quilt. During the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) in Korea. Gender inequality was severe and rigid. A national Code was in force that prohibited a middle class woman from appearing outside of her household without the permission of her husband. Even then she was to ride in a covered palanquin so as not to be seen by other men. Within the home she was further restricted to an inner room where she was not to see men other than immediate family members. She was required to cover her face and would receive no formal education (Sŏng-mi 2003). Her life was restricted to her duties as wife and mother. The primary creative outlet for a woman was to sew elaborate patchwork wrapping cloths called pojagi (Figure 1). Pojagi were made individually and not collectively as with quilts in other parts of the world (e.g., Kiracofe and Johnson 1993). They were used to wrap, carry, and cover a variety of things in everyday life and were used to cover any gift. They might also cover a table or altar, carry infants, store food, wrap sacred texts, and carry treasured objects from one place to another. A gift was wrapped in a Pojagi as a sign of respect for the recipient and it was thought that good luck and happiness could be preserved inside the cloths (Dong-hwa 2003). These Korean quilts wrapped precious objects, just as the middle class women of this 500+ year period can be seen as being wrapped by veils, layers of the house, and covered transportation (Hendry 1993).

Surviving Choson pojagi in private collections and museums are all made by nameless women. But despite their anonymity, these wrappings of happiness represent the love, caring, and creativity of the women who created them. Those who collect and treasure these fabrics are preserving the imagined stories of Choson women’s restricted lives and their links to others though giving gifts carefully wrapped in beautifully crafted pojagi. When we collect and preserve folk art and craft objects, we carry forward the silent expressions of meaningfulness, dignity, and caring imparted by their makers. Here too we find a justification for collecting that counters charges of materialistic acquisitive and possessive behavior. But rather than collector as performing heroic work on behalf of science, art, or history, the collector is instead positioned as caring, preserving, and nurturing intimate meanings, even if the specific stories of the women who sewed these fabrics are lost.

QUILTS AND THE FABRIC OF STORIES

If the specific stories of the women who made surviving Choson pojagi are lost, we might look to quilts and quilt collecting of other times and places in order to gain some appreciation of the stories conveyed by such objects and how these meanings are carried forward and communicated to others. If quilt makers or producers are the original story tellers, we should also recognize that the current consumers of old quilts are the inheritors, gift recipients, purchasers, and museum visitors who encounter these quilts, typically in another time, place, and context. In between producers and consumers there may also be various intermediaries, including dealers, museum curators, and historians who write about the original time, place, contexts, and quilt objects. Within the communication channels linking these producers, intermediaries, and consumers, there are a number of storytellers, listeners, and retellers. We might well ask what the impact is on these stories as they are told and retold by the people who pass along not just the physical quilt, but the tales that give them added meaning.

The meanings of quilts to their makers are often quite personal and specific to the events occurring in their lives as the quilts were made. Consider the following account of Brenda Dial’s double wedding ring pattern quilt:

I had started the quilt while my grandmother was dying of cancer in the hospital. During the long days spent at her bedside, I passed the time by cutting the numerous tiny pieces needed for the quilt. Even though most of the time my grandmother didn’t know I was there, I stayed with her because it was important to me. During those same weeks I learned that I was pregnant with my third child. It was a bittersweet realization that my new child would never know the woman I was sitting with. My unborn daughter and I were sharing the few moments I had left with my grandmother, yet she would never hear her great grandmother’s laugh or listen as she told a story. I began sewing the pieces together about the same time that I felt my daughter move for the first time. My grandmother died soon thereafter, and the quilt was put away for a few months as other things took precedence—preparing for the new arrival, taking care of the two children I already had.

Later in the pregnancy, I took up the sewing project again. I began sewing on the top just before the C-section that delivered my baby. I was still working on it when we took the thousand-mile journey by car to visit my husband’s family to introduce them to the newborn.

The tiny pieces of fabric dropped between the seats or underfoot as I moved to stop arguments between my other two
small children, pass out drinks or snacks, and nurse our new baby. I had to cut more than a hundred extra pieces to make up for the losses from that trip.

Back at home, I quilted at night after the kids went to bed. It was a bit of sanity in the middle of my otherwise chaotic life. I bundled the quilt onto my lap during cold evenings as my husband worked nights. I snuggled a sleeping little one beside me when one of them woke up and I wanted to keep quilting. It became therapeutic to work on it when I became pregnant twice more and lost both babies.

It wasn’t until the quilt was almost finished that I found a massive hole all the way through it. I still cringe at the memory. My son had spilled some hydrogen peroxide on it and failed to tell me. He was afraid that I would be upset. My son was right: I was mad. The hydrogen peroxide had eaten through the top, batting, backing, and quilting stitches. I had to unstitch the adjoining pieces and insert replacement material. Then I had to re-quilt the area, trying to make everything match up. Now, as I look back, with so much time having passed, I chuckle to myself as I remember (Lamancusa 2002).

As can be seen in this story, the memories that inhere in this quilt derive from the life of its maker, the trials encountered in making it, and the key life events with which its creation became associated. For this quilt maker, it is as if the porous fabric of the quilt absorbed these meanings and held them there. (Figure 2).

But what of those who inherit or receive such quilts as gifts? How much of such a story is likely to be retained and what other meanings might the quilt take on. McCracken (1988) found that “Lois Roget” was worried that the stories she tried to convey to her children about the heirloom furnishings in their Canadian farm home would be lost forever as the children left home. Despite her efforts to rehearse these stories with them, she held only faint hope that they would welcome the objects in their future homes, much less accurately convey the meanings she attempted to impart to the next family generation. Modernity, mobility, divorce, and our increasingly disposable attitude toward our possessions all threaten this meaning transfer. But such losses are not inevitable. Consider the following tale of Naomi Rhode’s wedding quilt:

Anna Goodman was an Icelandic immigrant who had come to the U.S. at the age of 16 and married George, her sweetheart, also from Iceland. They settled on the plains of North Dakota in a sod house with one room downstairs and a loft up above. The winters were bitter cold, with the snow often blowing up over the few windows that exposed the world outside.

When their children went to bed in the loft, they could hear the spinning wheel whirring late into the night, along with the creaking of the lumber that supported the sod roof and walls. Anna was spinning yarn from the sheep they raised so that she could make clothing for her family of 13. Wool socks, mittens, sweaters, baby clothing—all made to insulate her loved ones from the drafty existence inside and the subzero temperatures outside. The soft carded wool was also used for the stuffing of quilts made from flour sacks and pieces of fabric that could be gleaned from old garments or bedding.

The one project that took most of Anna’s time and love was the wedding quilt. As each child left home to start his or her
own family, Anna, or “Amma” as we called her (“Grandma” in Icelandic), would create a masterpiece. She would sacrifice wool that could have been used for stockings or sweaters to fill the wedding quilt.

My mother, Ellen Borg, the first girl to be born and live into adulthood, was also the first girl to receive her quilt when she left home to marry dark-haired Virgil Reed. Of course, the quilt was on their bed the first night—and every night of their marriage. It got ragged and needed new covers from time to time, but it was the “wedding blessing” over their bodies—and their marriage—meant to warm and comfort them.

When my father died suddenly at the age of 51, my mother was heartbroken. Their marriage had been a wonderful one, and in losing him, she had lost her very dearest friend. The quilt was quietly taken off the bed, folded up, and placed in a box. She could not bear to sleep under this precious treasure alone.

Years passed and it was time for my wedding to Jim Rhode. Knowing of my mother’s meager finances, I wondered what her wedding gift would be. I watched her face as I opened the box that she gave. When I saw what was inside, I was shocked and moved to tears. She had taken her wedding quilt, re-covered the precious wool, and given it to us. Her words were poignant and powerful.

“Naomi, dear, this is no longer ‘just a quilt.’ It has become a ‘comforter.’ It has lovingly warmed and comforted your dad and me through our entire married life. It has held our tears, and heard our laughter. It has shared the warmth of our love with you and your brother on those cold mornings when you hopped into bed with us. Even more than that, it has reminded us of the spirit that comes to us, resides within us, and comforts our journey with joy, hope, love, and peace. Sleep well, dear children, as your father and I did. May it always remind you of our love and comfort.”

It did. Every night we slept under the wedding comforter and knew of its blessings! It warmed us in the winter, and even cooled us in the summer, if that could possibly be true! We were blessed with three children, who snuggled with us and felt warmed under our special quilt through the year (Lamancusa 2002).

Here we see a tale colored by great emotion and nostalgically rendered in a way that celebrates the sacrifices of those who created and owned the quilt as well as sacralizes the quilt as having acquired the essence of those who lived with it, drawing on the power of contagion. Our family tales often carry such baggage and seek to ennoble the family’s heritage and give it purpose and meaning (Stone 1989).

But not all collected objects bear their meanings so fully or so well. This is especially likely when unrelated intermediaries acquire once personal possessions for their collections. This point was brought home to me when Ron Groves and I were doing research on art in an small Tiwi community on an island off the north of Australia (Belk and Groves 1999). The community has an art center where, among other productions, local artists carve wooden sculptures of the Dreaming figure, the first man, Purukupali. In the Dreaming story Purukupali’s wife, Bima, was having an on-going sexual affair during the day when she was ostensibly gathering food. She would put her infant son Djinini in the shade of a tree.
while she went off for her sexual assignation. But one day the lovers stayed too long, the shade moved off of Djinini, and the infant died. A totally disconsolate Purukupali took the dead child in his arms and walked out to his death in the sea. While the Ron Groves and I were having dinner with the doctor of the community and his wife we noticed one of the carved Purukupali statues on a bookshelf (Figure 3). Since the art center was just across the road, we expected that they would be familiar with the Purukupali story. But when I asked the doctor’s wife what the statue meant to her she said, “I thought he kind of looked like Louis Armstrong. And when I put that cowboy hat on him I thought he was really cute.”

In another case the famous Australian Aboriginal art collector Robert Holmes à Court was asked if he had ever visited the Aboriginal communities that his art came from. He replied “No, but I don’t visit the factory that makes my BMW either.” In other words, rather than symbolism and personal meanings, the art for him was regarded purely as an abstract art form for the viewers to make of whatever they wish. Not only do changes of time, place, and culture threaten meaning transfer in collected objects, there is very often a difference between the emic meanings of things to informants and the etic interpretations of researchers. Family and personal meanings are thus often lost along the way. More often, there is an attempt by intermediaries to preserve meanings of objects (a good story after all enhances value). But the result often appears to leave out a great deal, as hinted by the following story:

Lydia Rowbury was born in England to Ann Bissell and William Erastus Rowbury, the oldest of 6 children. The family came to Utah when Lydia was 5 years old, settling in Sanpete County. Lydia was 10 years old when her mother died and she was sent to live with relatives. Her life with Jesse in Nephi began with a homestead known as Marsh Flat in Nephi County, located 5 miles from town, where yellow roses and tamarack still grow. Shortly after their marriage, Jesse’s sister Elizabeth Cole died, leaving 3 children, Ruby, Dave, and Emma. Ruby was sent to live with her grandmother Cole, and Lydia and Jesse became parents to the younger children.

That wasn’t always an easy task, especially when Dave would take little Emma to town with the horse and buggy, and Lydia would have to talk the 5 miles in search of them.

In 1915, after 13 years of marriage, Lydia and Jesse became parents to a daughter. They named her Anna. When she was 5-years old, her brother Jesse was born. By then Lydia was almost 40 years old.

Anna remembers that she never had a store-bought dress until she graduated from high school. Lydia was an excellent seamstress and quilter, earning 3 dollars to quilt for others during the Great Depression. Lydia had always told Anna that she would never cut new fabric to make a quilt top—that is, until she saw the Improved Nine-Patch pattern. Anna bought the “slip sheen” fabric for her mother, and Lydia set to work.

The pastel blue, pink, and yellow pieces are machine pieced and hand quilted in 8 even stitches to the inch. Lydia always did her own quilting, fearing that a group of quilters would make stitches “big enough to catch your toenails in.” Most of the quilting is done “in the ditch” (stitches quilted close to the seam rather than the customary quarter inch away), but there is also a petal design quilted in blue thread in each of the blue pieces. The edges are finished in a scallop to accentuate the shape of the sashing and border.

Lydia Rowbury Coulson died in 1950 at the age of 69. She left behind only 3 of her beautiful quilts: a purple Star, a Double Wedding Ring, and the Improved Nine-Patch (Covington 1997).

While there is an attempt here to preserve something of the original story, it seems somewhat empty and focused on facts rather than emotions and relationships. The attention to the technical quality of the quilt also overshadows more personal detail, likely because it was either unknown or seemed too unprofessional to the writer to include.

A detailed narrative analysis of these tales remains to be done. Such an analysis should pay attention to the genre of the narrative as well. For example, is it a historical or folkloric tale? Is it a tale that is best understood as memorial (e.g., the AIDS quilt), personal, familial, cultural (e.g., Harriet Powers’ quilts in the Smithsonian Museum—Lyons 1993) (Figure 4), or art historical? Is it a dramatic tale and is the subgenre comedy, tragedy, mystery, or treasure tale? Did the quilt convey hidden meanings like some allege for the role of quilts in the underground railroad to help slaves escape to the...
If the quilt carries a family tale as a “narrative mnemonic life token” (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), are these a largely fictitious set of meanings like family photo albums that show only happy smiles and open eyes in spotless houses with new possessions (Belk 1998b)?

But even when the tales conveyed by collected objects depart from the literal truth, they may still convey an essential truth. In one tale told by Black Elk (Black Elk and Neidhardt 2000), we learn the story of a magical gift to the Ogalala Sioux people from a white bison in considerable detail. At the end of the tale Black Elk admits that the events may not have happened as he described them. “But...,” he adds, “if you think about it, you will see that it is true.” Likewise, the stories conveyed or projected onto quilts and pojagi may not be literally true. But that doesn’t mean they don’t convey broader truths.

An example is found in a pair of quilt stories from the 1847-1869 Mormon pioneer diaries and journals studied by Belk (1992):

1. When the company camped one night, Lollie Anderson became so ill that her family and friends were deeply concerned. It was agreed that one of the young girls in the company should sleep with her in an attempt to keep her warm. Christiana Wicklund was chosen. In spite of the precaution Lollie did not survive, and the next morning Christiana awoke to find Lollie frozen to death at her side. Her hair was frozen solid and an ax was used to free it from the ice. Lollie was buried on the plains as so many had been before her. Because of lack of space families of the deceased were not allowed to take the belongings of dead loved ones with them. Among the things which Lollie’s family were preparing to throw away were a quilt and a pair of scissors. These were both in better condition than those owned by the Wicklunds, so it was decided that they could be exchanged. The old quilt and scissors of Christiana’s family were thrown away and replaced by the better ones....They now occupy a place of honor among the family pioneer relics and are brought out only upon the occasion of retelling the story of the death on the plains.

2. My husband’s wife Abby died with cholera and was buried without a coffin by the Platte River along with others. We had to go on in the morning never to see their graves again. The night that Abby was buried the wolves were howling. It was awful to hear the dirt being thrown on their bodies. A young lady and I were the only ones to wash and dress her with what we could find. Her underclothes and nightgown. We sewed her up in a sheet and quilt. That was all that could be done for her burial. All the women in camp were afraid to prepare the body for fear they would catch the cholera from her. This young girl and I were not afraid to take care of the body. We were only 16 years old but brave in that case.

For such pioneers the emotional meanings of quilts in general was to carry the project of civilization into the wilderness (Foy and Marling 1994, p. 9). The survival of these delicate objects in the face of the forces of nature was testimony to the fortitude of those who carried them in handcarts across the plains. But as these tales indicate, under trying times honoring life and death are more important than such a project. Instead their significance comes from bringing a different kind of dignity and respect to the lives of those left behind and the lives of those going on.

A similar focus on carrying forward the meanings of past lives can be found even among collectors of antique objects that now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars (Freund 1993). Collectors not
only find increased economic value when the origin and provenance of an object is known, they also find increased symbolic meaning and sentimental value is such objects. But it is precisely this sentimental connection that has frequently caused collectors, especially women, with such motivations to be trivialized and marginalized by other, often male, collectors who believe that they are the ones pursuing serious collecting goals. Furthermore, given the frequent focus on handcrafted objects from the home sphere in collections that carry meanings of their makers and prior owners, those collectors who seek out these objects have been further disparaged as mere buyers of bibelots or as being caught up in “bricobracomania” (Saisselin 1984).

Based on fieldwork with collectors of a variety of objects laden with intimate meanings, this study offers an understanding of how these objects express values, preserve intimate histories that otherwise largely escape our grasp, and provide an accessible way to humanize our understandings of other people, places, and times. There is a danger here of reducing these meanings to stereotypes because the voices of those who first made and saved these objects are silent. But like artistic insight and skill, there is a trace of caring and connection that also inheres in these collected records of other lives. By recognizing this alternative motivation to the heroism previously attributed to collectors, we begin to better appreciate the non-utilitarian nature of collecting.

Like Black Elk, I do not know if the events in the stories I have told here happened as I have described them. But if you think about them, you will see that they are true.

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